

# 1

## THE TRANSLATOR'S ART

*The Holy Scriptures . . . are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that all God's people may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.*

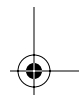
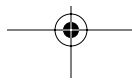
2 TIMOTHY 3:15-17 TNIV

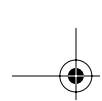


**T**he Bible, Christians affirm, is God's inspired Word (2 Tim 3:16; cf. 2 Pet 1:20-21).<sup>1</sup> It is normative for Christian doctrine and practice. It shows us the way of salvation (2 Tim 3:15), and in its life-giving words we meet the living Word, Jesus Christ (Jn 5:39). But the Bible did not drop from the sky—and certainly not in English. The sixty-six separate books it contains all had to be written by someone—in fact, around forty “someones” over a time span of around one and a half millennia. The Bible has one divine author but many human authors, who wrote in the languages they knew: Greek for the New Testament and Hebrew (with a smattering of Aramaic)<sup>2</sup> for the Old Testament. And unless you are prepared to learn these ancient languages, you must use a translation to access the Word of God.

### THE WORD OF GOD IN THE WORDS OF MEN

Though dubbed “the noblest monument of English prose,”<sup>3</sup> the Bible is anything but English, and it comes from a distant past and a remote culture. The challenges facing the translator cannot be overestimated.





We first turn our attention to the Bible's original languages.

**Biblical Hebrew.** Hebrew belongs to the Semitic group of languages, the most widely spoken of which today is Arabic. Like other Semitic tongues, Hebrew is written from right to left. It originally had no written vowels.

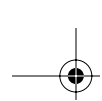
Hebrew, for a long time a dead language apart from its religious use within Jewish synagogues, has now been revived and is spoken in modern Israel. A Hebrew professor friend of mine once came back from Jerusalem with an official-looking piece of paper. He recognized a few Old Testament words: the document demanded he pay a certain number of shekels for his chariot. It turned out to be a parking fine!

Very little ancient Hebrew—only a few inscriptions—is found outside the Bible. A particular difficulty facing translators is the large number of words that occur only once or twice in the Old Testament, making it hard to be sure of their meaning. Translators often have to rely on similar words in other related ancient languages or depend on early translations of the Hebrew Bible into other languages such as the Greek Septuagint (see appendix one), the version of the Old Testament used by the early church and quoted in the New Testament.

Most Hebrew vocabulary is built up from root words of three consonants. Various prefixes and suffixes are added to these roots to indicate pronouns and prepositions. A Hebrew sentence, especially in poetry, may consist of only two or three words, but eight or nine English words may be necessary in translation. The particular forms of Hebrew poetry will be discussed on pages 83-85.

Hebrew has only two tenses: one for completed action, one for incomplete. But various verb forms can suggest different "moods," including the reflexive (e.g., to kill oneself) and the passive (to be killed). A verb can even be intensified in meaning; for example, *kill* can be strengthened to mean *massacre*. Many sentences have no verb at all; one has to be supplied for the sentence to make sense in English. Hebrew sentences are generally simple, often with a long series of narrative actions strung together with the word for *and*.





Many figures of speech appear in Hebrew. These make the language very expressive but also very down-to-earth; abstract concepts are largely avoided. The imagery of Hebrew is largely drawn from everyday life: a heroic person is a lion, a dependable person is a rock, and so on. Much of Hebrew imagery relates to parts of the body: the heart is the center of the will (not the emotions); one's kidneys ("reins" in the AV/KJV) the center of thought; and one's bowels(!) the center of affection.<sup>4</sup> It is obvious that great care must be taken in translating these expressions.

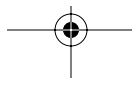
Some recognizable English words are in actuality Hebrew loan words, including *sabbath*, *jubilee*, *hallelujah* and *amen*.

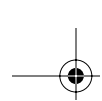
**New Testament Greek.** Like Hebrew, Greek has its own alphabet, but it is a European language and is written from left to right. The Greek of the New Testament is not as elevated or polished as the more literary classical Greek dialects; it is known as *koinē* (or common) Greek. Until relatively recently, no written examples of *koinē* Greek were known outside the Bible, but archaeological discoveries have shown that it preceded Latin as the common language of business within the Roman Empire.

