Do literal Bible versions show greater respect for plenary inspiration?
(A response to Wayne Grudem)

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On Thursday October 28, 2004 an article appeared in the San Diego Union Tribune concerning the recall of thousands of San Diego County voter guides in Spanish. The guides had to be recalled because someone had made the mistake of translating them word-for-word (literally) from the English version of the guide. According to the article, reputable translators winced and laughed at the grammar and syntax used. One passage (back-translated into English) read, "People that are registered 29 to 15 days before an election will be commanded a brochure."[1] This story should not surprise anyone who has ever studied a foreign language, whether Spanish, German, French, Chinese, Russian, Hebrew or Greek. It is unreliable to translate something literally since languages differ from one another in terms of word meanings, syntax, idioms, and a variety of other ways. Indeed, the results can be hilarious when people translate literally without regard for the idiomatic nature of source and receptor languages.[2]

Humorist Mark Twain poked fun at this phenomenon in an essay about a French translation of his celebrated short story "The Notorious Jumping Frog of Calaveras County." Twain points out that a French reviewer of his story did not find it very funny, and then seeks to explain why by back-translating the French version into English in a literal manner. Although the French version was itself very well done, as all good translations it was idiomatic rather than literal, so that the results of back translating literally into English are horrific. Twain concludes (with tongue firmly in cheek) that the French translator "has not translated it at all; he has simply mixed it all up." It is the "worst I ever saw; and yet the French are called a polished nation. If I had a boy that put sentences together as they do, I would polish him to some purpose."[3]

The simple fact is that literal translation is *unreliable,* since languages are so different. It is surprising, therefore, that Wayne Grudem would argue in a paper presented at last year's annual meeting (subsequently published) that the plenary inspiration of Scripture

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[1] Adam Klawonn, "Voter guide in Spanish being recalled," *San Diego Union Tribune,* Thursday, October 28, 2004, B1, B7.

[2] My brother, who works in Kazakhstan, sent me this description of Thanksgiving produced by a Kazakh travel agency: "There is no more American holiday than Thanksgivings Day. There is no more political holiday than Thanksgivings Day. The idea of celebration autumn and conclusion of collection harvest outcomes from the antiquity. Those days are connected with history of discovery earths too. CALIPSO Holiday offers to celebrate this American holiday with Your colleagues, friends, in American traditions: appetite turkey, sweet potatoes, cranberry souse, staffing from bread-crumbs with spices, pumping pie, traditional desiccation question: What we are grateful in this year for?, traditional ceremony – forgiveness of turkey, inflammatory music and many many others." I think something was lost in the translation.

[3] Mark Twain, "The 'Jumping Frog'. In English. Then in French. Then clawed back into a civilized language once more, by patient, unremunerated toil," in *Mark Twain: Collected Tales, Sketches, Speeches, and Essays,* 1852-1890, ed. Louis J. Budd [New York: Library of America, 1992], pp. 588-603; quotes from 588-89. I am grateful for this reference to D. A. Carson, who cites it in *The Inclusive Language Debate. A Plea for Realism* (Baker, 1998), pp. 56-57, and who sent me a copy of the essay.

favors "essentially literal" Bible translation.[4] I will respond to this thesis along two lines.
First, I will seek to show that literal or formal equivalence is unreliable as a *method* or
philosophy of translation. Unreliable does not mean that it always fails, but that it
frequently fails. If I had a car that broke down once a week, I would consider it
unreliable. So it is with literal translation, which breaks down in almost every sentence.
Indeed, those who *claim* to be doing formal equivalence are in fact constantly defaulting
to functional equivalence. Second, I will briefly examine Grudem's paper to show that it
is a selective and inadequate presentation of the evidence.[5]

I should say, first of all, that I am an advocate of using multiple versions for Bible
study and have published articles demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of both
formal and functional equivalence.[6] Formal equivalent versions are helpful *tools,*
especially for those with only a rudimentary knowledge of the original languages (my
first year Greek students love them). But they also suffer serious deficiencies, and
Grudem's claim that they are the *only* sure way to safeguard the plenary inspiration of
scripture is linguistically naive.

Grudem begins with a lengthy defense of plenary inspiration, seeking to show that the
Bible teaches that *all the words of Scripture* are inspired.[7] This argument against
functional equivalence is, of course, a straw man, since all participants in this debate
believe that *all the Hebrew and Greek words* of Scripture are fully inspired. The question
we must ask is whether the *meaning* of those Greek and Hebrew words is most accurately
rendered in English by following a literal method or a more idiomatic one. To answer
this, we must discuss philosophies of translation.

