

A Comparative Study of Major Translations of the Prologue to the Gospel of John

A comparative study of an intriguing passage like the prologue to John's Gospel set forth in several modern translations will help focus and substantiate all the foregoing discussions about how the translations differ. By doing this study we can see which translations tend to be literal, which tend to be more idiomatic, and which are dynamically equivalent; at the same time, we can see why each translation has its own strengths and weaknesses. It takes several translations to bring out the fullness and richness of the original language—and even then, at times, all of the translations together fail to convey the full meaning of the original words.

The following analysis of John's prologue (John 1:1-18) is detailed and, at times, complex because the analysis assesses translations of the Greek text and therefore makes constant reference to Greek words. The serious reader will be rewarded if he or she works through this chapter carefully.

ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS: ANCIENT AND MODERN

John 1:1-5

William Tyndale's Version

In the beginnyng was the worde, and the worde was with God: and the word was God. The same was in the beginnyng with God. All things were made by it, and with out it, was made nothinge, that was made. In it was lyfe, and the lyfe was the lyghte of men, and the lyght shyneth in the darckness, but the darckness comprehended it not.

King James Version

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²The same was in the beginning with God.

³All things were made by him; and without him was not any thing made that was made.

⁴In him was life; and the life was the light of men.

⁵And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not.

American Standard Version

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²The same was in the beginning with God. ³All things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that hath been made. ⁴In him was life; and the life was the light of men. ⁵And the light shineth in the darkness; and the darkness apprehended it not.

Revised Standard Version

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God; ³all things were made through him; and without him was not anything made that was made. ⁴In him was life, and the life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

New American Standard Bible

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.

²He was in the beginning with God.

³All things came into being by Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

⁴In Him was life, and the life was the light of men.

⁵And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it.

New International Version

¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was with God in the beginning.

³Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. ⁴In him was life, and that life was the light of men. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.

Today's English Version

¹Before the world was created, the Word already existed; he was with God, and he was the same as God. ²From the very beginning the Word was with God. ³Through him God made all things; not one thing in all creation was made without him. ⁴The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out.

New Living Translation

¹In the beginning the Word already existed. He was with God, and he was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³He created everything there is. Nothing exists that he didn't make. ⁴Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. ⁵The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it.

New English Bible

When all things began, the Word already was. The Word dwelt with God, and what God was, the Word was. The Word, then, was with God at the beginning, and through him all things came to be; no single thing was created without him. All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never mastered it.

The New Jerusalem Bible

- ¹In the beginning was the Word:
the Word was with God
and the Word was God.
- ²He was with God in the beginning.
- ³Through him all things came into being,
not one thing came into being
except through him.
- ⁴What has come into being in him was life,
life that was the light of men;
- ⁵and light shines in darkness,
and darkness could not overpower it.

The New American Bible

- ¹In the beginning was the Word,
and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.
- ²He was in the beginning with God.
- ³All things came to be through him,
and without him nothing came to be.
What came to be ⁴through him was life,
and this life was the light of the human race;
- ⁵the light shines in the darkness,
and the darkness has not overcome it.

New Revised Standard Version

- ¹In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. ²He was in the beginning with God. ³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. ⁵The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not overcome it.

A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF JOHN 1:1-18

1:1a

In the beginning was the Word. (KJV, RSV,
NASB, NIV)

When all things began, the Word already
was. (NEB)

Before the world was created, the Word already
existed. (TEV)

In the beginning the Word already existed. (NLT)

From the outset the reader of John's Gospel is confronted with an enigmatic phrase, which in a word-for-word rendering becomes, "In beginning was the Word." The phrase "in beginning" most likely indicates the beginning before all beginnings, prior to the beginning of Genesis 1:1; it speaks of that eternal beginning in which the eternal Word existed. The NEB and TEV, understanding the phrase to have temporal significance, however, make this beginning equal to the beginning in Genesis 1:1. The paraphrases in the NEB and TEV might alarm the careful reader because, although their renderings indicate that the Word existed prior to Creation, they do not convey the idea that the Word existed from the beginning or from all eternity—which is the meaning probably intended by John. The NLT highlights this sense by using the verb "existed" to represent the Greek imperfect tense (a tense used to denote continuous action in past time).

All the versions render the Greek word *logos* as "the Word." There is probably no better term than "The Word" because it has become a traditional title of the Son of God before his incarnation, and it will probably remain a constant expression in English translations.

1:1b

and the Word was with God (KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV)
 the Word dwelt with God (NEB)
 he was with God (TEV, NLT)

The rendering of this phrase depends upon how the Greek preposition *pros* is understood in this context. In classical usage, *pros* used in relationship between two people means “having regard to,” and indicates “devotion.”¹ Perhaps John intended to convey this meaning; but it is more likely that *pros* is to be understood according to koiné Greek usage. In koiné Greek, *pros* (short for *prosopon pros prosopon*, “face-to-face”) was used to show personal relationships.² Accordingly, two other translations, that of Williams and that of Montgomery, rendered this passage, “and the Word was face-to-face with God.” The NEB comes the closest to transferring this sense by adding “dwelt,” and the REB is even better: “the Word was in God’s presence.” The translation “with” in the other translations is accurate but colorless.