New Testament *koinē* Greek shows considerable Old Testament influence and contains a large number of Hebrew-style expressions and grammatical forms. The New Testament also contains a few untranslated Aramaic words: *abba*, meaning "father," is the best known.

Within the New Testament the quality of Greek varies. The most polished is found in Luke, Acts and Hebrews; the most torturous in 2 Peter and Jude. The Greek of Revelation is very stylized and full of Old Testament imagery. Paul's Greek (found in Romans-Philemon) is generally elegant, but he often writes in long, complex sentences. (Translating these can be like unraveling a tangled ball of string!)

Greek tenses do not entirely correspond to English expectations. Many verbs in the Gospel of Mark, for instance, are in the present tense. Translated as such, it would sound like a running commentary: "And now Jesus is healing the blind man, and now he is on his way to Jerusalem . . ." (a further example, Mk 1:40-45, is provided on pp. 53-





54).<sup>5</sup> Additionally, Greek uses far more participles—verbs ending in *ing*—than English, making it difficult to produce a natural rendering.

Well-known Greek words include *agapē* (“love”), *logos* (“word”), *apostolos* (“apostle”) and *ekklēsia* (“church”).

Before we pass on to translation methods, it needs to be pointed out that translators (as though they were not facing enough challenges already) cannot always be certain as to the original Hebrew or the original Greek, but must sift through the manuscript evidence in order to determine which “original” they are translating. This is called textual criticism and is discussed in appendix one.

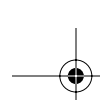
### THE ART OF TRANSLATION

Anyone who has ever tried to follow a set of assembly instructions poorly translated from Japanese or German will immediately appreciate that translation is not simply opening a bilingual dictionary and substituting every “foreign” word with a corresponding “English” one. If it were that easy, a computer could do in minutes what often takes a human being years to accomplish. Language is both more subtle and more complex than that. Moisés Silva stipulates:

A successful translation requires: (1) mastery of the source languages—certainly a much more sophisticated knowledge than one can acquire over a period of four or five years; (2) superb interpretation skills and breadth of knowledge so as not to miss the nuances of the original; and (3) a very high aptitude for writing in the target language so as to express accurately both the cognitive and affective elements of the message.<sup>6</sup>

This list of priorities implies that a good command of Hebrew and Greek is more important than an ear sensitive to English expression. Recently, it has been suggested that these priorities should be reversed; that Bible translation might be done better by English experts, with the Hebrew and Greek scholars brought in simply to tidy up. That perhaps is going too far, but a good translation certainly must reflect high competency in English, not just Hebrew or Greek.<sup>7</sup>





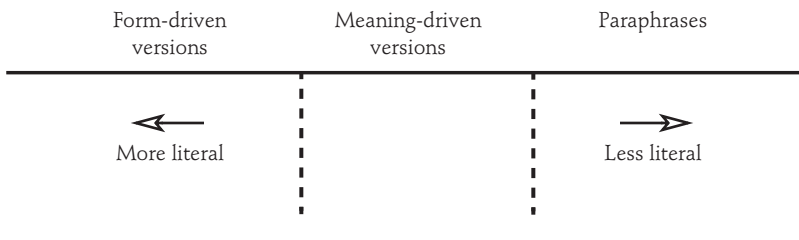
**ACCURATE AND ACCESSIBLE; RELIABLE AND READABLE**

Those purchasing an untried Bible have two main concerns: is it reliable, and is it readable? Or put another way, is it both accurate and accessible? Translators differ as to how these concerns can best be met. Some argue for the merits of a literal translation; others favor a freer approach. *Literal* and *free* are, however, not the best terms to use; translators speak rather of "formal equivalence" and "functional (or 'dynamic') equivalence" respectively. There are several other terms in common use too, as shown in table 1.1.

**Table 1.1. Alternative Descriptions of "Literal" and "Free" Categories**

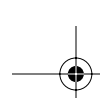
"Literal"	"Free"
formal equivalence	functional equivalence / dynamic equivalence
verbal equivalence	idiomatic translation
direct translation	indirect translation
word-for-word	thought-for-thought / sense-for-sense
form-based	meaning-based
form-driven	meaning-driven

All translations can be placed at some point on a line between extremely literal and extremely free. This is, in fact, the principal way of describing any particular Bible version. Where a translation is placed on this literal↔free spectrum determines into which of three categories it falls: word-for-word, thought-for-thought or paraphrase (see figure 1.1).