The Goal of Translation: Meaning or Form?

The goal of formal equivalence, or literal translation, is to reproduce, inasmuch as
possible, the *form* of the original text. By contrast, the goal of functional equivalence is
to reproduce the *meaning* of the text. The claim repeatedly made by Grudem that
functional equivalence is interested only in the "main idea" rather than all the details of
meaning is incorrect.[8] The goal is to communicate *as much of the meaning as possible to
a particular audience.* Functional equivalent advocates recognize that the ultimate goal of
translation is to achieve an effective communicative event between the author and the
reader. If the reader fails to comprehend the author's message, the translation has failed.
Of course *both* translators and readers bear a measure of responsibility in this regard, and
the translator's difficult task is to keep a constant eye on *both* the original meaning of the

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[4] Wayne Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God? Why Plenary Inspiration
Favors 'Essentially Literal' Bible Translation," in *Translating Truth* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005), 19-
56. The paper was originally presented at the 2004 ETS annual meeting, Nov. 18, 2004.

[5] Some of the material in the first half of this paper is adapted from my article, "Form, Function and the
Literal Meaning Fallacy in English Bible Translation." *The Bible Translator,* vol. 56 n. 3 (July 2005), 153-
168.

[6] See my articles, "Understanding Bible Translation," Introductory essay in *The Essential Evangelical
Parallel Bible* (ed. John Kohlenberger; Oxford University Press, 2005); "Understanding New Testament
Translation." Introductory essay in *The Evangelical Parallel New Testament* (ed. John Kohlenberger;
Oxford University Press, 2003); cf. *Distorting Scripture? The Challenge of Bible Translation and Gender
Accuracy* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1998), 77-102, esp. 83

[7] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?" 25-30.

[8] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?" 25, 29, 32.

text *and* the reader's abilities to comprehend that meaning.[9] This is why there is a wide spectrum of functional equivalent versions, from those geared to children and remedial readers (ICB; NIrV), to those utilizing contemporary English idiom (NLT, NCV, GNT, CEV, GW), to those steering a middle road between formal and functional equivalence (NIV, TNIV, NEB, REB, NAB, NJB, NET, HCSB) (see Appendix). Each of these is meant to *communicate effectively to their intended readers.*

Weaknesses of Formal Equivalence
    Formal equivalence, or "literal" translation, is pursued along two main lines: *Lexical Concordance* and *Syntactic Correspondence.* I will discuss and critique each of these.

The Fallacy of Lexical Concordance
    Lexical concordance means trying to use the same English word for each Greek or Hebrew word. Of course all translators acknowledge that strict lexical consistency is impossible. The Greek lexeme χάρις has a semantic range which includes various senses, including "grace" (Eph 2:8), "favor" (Luke 1:30), "credit" (Luke 6:32), "goodwill" (Acts 7:10), "thanks" (Luke 17:9), and others. None of these senses represent the "literal" meaning of χάρις. All are rather potential *senses* within the lexeme's semantic range. Words do not have a literal meaning, but rather a semantic range – a range of potential senses which are actualized by the context in which they appear. Translators must therefore be in a constant mode of interpretation, seeking to identify English lexemes which reproduce the sense of Greek or Hebrew lexemes *in each context.*[10]
    The differences in word meanings across languages is particularly evident when studying *collocational relationships* – meanings achieved through a word's relationship with another word (its collocate).[11] In English, for example, I can make pancakes, make trouble, make sergeant, make sense, make war, make friends, make a plane (= catch), make a deal, make a difference, make a vow, make love, make a law, make someone leave, make Paris in one day (= reach). This illustrates the broad semantic range of the English lexeme "make." But it also shows that the sense of "make" is determined by its collocational relationships with other words.
    This is significant for our discussion since collocational relationships change radically across languages. For example, we teach beginning Greek students that the Greek verb for "make" is ποιέω. Yet ποιέω would not provide an adequate translation for most of the collocates mentioned above. In Greek you do not make trouble, make a difference,