1:1c

and the Word was God. (KJV, RSV, NASB, NIV, NLT)
 and what God was, the Word was. (NEB)
 and he was the same as God. (TEV)

The Greek clause underlying these translations stipulates, according to a rule of grammar, that *logos* (the Word) is the subject and *theos* (God) is the predicate. Another particularity of Greek is that the definite article (“the” in English) is often used in Greek for defining individual identity and is

¹ Abbott, *Johannine Grammar*, 274-275.

² See Matt. 13:56; 26:18; Mark 6:3; 14:49; 1 Cor. 16:10; 2 Cor. 5:8; and Gal. 1:18.

thus absent when the purpose is to ascribe quality or character. In the previous clause (“the Word was with God”), there is an article before God (*ton theon*)—pointing to God the Father. In the present clause, there is no article before “God.” The distinction may indicate that John did not want the reader to think the Son was the Father—but the same as the Father: that is, both are “God.” The NEB reads, “and what God was, the Word was,”¹ and the TEV reads, “and he was the same as God.” It can be argued, however, that the grammar simply indicates that “God” is the object of the verb rather than the subject, and the clause should be translated as in most of the versions: “the Word was God.”

1:2

He was in the beginning with God. (RSV, NASB, NLT)

The same was in the beginning with God. (KJV)

He was with God in the beginning. (NIV)

The Word, then, was with God at the beginning.

(NEB)

From the very beginning the Word was with God.

(TEV)

The first verse establishes three separate facts: (1) the Word existed in the beginning, (2) the Word was with God, and (3) the Word was God. The second verse, picking up from the third statement, joins facts two and one: the Word (who was God) existed in the beginning with God. All the versions, given their minor variations, convey this. Nevertheless, it

¹ Bruce says this: “The last clause of John 1:1 [in the NEB] reads: ‘what God was, the Word was.’ Is this what the clause really means? Or have the translators perhaps been moved by an unconscious desire to give a rather different rendering from the Authorized Version? On reflection, this is probably excellent exegesis of the words literally rendered in the older versions as ‘the Word was God’ ” (*English Bible*, 245).

seems odd that the NEB and TEV would here use “at the beginning” or “from the very beginning” when in the first verse they paraphrased this phrase. Consistency would help the reader observe John’s intended redundancy.

1:3a

All things were made by him (KJV)
 All things were made through him (RSV)
 All things came into being through him (NRSV)
 All things came into being by Him (NASB)
 and through him all things came to be (NEB)
 Through him all things were made (NIV)
 Through him God made all things (TEV)
 He created everything there is (NLT)

The KJV and NASB’s renderings, “all things were made/came into being *by him*,” are unfortunate because the English preposition *by* in this context connotes authorship. The Word, according to this passage, was not so much the author of creation (i.e., the Creator) as the agent of creation. This agency or instrumentality is expressed in Greek by the preposition *dia*, best translated into English as “through.”

Three of the translations (NRSV, NASB, NEB) have a literal rendering of the Greek verb *egeneto* (came into being or came to be); such expressions are perhaps more suggestive of creation than “made.”

1:3b-4a

and without him was not anything made that was made.
⁴In him was life (KJV, RSV)
 and apart from Him nothing came into being that has
 come into being. ⁴In Him was life (NASB)

without him nothing was made that has been made.

⁴In him was life (NIV)

not one thing in all creation was made without him.

⁴The Word was the source of life (TEV)

no single thing was created without him. ⁴All that came

to be was alive with his life (NEB)

Nothing exists that he didn't make. ⁴Life itself was in him (NLT)

The variation in phrasing among the translations in verses 3 and 4 is due to a textual problem. The last phrase of verse 3 in the KJV and RSV has been placed with either verse 3 or verse 4 in the different versions by means of punctuation. Rendered literally, the two possible interpretations are as follows:

- (1) and without him was not anything created. ⁴That which was created in him was life
- (2) and without him was not anything created that was created. ⁴In him was life

The earliest manuscripts (the Bodmer Papyri— \mathfrak{P}^{66} and \mathfrak{P}^{75} , Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Vaticanus) do not have any punctuation in these verses. \mathfrak{P}^{75} was later corrected, as was Codex Sinaiticus. In \mathfrak{P}^{75} a punctuation mark was placed before the phrase, as in (1); in Codex Sinaiticus after it, as in (2).

The majority of the early church fathers interpreted John 1:3-4 according to the phrasing in (1). The passage was understood to mean that all created things were “life” by virtue of being “in him” (i.e., in Christ). The statement was somehow supposed to affirm that the Word (Christ) not only created the universe, he now sustains it with his life. This is

the thought behind the rendering in the NLT: "Life itself was in him." Historically, interpretation generally changed after some gnostic heretics used the passage to say that the Holy Spirit was "a created thing." All the church fathers then shifted to the phrasing in (2). Most exegesis has followed this up to the present.

Of the translations listed above, only the NEB and the NLT follow the approach of (1).

We cannot be sure which of the two interpretations John intended. Since this is poetry, it is very likely that he wrote the phrase to have both meanings.

1:4

In him was life, and the life was the light of men.