**Figure 1.1. The literal-free spectrum**





It is important to remember, however, that no translation is ever entirely one or the other. All show a degree of being form-driven and all a degree of being meaning-driven. Nevertheless, usually one or the other philosophy predominates. For the remainder of this book, I shall use the terms *form-driven* and *meaning-driven*.

Kevin Smith gives a good summary of the main differences between form- and meaning-driven translation approaches (see table 1.2).<sup>8</sup> His last two comparisons represent a value judgment. I will be exploring many of the points he raises over the next chapter and a half.

**Table 1.2. Kevin Smith's Summary of Translation Approaches**

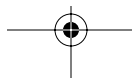
<b>Form-driven</b>	<b>Meaning-driven</b>
Focuses on form	Focuses on meaning
Emphasizes source language	Emphasizes receptor language
Translates what was said	Translates what was meant
Presumes original context	Presumes contemporary context
Retains ambiguities	Removes ambiguities
Minimizes interpretive bias	Allows for interpretive bias
Awkward receptor-language style	Natural receptor-language style
Valuable for serious Bible study	Valuable for missionary use

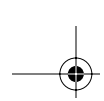


**FORM-DRIVEN AND MEANING-DRIVEN TRANSLATIONS**

A form-driven translation is molded by the structure and style of the original language. Its aim is to come as close to the original as can be achieved in an English rendering. Where possible (depending on just how rigidly this translation philosophy is applied) a form-driven version will keep to the simple dictionary definitions of the Hebrew and Greek words being translated as well as the word order and grammatical structures of the original. If there is a long sentence in the Greek, a long sentence will appear in English, however awkward it may be.

In a meaning-driven version, however, the requirements of good, natural English determine the shape of the translation. A long Greek





sentence may, for instance, be broken into several shorter English sentences. Word order may be rearranged, and a particular Greek or Hebrew word translated in different places by several different English words, depending on the context.

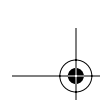
A comparison will help. The New American Standard Bible (updated edition; NASBu) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV) were both published in 1995, but they could hardly be more different. The former is thoroughly form-driven, while the latter follows a rigorous meaning-driven approach. Both claim a high degree of accuracy. Table 1.3 shows a key theological passage in the two versions.

**Table 1.3. Romans 3:21-26 in Two Versions**

NASBu ( <i>italics in original</i> )	CEV
<p><sup>21</sup>But now apart from the Law <i>the</i> righteousness of God has been manifested, being witnessed by the Law and the Prophets, <sup>22</sup><i>even the</i> righteousness of God through faith in Jesus Christ for all those who believe; for there is no distinction; <sup>23</sup>for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, <sup>24</sup>being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; <sup>25</sup>whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood through faith. <i>This was</i> to demonstrate His righteousness, because in the forbearance of God He passed over the sins previously committed; <sup>26</sup>for the demonstration, <i>I say</i>, of His righteousness at the present time, so that He would be just and the justifier of the one who has faith in Jesus.</p>	<p><sup>21</sup>Now we see how God makes us acceptable to him. The Law and the Prophets tell how we become acceptable, and it isn't by obeying the Law of Moses. <sup>22</sup>God treats everyone alike. He accepts people only because they have faith in Jesus Christ. <sup>23</sup>All of us have sinned and fallen short of God's glory. <sup>24</sup>But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. <sup>25-26</sup>God sent Christ to be our sacrifice. Christ offered his life's blood, so that by faith in him we should come to God. And God did this to show that in the past he was right to be patient and forgive sinners. This also shows that God is right when he accepts people who have faith in Jesus.</p>

At even a cursory reading, certain differences in these two versions of Romans 3:21-26 are obvious. In contrast to the NASBu, the CEV employs more sentence breaks (ten as opposed to two) and easier vocabulary ("made acceptable to God" compared to "justified"; "set free from sins" rather than "redemption"; "sacrifice" as opposed to "propitia-





tion”) and is prepared to make significant changes to word order.