(KJV, RSV, NASB)

In him was life, and that life was the light of men. (NIV)

The Word was the source of life, and this life brought light to mankind. (TEV)

All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men. (NEB)

Life itself was in him, and this life gives light to everyone. (NLT)

Having discussed the problem of phrasing, let us examine other aspects of this verse. "In him was life" is a good, literal translation; but the TEV differs. Its first edition reads, "The Word had life in himself," but the third edition has, "The Word was the source of life." The first rendering is a paraphrase of John 5:26 and conveys the thought that life was located in the Word. The revision, an improvement, suggests that the Word is the source from which people can obtain life. Although this

is in accord with the total thought of John's Gospel, it perhaps goes beyond what John intended here.

The second part of this verse, rendered literally, is clear enough. Most readers will recognize that the life was the light *to* people; but the TEV and NLT remove any uncertainty.

1:5

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it. (RSV)

And the light shineth in darkness; and the darkness comprehended it not. (KJV)

And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it. (NASB)

The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it. (NIV)

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has never put it out. (TEV)

The light shines on in the dark, and the darkness has never quenched it [mastered it, 2nd ed.]. (NEB)

The light shines through the darkness, and the darkness can never extinguish it. (NLT)

All the versions essentially read the same in the first clause except the NEB and the NLT. The translation “shines on” seems correctly to capture the time element of verse 5 in conjunction with the sequence of verses 1-5. Since verses 1-2 deal with the eternal preexistence of the Word, they are prior to the time of Creation. Verse 3 involves the Creation; and verse 4 indicates the time period in which the Word was incarnate among men as “the light of life.” Verse 5 then suggests that the light kept on shining, even after his departure.

In this second clause, the versions vary as to the translation of the predicate because the Greek word *lambano* can mean either “lay hold of, grasp, apprehend, comprehend” or “overcome, overpower.” This Greek verb is used quite often in the New Testament to indicate obtainment or apprehension/understanding (see Acts 4:13; 10:34; Rom. 9:30; 1 Cor. 9:24; Eph. 3:18; Phil. 3:12-13). However, when the New Testament elsewhere has this word in relationship to darkness, the sense required is “overtake” or “overcome” (see John 12:35; 1 Thess. 5:4). It might be that John had both meanings in mind. He could have been asserting that the light keeps on shining because the darkness did not overtake it (as in the RSV, TEV, NEB, NLT); and he could have also been decrying the fact that the darkness (i.e., unenlightened humanity) did not apprehend or comprehend this light (as in the KJV, NASB, NIV, and NLT margin, which reads, “Or *and the darkness has not understood it*”). The remainder of the prologue and even the entire Gospel underscores this sense of misunderstanding and rejection.

1:6-8

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. The same came for a witness, to bear witness of the Light, that all men through him might believe. He was not that Light, but was sent to bear witness of that Light. (KJV)

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came for testimony, to bear witness to the light, that all might believe through him. He was not the light, but came to bear witness to the light. (RSV; similarly, NASB, NIV, NRSV)

There appeared a man named John, sent from God; he came as a witness to testify to the light, that all might

become believers through him. He was not himself the light; he came to bear witness to the light. (NEB)

God sent his messenger, a man named John, who came to tell people about the light, so that all should hear the message and believe. He himself was not the light; he came to tell about the light. (TEV)

God sent John the Baptist to tell everyone about the light so that everyone might believe because of his testimony. John himself was not the light; he was only a witness to the light. (NLT)

Given their minor semantic and syntactic variations, all the versions of this passage convey essentially the same message. The most notable differences are seen in the diverse renderings of the Greek verb *marturo*. The KJV, RSV, NASB, and NIV translate it “bear witness”—a somewhat outdated and/or religious expression that might bewilder the reader unfamiliar with its biblical usage. In the NRSV the expression is “came as a witness to testify.” “Testify” (NEB) is more modern and more comprehensive; “tell” (TEV, NLT), while easy to understand, fails to convey the notion of verification and substantiation.

1:9

That was the true Light, which lighteth every man that cometh into the world. (KJV)

The true light that enlightens every man was coming into the world. (RSV)

The true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world. (NIV)

There was the true light which, coming into the world, enlightens every man. (NASB)

The real light which enlightens every man was even then coming into the world. (NEB)

This was the real light—the light that comes into the world and shines on all mankind. (TEV)

The one who is the true light, who gives light to everyone, was going to come into the world. (NLT)

It should be noted that many of the translations provide an alternative rendering in the margin because, according to the grammar of this sentence, the verse can be constructed in two ways: (1) “the true light that gives light to every man was coming into the world,” or (2) “He was the true light that gives light to every man coming into the world.” According to the Greek, the participle for “coming” can agree with either “man” or “light”; and though “man” is closer to “coming” in the sentence, the next verses suggest that John was speaking of how the light came into the world. Thus, all modern translations have selected the first rendering.

The KJV translators, however, stayed closely to the syntax of the Greek and thereby provided a translation that asserts that Christ has given light to every person who has come into this world. One way to interpret this is to understand that Christ has brought the light of the gospel for all to see—not that all have seen or have been enlightened.

1:10

He was in the world, and the world was made by him, and the world knew him not (KJV)

He was in the world, and the world was made through him, yet the world knew him not (RSV, and similarly NASB and NIV; the NIV uses “recognize” in place of “knew”)

He was in the world; but the world, though it owed its being to him, did not recognize him (NEB)

The Word was in the world and though God made the world through him, yet the world did not recognize him (TEV)

But although the world was made through him, the world didn't recognize him when he came. (NLT)

Since the understood subject of this verse is “the Word,” the TEV supplies it. Most of the translations correctly indicate that the world was made through him—a repetition of verse 3 (but observe the inconsistency in the NEB and NASB between “came into being” in verse 3 and “made” in this verse). The NEB’s rendering (“the world . . . owed its being to him”) means that the world was indebted to the Word for its existence; but this does not, in and of itself, necessarily indicate that Creation has occurred through his agency. Thus, Creation is obscured, as well as the Word’s instrumentality in it. The KJV’s rendering, “the world was made by him,” connotes direct authorship, with no instrumentality.

In English, “recognize” (in NEB, TEV, NIV, NLT) is more poignant than “know” (RSV, NASB), which is a general term, especially in this context. After the Word’s incarnation, mankind should have recognized the one through whom they were created, but they failed to do so—as is so poignantly reflected in the NLT: “But although the world was made through him, the world didn’t recognize him when he came.”

1:11

He came unto his own, and his own received him not.
(KJV)

He came to his own home, and his own people received him not. (RSV)

He came to His own, and those who were His own did not receive Him. (NASB)

He came to that which was his own, but his own did not receive him. (NIV)

He entered into his own realm, and his own would not receive him. (NEB)

He came to his own country, but his own people did not receive him. (TEV)

Even in his own land and among his own people, he was not accepted. (NLT)

The Greek idiom *ta idia* (literally, “one’s own things”) can designate one’s own possession or domain (see NASB’s footnote), but when John uses it he seems to mean domain (see John 16:32 and 19:27). Four versions (RSV, NEB, NLT, TEV) attempt to convey this in English by the phrases “own home,” “own realm,” “own land,” or “own country” (respectively), while the other two leave it ambiguous (although NASB has a note). In the next phrase, the idiom *hoi idioi* denotes “one’s own people.” Again, the KJV, RSV, NEB, and TEV make this explicit, while the NASB and NIV leave it implicit. The NLT assumes that the Greek idioms *ta idia* and *hoi idioi* both refer to “the people.”

1:12

But as many as received him, to them he gave power to become the sons of God, even to them that believe on his name. (KJV)

But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God (RSV)

But as many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe in His name. (NASB)

Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God (NIV)

But to all who did receive him, to those who have yielded him their allegiance, he gave the right to become children of God (NEB)

Some, however, did receive him and believed in him; so he gave them the right to become God's children. (TEV)

But to all who believed him and accepted him, he gave the right to become children of God. (NLT)

The Greek word rendered “receive” in this verse conveys the dual idea of acceptance and understanding. In English, one possible meaning of receive is “to permit to enter,” and another is “to accept as true,” which is related to the idea of believing.¹ All of the translations except the KJV and NASB rearrange the original syntax by joining the third clause to the first in order to show the association between receiving and believing. Reception is dependent upon and concurrent with belief: to believe is to receive. And to believe in Christ, according to John, means more than to “have yielded him allegiance” (NEB)—which sounds like a pledge of loyalty. (This has been corrected in the REB: “those who put their trust in him.”)

To those who believed in Christ, “he” (God or Christ?) gave them “the right” or “the privilege” to become the children of God. The Greek word underlying “right” or “privilege”

¹ *Merriam Webster's New International Dictionary*, s.v. “receive.”

(*exousia*) usually is translated “authority” in the New Testament; but in this context “right” is more natural. To translate it “power,” as in the RSV, would require the Greek word to have been *dunamis*, a word that John never uses.

Modern versions were not trying to be gender inclusive when they used “children” instead of the KJV’s “sons.” Rather, the Greek word here is *tekna*, which means “children”—specifically, “born ones.” There is an entirely different Greek word for “sons”—*huioi*.

1:13

Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God. (KJV; similarly RSV and NASB, which replace “which” with “who” and use different punctuation)

children born not of natural descent, nor of human decision or a husband’s will, but born of God. (NIV)

not born of any human stock, or by the fleshly [“physical” in REB] desire of a human father, but the offspring of God himself. (NEB)

They did not become God’s children by natural means, that is, by being born as the children of a human father; God himself was their Father. (TEV)

They are reborn! This is not a physical birth resulting from human passion or plan—this rebirth comes from God. (NLT)

In this verse John wanted to make it emphatically clear that becoming a child of God necessitates a divinely-initiated birth. Using four prepositional phrases, each beginning with the Greek preposition *ek* (which denotes source), John three times states what the origin of this birth is not and once states what

the origin is. There is substantial variation among the versions as to how to translate these four prepositional phrases. The first prepositional phrase (literally, “not from bloods”) comes from a Hebrew idiom that indicates physical bloodlines. Most commentators take this to mean natural descent, perhaps with reference to Abraham’s lineage; thus, one is not a child of God because his genealogy traces to Abraham (this theme reappears later, John 8:31-47). The KJV, RSV, and NASB render this phrase almost literally, while others translate it idiomatically. The literal rendering, to modern readers, would be incomprehensible. The idiomatic renderings aid understanding.