Often, a form-driven rendering is all that is needed to produce a perfectly sensible and natural translation. “In the beginning, God created the heavens and the earth” is a straightforward word-for-word rendering of Genesis 1:1 adopted by many translations. Why change it? Even Eugene Peterson’s often vogueish paraphrase *The Message* barely alters it: “First this: God created the Heavens and the Earth.”

But elsewhere it is clear that a form-driven approach can lead to unintended, even humorous, results, such as the NIV’s rendering of Psalm 1:1:

Blessed is the man  
who does not walk in the counsel of the wicked  
or stand in the way of sinners  
or sit in the seat of mockers.

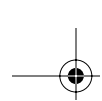
If you do not immediately see any difficulties with this verse, you probably have a high degree of familiarity with the Bible and have become immune to traditional Bible English or “biblish” (see pp. 79-80 for more on this). But put this verse in front of someone unacquainted with the Bible, and they will immediately spot several difficulties.

First, is God’s blessing really just for men, or is it for women too? (I return to the question of inclusive language in chapter four.) Second, “standing in the way of sinners” is tantamount to obstructing their path, not copying their behavior, which is the intended meaning here. And finally, the complex threefold figure of speech “walk . . . stand . . . sit . . .” refers metaphorically to progressively deeper degrees in the imitation of sinful behavior. Table 1.4 demonstrates how two meaning-driven versions tackle Psalm 1:1.

**Table 1.4. Psalm 1:1 in Two Meaning-Driven Translations**

NLT (1996 and 2004)	CEV (1995)
Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers.	God blesses those people who refuse evil advice and won’t follow sinners or join in sneering at God.





### **KERNELS OF MEANING**

In comparison to form-driven versions, meaning-driven ones typically use easier vocabulary, shorter sentences and more natural English. All these points will be considered further in the next chapter, but none is actually central to the meaning-driven philosophy.

Key to a meaning-driven translation is the way a translator, rather than looking at single words or isolated expressions, takes as much as a whole paragraph, disassembles it, translates its constituent parts and then rebuilds it in the target language. Not all meaning-driven translations do this in the scientific kind of way described below. Many translators rely on their intuition to produce natural, idiomatic English, but a fully worked example will help.

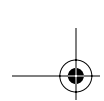
Ephesians 1:7 in the RSV, NRSV and ESV runs thus: "In him [Christ] we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses." The NIV is only a little different. In all these form-driven renderings, the word order and grammatical constructions are as they stand in the Greek; in English it is hard to grasp not only the meaning of each phrase but the relationship between them. If we break down what Paul is saying into its constituent parts (technically its "kernels of meaning"), we arrive at the following:

1. We trespassed (i.e., we wronged God, breaking his rules).
2. Christ shed his blood (i.e., he died sacrificially).
3. God redeems us (i.e., he frees us).
4. God forgives us.

Notice several things. First, we have put these kernels into their logical order. Second, the kernels have been expressed as a series of actions (e.g., "God redeems" instead of the more static "God gives redemption"). Third, the statements have been put into the active rather than the passive mood ("God forgives," not "We are forgiven"). If we now reassemble these elements in the simplest way possible, we arrive at the following: "We trespassed, but because of Christ's blood, God redeems us and forgives us."

For now the vocabulary is unchanged, but the order is much more





logical. Here is how four meaning-driven translations tackle the same verse. Notice how they change the vocabulary as well as rearrange the various parts of the sentence:

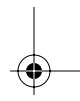
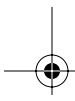
- NEB By the death of Christ, we are set free and our sins forgiven.
- TEV By the death of Christ we are set free, that is, our sins are forgiven.
- CEV Christ sacrificed his life's blood to set us free, which means that our sins are now forgiven.
- NLT He [God] purchased our freedom with the blood of his Son and forgave our sins.

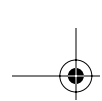
Compared to my attempt, all three have changed the construction of the verse less but the vocabulary more. Arguably, the CEV is the best of the four. If, going back to my attempt, we now simplify the vocabulary as well, we might arrive at something like this: "We wronged God, but because of Christ's sacrificial death, God frees us and forgives us."

In addition to the easier vocabulary, one piece of implicit information has been made explicit: Christ's "blood" becomes his "sacrificial death." Unless readers have some knowledge of the Old Testament, they will not realize that "through his blood" refers to death as a sacrifice. (See pp. 54-55 for more on making implicit information explicit.)