The second phrase (literally, “not from the will [or desire] of the flesh”) has been interpreted by some as implying sexual desire. Others, understanding the Greek word for “flesh” to designate that which is human, think this phrase signifies human volition. Again, the KJV, RSV, and NASB avoid making an exegetical commitment by translating literally. The NEB adopts the meaning of sexual desire; the NIV, on the other hand, takes the phrase to suggest human volition. Because the TEV translators understood this phrase as equivalent to the following phrase, “the one qualifying the other,”¹ the TEV condenses the two phrases into one.

The third phrase (literally, “nor from the will of a husband”) is understood by most commentators to indicate the generative power of an adult male, a husband. The NIV, NEB, and TEV use the phrase “husband’s will” or “human father” to convey this. The NLT has no reference to a husband.

The fourth prepositional phrase (literally, “from God”) declares the divine origin of this birth. This is clear enough in the RSV, NASB, and NIV. The paraphrases in the NEB and

¹ Newman and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 20.

TEV are not necessary. The NEB's translation was changed in the REB to "of God." And Newman and Nida, who normally defend the TEV, suggest that a better thought-for-thought translation would be "God himself caused them to be his children."¹ Influenced by John 3, the NLT uses "rebirth" (and "reborn") in this verse, when the text speaks only of birth.

1:14

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. (KJV)

And the Word became flesh and dwelt ["lived" in the NRSV] among us, full of grace and truth; we have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father. (RSV)

And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of the only begotten from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NASB)

The Word became flesh and lived for a while [1st ed.; "made his dwelling," 2nd ed.] among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth. (NIV)

So the Word became flesh; he came to dwell among us, and we saw his glory, such glory as befits the Father's only Son, full of grace and truth. (NEB)

The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son. (TEV)

So the Word became human and lived here on earth among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness.

¹ Ibid.

And we have seen his glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. (NLT)

All the versions, with the exception of the TEB and NLT, read, “The Word became flesh.” As this is a unique assertion of the Son of God’s incarnation, it must be translated accurately. Fortunately, all the versions advance beyond the KJV’s rendering, “was made,” for this expression does not correctly translate the meaning of the Greek verb *egeneto*, which denotes the beginning of a new existence. The Word, who was God, became that which he had never been before—a man. When John says, “The Word became flesh,” he must mean “The Word became a human being” (as in the TEV).¹ But this could imply that the Word, a divine person, assumed the personality of another, whereas the orthodox understanding of the incarnation is that the Word took on human nature (signified by the word “flesh”). Thus, it is better to say it as in the NLT: “the Word became human.”

It should be noted that John probably avoided the Greek word *anthropos* (man) and instead used *sarx* (flesh) because he was battling against the *Docetic heresy*. The Docetists, a gnostic sect, believed that flesh was evil; therefore, they taught that the Son of God did not possess real flesh but only the guise of it. John wanted to make it unquestionably clear that the Word took on actual flesh. This historical background is critical for the proper interpretation and translation of this passage. Therefore, though it is linguistically appropriate to equate “flesh” with “man” or “human being,” it is theologically inaccurate.

In the second clause of verse 14 (literally, “and tabernacled [or “pitched his tent”] in our midst”), all the translators chose

¹ Westcott defined flesh as follows: “Flesh expresses here human nature as a whole regarded under its aspect of its present corporal embodiment, including of necessity the ‘soul’ (12:27) and the spirit (11:33; 13:21) as belonging to the totality of man” (*Gospel According to St. John*, 11).

not to translate the Greek verb *eskenosen* literally because “tabernacled” sounds foreign to the English ear. Among the five translations, three chose “dwelt” (RSV, NASB, NEB) and two selected “lived” (TEV, so also NRSV) or “lived for a while” (NIV, 1st ed.). The NLT went with “lived here on earth.” Although these adaptations may accommodate the English reader, they eclipse a word that was pregnant with meaning to the original readers. As a case in point, here is precisely where dynamic equivalence fails. While the average modern reader would probably be perplexed if he read “tabernacled,” the ancient reader of this Gospel, when hearing *eskenosen*, would associate it with the Old Testament tabernacle. In the Old Testament account, God dwelt among his people, Israel, by pitching his tabernacle (his tent) among them. His presence and Shekinah glory filled that tabernacle; and wherever that tabernacle went in the journeys of Israel, God would also go (see Exod. 40). With this image in view, the writer, John, must have intended his readers to see the connection with the Old Testament tabernacle. If “tabernacled” (or “pitched his tent”) is too peculiar to appear in the text of a translation, it should at least appear as a marginal reading accompanied by some explanation. And, finally, it should be pointed out that “made his dwelling” in the second edition of the NIV is much better than “lived for a while” (1st ed.), which captures only the transitory aspect of tabernacling while neglecting the act of dwelling.¹

Before examining the next phrase (“we beheld his glory”) and

¹ F. F. Bruce criticized the NIV for failing to capture the meaning of *eskenosen*: “In verse 14 the verb *eskenosen*, instead of being treated as an ingressive aorist, is rendered as though it were an imperfect: ‘The Word lived for a while among us.’ The phrase ‘for a while’ is probably intended to bring out the idea of a temporary encampment in the verb *skenoō*. But why not retain the ingressive force by some such rendering as: ‘took up his temporary abode among us’? If a rendering of this verb in the present context, without becoming clumsy, could convey something of the shekinah idea also, that would be a further improvement!” (*CHRISTIANITY TODAY*, Sept. 28, 1973, 26). The second edition of the NIV has a correction: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us.”

that which follows, we must note that among the versions there has been some rearrangement of the word order in the last part of verse 14. This is due to different interpretations of the grammatical identification of the Greek word *pleres* (“full”). As this word is often grammatically unmarked, it could agree with the Greek words for “only Son” or “his glory” or “Word.” Since its connection with “the Word” is more natural and suitable to the context (see 1:16), the RSV repositions the clause “full of grace and truth” to follow immediately its logical antecedent, “the Word.” This rearrangement or word order, however, separates the compounded idea of tabernacling and beholding his glory—which is clearly evident in the Greek text. The NEB handles it better, by keeping the last clause in its proper position and then clarifying its antecedent: “the Father’s only Son, full of grace and truth.” The TEV aligns “full of grace and truth” with “his glory.” Two versions (NASB and NIV) retain the same syntax as in the Greek and, unfortunately, give the impression that “full of grace and truth” modifies “Father.”

Most of the versions render the Greek word *charis* as “grace.” The NLT, however, employs the expression “unfailing love” because the translators thought that John was attempting to convey the Hebrew notion of *hesed* with the Greek word *charis*. Here and in 1:17 *aletheia* uniformly becomes “truth.” Yet, as Barclay Newman intimates, readers should not be surprised to see new versions changing “truth” to “reality.”¹ In John’s special terminology, *aletheia* does not, in all instances, simply mean “truth” (as versus falsehood) or “veracity.” It more often signifies “divine reality revealed.”²

¹ Newman and Nida, *Translator’s Handbook*, 653–655.

² Bultmann wrote, “In John *aletheia* denotes ‘divine reality’ with reference to the fact (1) that this is different from the reality in which man first finds himself, and by which he is controlled, and (2) that it discloses itself and is thus revelation” (*Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, vol. 1 [ed. Gerhard Kittel; trans. G. Bromiley], 245).

The last segment of this verse to be examined is, “We have beheld his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father” (RSV). Beginning with verse 14, John introduces a testimony on behalf of the eyewitnesses of Jesus (see also 1 John 1:1-3). He declares, “We have beheld his glory.” The Greek verb he uses (*etheasametha*) means more than “to see”; it means “to view, to gaze upon” (an English derivative is “theater”). Then John characterizes the glory that was seen as being special in that it belonged to one who possessed a unique relationship with the Father; that is, it was the glory of an only Son.

The Greek word underlying “only Son” is *monogenous*, which is derived from *monos* (only) and *genos* (kind, offspring). This word does convey the idea of birth but probably not as much as it emphasizes the notion of uniqueness. Therefore, the rendering “only begotten” (as in the KJV) can be misleading, for inherent in this term is the implication of generation—and much debate was incited in the early days of the church over how the Son was generated from the Father. It is better that the idea of generation be avoided in translation, as is done in the second edition of the NIV (“the One and Only”) and in the NLT (“the only Son of the Father”).

The rendering “only begotten” probably originated from Jerome’s Latin translation when Jerome changed *unicus* (unique) to *unigenitus* (only begotten). Prior to Jerome’s translation, the old Latin Codex Vercellensis (A.D. 365) had translated *monogenous* as *unicus*. The rendering “only begotten” was carried over to the KJV, then to the ERV and ASV, and on to several twentieth century versions, including the NASB. Fortunately, the phrase has been adjusted in Weymouth, Moffatt, Goodspeed, Williams, and other more recent versions (RSV, NIV, NEB, TEV, NLT).

This “one and only Son,” according to the original, came from

the Father. The NIV makes this explicit, while NEB and TEV say the glory came from the Father. But the Greek text does not indicate that the glory came from the Father to the Son (as in the NEB, TEV). Having just declared the incarnation of the Word, John is here viewing the Son as having come from the Father.