As will become apparent in part two in the review of English translations of the Bible in their historical order, most translations before 1900 fall into the form-driven category. Meaning-driven translations began appearing in the early twentieth century, but it is really only in the past forty years that a well-thought-out science of meaning-driven translation has been developed, largely as a result of the work of one man: Eugene Nida (b. 1914). Drawing on his experience of mission-field translation, he developed what he originally called "dynamic equivalence" translation but since 1986 has been termed "functional equivalence"—alternative expressions for what I am referring to as "meaning-driven translation."

Those translations that employ meaning-driven principles most consistently and that aim to make the Bible as accessible as possible,





especially for inexperienced Bible readers, are sometimes called “common language” translations. Among these are Today’s English Version (1976) and the Contemporary English Version (1995), both of which owe an enormous debt to Nida. In addition, the New Century Version (see p. 165) and God’s Word translation (pp. 173-74) can be included under the category of “common language” translations.

Having said that meaning-driven translations are a relatively new phenomenon, William Tyndale, whose work underlies the King James Version of 1611, often adopted what, in retrospect, could be considered a meaning-driven approach. Even the AV/KJV is not as literal as many assume and is certainly not as literal as some more recent translations, for instance the NASB.

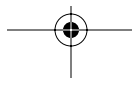
#### A SPECTRUM OF TRANSLATIONS

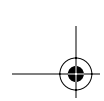
As we examine further the differences between form-driven and meaning-driven translations, certain points should be borne in mind.

First, *no translation is ever entirely literal or entirely free*. Perhaps the most literal translation ever published was Robert Young’s in 1862, which translates John 3:16 as, “For God did so love the world, that His Son—the only begotten—He gave, that every one who is believing in him may not perish, but may have life age-during.”

By keeping the English word order and tenses much as they are in the Greek, Young produced a rendering so literal that the result is almost unintelligible. It is certainly not English! And here is an important point: if a translation, however literal, cannot be understood, it cannot be said to be accurate. It has not done its job; it has not communicated the original meaning to today’s audience.

Likewise, just as a translation that is form-driven in the extreme may not be accurate, so a translation that is very free may not be accurate. For example, in Clarence Jordan’s *Cotton Patch New Testament* (1968), Paul’s letter to the Romans is redirected “To Washington.” While it is undoubtedly true that the good—and not so good—people of Washington, D.C., need the gospel every bit as much as those who once lived at the heart of earth’s greatest empire, the *Cotton Patch* ver-





sion cannot be deemed accurate. A translator cannot rewrite the historical setting of Scripture. Jordan's paraphrase is an exercise not merely in translation but in transculturation.

All translations employ a degree of freedom and a degree of literalness. Some clearly fall into the form-driven camp; others are without question meaning-driven; still others, like the NIV, sit somewhere in the middle. There is also the special category of "paraphrase" that I will consider at the end of the chapter.

A second point over which there is frequent misunderstanding is the common assumption that *there must be a trade-off between reliability (or accuracy) and readability (or accessibility)*. This is not necessarily true: a good translation will strive for both.

It is often thought that form-driven translations are reliable and meaning-driven versions readable. This leads to the suspicion that meaning-driven translations are less trustworthy and form-driven ones less readable. Chapter three will deal with readability, but first a little more on the subject of accuracy.

### ACCURACY AGAIN

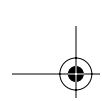
The accuracy of a translation is actually one of the more difficult criteria to measure. Other questions, such as ease of reading, choice of vocabulary and general style, can be assessed intelligently by sampling a few passages. But unless you know Hebrew and Greek, how can the degree of accuracy be ascertained?

Let me make two bold—and rather bald—statements, and then attempt to justify them:

1. No translation, however good, will ever be 100 percent accurate.
2. Most modern versions are highly accurate and very trustworthy.

These two statements may sound contradictory, but are not. First, no translation will ever be 100 percent accurate simply because no two languages ever express themselves in exactly the same way. It is not possible to carry every nuance of the original into clear English. Translation always involves a degree of compromise. Inevitably, something is lost, added or altered in the task of translating from one language to





another. All translation involves at least a degree of interpretation. There is an old Italian proverb: *traduttore traditore* (“the translator is a traitor”). Unfortunately, it’s true.