1:15

John bare witness of him, and cried, saying, This was he of whom I spake, He that cometh after me is preferred before me: for he was before me. (KJV)

(John bore witness to him, and cried, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me ranks before me, for he was before me.’”) (RSV)

John bore witness of Him, and cried out, saying, “This was He of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has a higher rank than I, for He existed before me.’” (NASB)

John testifies concerning him. He cries out, saying, “This was he of whom I said, ‘He who comes after me has surpassed me because he was before me.’” (NIV)

Here is John’s testimony to him: he cried aloud, “This is the man I meant when I said, ‘He comes after me, but takes rank before me’; for before I was born, he already was.” (NEB)

John spoke about him. He cried out, “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘He comes after me, but he is greater than I am, because he existed before I was born.’” (TEV)

John pointed him out to the people. He shouted to the crowds, “This is the one I was talking about when I said, ‘Someone is coming who is far greater than I am, for he existed long before I did.’” (NLT)

Following his own personal testimony, John (the evangelist) quotes the witness that John (the Baptist) made on the day he baptized Jesus (see 1:30). On one hand, this verse appears to interrupt the continuity between verses 14 and 16; as such, it is parenthetical in the RSV and a separate paragraph in the TEV and NIV. But, on the other hand, verse 15 seems to substantiate sequentially the testimony of 1:1-14, inasmuch as the Baptist's declaration refers to both the Word's eternal preexistence and incarnation, except in reverse order. At any rate, the message, as transmitted in all the versions, is essentially uniform in accuracy. They all relate that, while the incarnate Word came after John chronologically, he surpassed John (in rank) because he existed before him.

1:16

And of his fulness have all we received, and grace for grace. (KJV)

And from his fulness have we all received, grace upon grace. (RSV)

For of His fulness we have all received, and grace upon grace. (NASB)

From the fullness of his grace we have all received one blessing after another. (NIV)

Out of his full store we have all received grace upon grace; (NEB)

Out of the fullness of his grace he has blessed us all, giving us one blessing after another. (TEV)

We have all benefited from the rich blessings he brought to us—one gracious blessing after another. (NLT)

The connection between 1:14 and 1:16 is obvious: 1:14 concludes with “full of grace and truth,” and 1:16 begins with “because out of his fullness we all received.” The Greek word translated “fullness” is *pleroma*. To Greek-speaking Christian readers, *pleroma* was a special term with particular significance. New Testament writers used it to describe the all-inclusive, all-sufficient Christ (see Col. 2:9). The NEB’s rendering, “his full store,” captures this idea. The NIV and TEV, based on a different interpretation, specify that the fullness is “the fullness of his grace.” They made the addition “of his grace” in order to compensate for replacing the words “grace upon grace” with “one blessing after another” in the last part of this verse. The NLT makes this “one gracious blessing after another.” From my perspective, these are unfortunate renderings because they obscure the meaning of “grace upon grace.” This phrase does not mean that Christ gives us one blessing after another (in the sense that we keep getting good things); the expression means that there is no end to the supply of grace that comes from Christ’s fullness. The phrase suggests constant replacement and replenishment: “continual accessions of grace, new grace coming upon and superseding the former.”¹

1:17

For the law was given by Moses, but grace and truth came by Jesus Christ. (KJV)

For the law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (RSV, NIV)

For the Law was given through Moses; grace and truth were realized through Jesus Christ. (NASB)

¹ Alford, *Greek Testament*.

for while the Law was given through Moses, grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (NEB)

God gave the Law through Moses, but grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. (TEV)

For the law was given through Moses; God's unfailing love and faithfulness came through Jesus Christ. (NLT)

In this verse, John seems to be distinguishing the New Testament dispensation from that of the Old Testament. The NEB adds "while," and the TEV adds "but," to make sure the reader notices the contrast. A few ancient scribes (P⁶⁶, W^s) and ancient translators (Old Latin and Coptic Bohairic) also added a contrastive *de*. While the Old Testament law was something "given" by God through the agent, Moses, grace and truth "came" or "were realized" through Jesus Christ. Since the Greek word *egeneto* can mean "came" (see 1:6), "came into being" (see 1:3, 10), or "became" (see 1:14), translators must decide which meaning is called for in each given context. In this verse, "came" was selected for most of the translations and "were realized" for one—namely, the NASB.

1:18

No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him. (KJV)

No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known. (RSV)

No one has ever seen God; but God's only Son, he who is nearest to the Father's heart, he has made him known. (NEB)

No man has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him. (NASB)

No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father's side, has made him known. (NIV)

No one has ever seen God. The only Son, who is the same as God and is at the Father's side, he has made him known. (TEV)

No one has ever seen God. But his only Son, who is himself God, is near to the Father's heart; he has told us about him. (NLT)

The difference between the versions that read “only begotten Son” or “only Son” as opposed to the reading “the only begotten God” comes from a significant variance among the Greek New Testament manuscripts. The translation in the KJV, RSV, and NEB is based upon the reading *monogenes huios*, which has been translated as “only begotten Son” or “one and only Son”; the other translations are based upon *monogenes theos*, which has been translated as “only begotten God” (NASB) or “God the One and Only” (NIV). The latter reading has the support of the earliest manuscripts (the Bodmer Papyri— \mathfrak{P}^{66} and \mathfrak{P}^{75} , Codex Sinaiticus, Codex Vaticanus, Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus). It is later manuscripts (Codex Alexandrinus, the Freer Gospel, and many later witnesses) that read, “the only begotten Son.” The first reading is clearly the preferred reading because it is the most difficult of the two and best explains the origin of the variation. Scribes would not be inclined to change a common wording (“only begotten Son”) to an uncommon wording (“only begotten God”—which is a literal translation). The reading in all the earliest manuscripts indicates that Jesus is here called “God,” as well as “the one and only.” Unfortunately, many

translators feel compelled to add the word “Son” after “one and only,” thereby creating, in effect, a conflated reading, as in the TEV: “the only Son, who is the same as God” (so also NLT).