At this point some might feel uneasy. The Bible is indeed the inspired Word of God. The doctrine of inspiration, however, applies only to the *autographs*, or original manuscripts in the original languages, not to later copies or still later translations. Not one autograph still exists; thus, while God’s providential hand is evident in the preservation, transmission and translation of the Bible, we have to allow for the fact that human error can creep in and has done so.

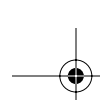
A pastor, so the story goes, introduced a modern version of the Bible into his church services. Afterward a parishioner complained, “If the King James Version was good enough for Saint Paul, then it’s good enough for me!” But the AV/KJV was not the first Bible in English or the last, and it certainly has its fair share of translation mistakes.

Second, notwithstanding the above points, most modern translations *are* highly trustworthy. Of course, all translations *claim* to be accurate. While you might buy yogurt that claims to be 99 percent fat-free, no one is going to purchase a Bible that states on its cover that it is only 99 percent faithful to the original. But the fact is, so much effort—millions of dollars and thousands of hours—goes into a typical English translation that a high degree of accuracy is ensured. This is especially true of translations prepared by teams of translators constantly cross-checking each other’s work. The accumulated scholarship is simply enormous. Apart from a few exceptions,<sup>9</sup> no modern English version contains any really dangerous inaccuracies, certainly none that impinge on our understanding of Christian doctrine. To be certain of the greatest possible accuracy, short of learning the original languages, the best approach is to compare one translation with another.

I did say most *modern* versions are highly accurate. There are three reasons why *older* translations, such as the AV/KJV, may not be:

1. Better Hebrew and Greek manuscripts have come to light.
2. Our understanding of Bible languages is constantly improving.





3. The English language is constantly changing.

But the question is how best to ensure that a modern translation is accurate and reliable. Here is a definition of accuracy:

An accurate translation communicates to today's readers (or hearers) the same meaning that the original author's text conveyed to his original readers (or hearers).<sup>10</sup>

Once again we see that reliability cannot be separated from readability. A translation that is not readable is not reliable. If it cannot be understood, it cannot be said to be accurate. But while some argue that a form-driven approach is the best way to achieve the twin aims of reliability and readability, others stand by the philosophy of a meaning-driven approach.

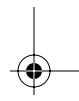
This will be the subject of the next chapter, but to complete the present one, we need to consider a third category of translation: the paraphrase.

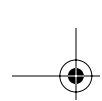
**PARAPHRASES**

Some Bibles are referred to as paraphrases. Best known are J. B. Phillips's *New Testament in Modern English* (1958, revised 1972; see pp. 150-51), Kenneth Taylor's *Living Bible* (completed in 1971; see pp. 151-52) and Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (completed in 2002; see pp. 182-83). Paraphrases are invariably the work of an individual rather than a team or committee.

Strictly speaking, a paraphrase is not a translation from one language to another but a rewording in the same language. While some paraphrases are in fact done this way (the *Living Bible* was paraphrased from the highly literal *American Standard Version* of 1901), others (such as the efforts of Phillips and Peterson) have been made directly from the original languages. I will use the term *paraphrase* to cover any free rendering, regardless of whether it was made from another English version or from the Greek and Hebrew.

It is not easy to make an entirely clear distinction between a paraphrase and other meaning-driven translations. But consider how three





different translators might tackle one of the phrases from Psalm 23:5:

Form-driven	my cup overflows
Meaning-driven	my life overflows with blessing
Paraphrase	God blesses my socks off

Generally speaking, a paraphrase is marked by

- great freedom of vocabulary and expression
- a distinct language style, often very evocative, even quirky
- a willingness to use colloquialisms
- a tendency to be interpretive

Often a turn of a phrase wonderfully captures the meaning intended by the biblical author, but sometimes the accuracy of a paraphrase can leave much to be desired. For these reasons, while paraphrases can be helpful in giving a fresh and lively approach to Scripture, they can be recommended only as a secondary Bible, never a principal or sole translation. Additionally, paraphrases can and do date quickly.

The next chapter gives more detail about various aspects of translation and the different way form-driven and meaning-driven versions tackle them.