The best rendering should convey that the Word is the one and only God. This perfectly corresponds to the first verse of the prologue, where the Word is called “God” and is shown as the Son living in intimate fellowship with the Father—literally, “in the bosom of the Father.”

Among the translations, three translate this next phrase nearly word for word (KJV, RSV, NASB), and four paraphrase it. For others, the rendering “at the Father’s side” (NIV, TEV) is far less picturesque than the translation “nearest to the Father’s heart” (NEB) and “close the Father’s heart” (NRSV; similarly NLT).

In the last clause of this verse is a Greek word, *exegesato*, that derives from the verb that means “to lead one through an explanation, to narrate.” The English word *exegesis* is derived from this word. An exegesis in biblical studies means a detailed explanation of a Bible passage—literally “a leading through” a portion of Scripture. The Word is the one who leads people through a detailed explanation of God. To render the Greek verb “made him known” is too general and not very impressive. And the reader may not see the intended connection with “the Word” in 1:1. Indeed, 1:18 is a mirror of 1:1, for both speak of the Son’s intimate relationship with the Father, of his being God, and of his being the expression—the explanation—of God. The best translation of them all, then, is the one in the NASB because it explicitly says, “He has explained Him.”

The Son of God, called “the Word,” came among people to explain the invisible God. Had he not come, God would have remained unknown by us. But the Word, who is himself God and knows God the Father, came to earth as a man among human beings to provide us with a full, living explanation of divinity.

CONCLUSION

Having worked our way through this fascinating portion of the Bible, we could go on to do comparative studies of other portions. I would recommend that the serious reader use an interlinear Hebrew text and Greek text. The most up-to-date Hebrew-English interlinear is the *NIV Interlinear Hebrew-English Old Testament* (translator, John Kohlenberger), and the most up-to-date Greek-English interlinear is *The New Greek-English Interlinear New Testament* (translators, Robert Brown and Philip Comfort; ed. J. D. Douglas). Using an interlinear with lexicons and other modern translations, a serious Bible reader can do a very thorough and enlightening study of any portion of the Bible.

Such a study will also show you, firsthand, the differences in translation philosophy and methodology. Each of the translations that was discussed in the previous chapters was based on a particular philosophy of translation. For example, the Revised Standard Version and the *New American Standard Bible*, which share a common purpose (i.e., to revise and revive the American Standard Version), are more literal than most versions. The translators often adhered to a word-for-word methodology instead of a thought-for-thought. The New Revised Standard Version is a little more “free”—in fact, the guiding concept for this revision was “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” The New International Version is even more free than the New Revised Standard Version because the translators employed a thought-for-thought approach to translation. And yet the New International Version is not as free as Today’s English Version and the New Living Translation because these versions were created to be as contemporary as possible. Of course, these are generalized observations; such exact distinctions between the translations cannot always be so clearly

delineated. At times, the translations will cross over these boundaries. Nonetheless, it is possible to broadly classify several of the translations as follows:

Classification of English Translations

Strictly literal

New American Standard Bible

Literal

King James Version

American Standard Version

New King James Version

Revised Standard Version

New American Bible

Literal with freedom to be idiomatic

New Revised Standard Version

Thought-for-thought

New International Version

New Jerusalem Bible

Revised English Bible

Functionally equivalent (modern speech)

Today's English Version

New Living Translation

Contemporary English Version

Paraphrastic

The Living Bible

The Message

WHICH VERSIONS SHOULD YOU USE?

A modern English reader (or student) of the Bible would do well to use five or six translations—one in each category listed

above. For example, I use the American Standard Version, *New American Standard Bible*, and the New Revised Standard Version for detailed word studies; and the New International Version, the *New Jerusalem Bible*, and the New Living Translation for general study and reading pleasure. Other readers would make different selections from the various categories, depending on their needs and preferences. Those who use one translation exclusively would be enriched if they used a few others. This is especially true for those who are King James Version enthusiasts. They would discover that their Bible reading would be infused with fresh life and new light if they read a modern version as well.

In selecting a translation of the Bible, the reader should always make sure that the translation was based on the latest, most authoritative texts. Preferably, the Old Testament should have basically followed *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*; and the New Testament, the United Bible Societies' third or fourth edition of the *Greek New Testament* (the same text is published as the Nestle-Aland text; the twenty-sixth (NA²⁶) and twenty-seventh (NA²⁷) editions correspond to the third and fourth editions of the United Bible Societies' text). Many of the modern versions reflect these standard texts; whereas translations such as the King James Version and even the New King James are based on an inferior Greek text.

Finally, it must always be remembered that translations are nothing more than translations—they are not the same as the Bible in the original languages. Not one translation has been “inspired” by God in the same way the original text was. For those who want to read the Bible as it is in the original, inspired languages, they should learn Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Those who do not learn these languages have to depend on translations.

Notice that I used the plural, “translations,” not the singular, because I believe it is imperative for modern English readers to use several of the available English versions. By using different translations the reader can acquire a fuller understanding of the meaning of the original text.