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[9] Grudem misrepresents functional equivalence when he claims that for Eugene Nida (the key pioneer of the method) "the goal of translation is not being faithful to the meaning of the *original text,* but rather the goal is to bring about a proper *response* from the reader" (Grudem, "Are Only Some Words," 53). In fact, Nida stressed *both* original meaning and the reader's comprehension: "The translator's task may be described as being essentially exegetical, in that a translation should faithfully reflect who said what to whom under what circumstances and for what purpose and should be in a form of the receptor language which does not distort the content or misrepresent the rhetorical impact or appeal." (Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* [Nashville: Nelson, 1986], 40.)
[10] Grudem, "Are Only Some Words," p. 50, tries to distinguish interpretation from translation, but every word of every translation is an act of interpretation.
[11] John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 75.

make a vow, make love, or make a deal. The inverse is also true. There are hundreds of collocates with ποιέω which make little sense in English. Below are some contexts in which ποιέω appears with various collocates. I have translated ποιέω "literally" in the middle column and then given an English translation from the ESV on the right to show that even an "essentially literal" translation recognizes that there is no one-to-one correspondence between English and Greek.

Verse	"Literal" rendering of ποιέω	ESV rendering
Matt. 3:8	*Make* fruit	*Bear* fruit
Matt. 5:32	*Make* adultery	*Commit* adultery
Matt. 6:1	*Make* righteousness	*Practice* righteousness
Matt. 6:2	*Make* alms	*Give* to the needy
Matt. 13:23	*Make* fruit	*Yields* fruit
Matt. 13:41	*Make lawlessness*	*Be* a lawbreaker
Matt. 20:12	*Make* one hour	*Work* one hour
Matt. 21:43	*Make* fruit	*Produce* fruit
Matt. 22:2	*Make* a feast	*Give* a feast
Matt. 26:18	*Make* Passover	*Keep* Passover
Matt. 26:73	Your accent *makes* you evident	Your accent *betrays* you
Matt. 28:14	*Make* you secure	*Keep* you out of trouble
Mark 3:14	*Make* Twelve	*Appoint* Twelve
Mark 4:32	*Make* great branches	*Put out* large branches
Mark 6:21	*Make* a dinner	*Give* a banquet
Mark 15:1	*Make* a council	*Hold* a consultation
Mark 15:15	*Make* sufficient the crowd	*Satisfy* the crowd
Luke 1:51	*Make* power	*Show* strength
Luke 1:68	*Make* redemption	Redeem (*poieō* untranslated)
Luke 1:72	*Make* mercy	*Show* mercy
Luke 2:48	*Make* us thusly	*Treat* us so
Luke 12:33	*Make* for yourself purses	*Provide* yourselves with purses
Luke 12:47	*Make* to his will	*Act* according to his will
Luke 13:22	*Make* a journey	*Journey* (*poieō* untranslated)
Luke 15:19	*Make* me as a hired one	*Treat* me as...a servant
Luke 16:8	Because he *made* shrewdly	For his shrewdness (*poieō* untranslated)
Luke 18:7	*Make* the vengeance	*Give* justice
John 3:21	*Make* truth	*Do* the truth
John 5:11	*Make* healthy	Heal (*poieō* untranslated)
John 5:27	*Make* judgment	*Execute* judgment
John 7:4	*Make* in secret	*Work* in secret
John 7:19	*Make* the law	*Keep* the law
John 11:37	*Make* not that he might die	*Keep* him from dying
John 14:23	*Make* a room beside him	*Make* our home with him
John 16:2	*Make* you from synagogues	*Put* you *out* of the synagogues
John 17:4	*Make* the work	*Accomplish* the work
Acts 1:1	*Make* word	*Deal* with
Acts 5:34	*Make* the men outside	*Put* the men outside
Acts 7:19	*Make* their infants exposed	Expose their infants (untranslated)
Acts 7:24	*Make* vengeance	Avenge (untranslated)
Acts 9:36	which she *made*	(Untranslated phrase)
Acts 10:33	*Make well* to come	*Kind enough* to come
Acts 15:3	*Make* great joy to all	*Bring* great joy to all
Acts 15:33	*Make* time	*Spend* some time

Acts 20:24	*Make* my life precious	*Account* my life of any value
Acts 24:12	*Make* pressure a crowd	*Stir up* a crowd
Acts 24:17	*Make* alms	*Bring* alms
Acts 25:3	*Make* an ambush	*Plan* an ambush
Acts 27:18	*Make* a casting out	*Jettison* the cargo

So what does ποιέω "literally" mean? Make? Do? Bear? Commit? Practice? Give? Perform? Yield? Keep? Be? Work? Produce? Betray? Put forth? Hold? Satisfy? Form? Show? Treat? Provide? Act? Execute? Work? Deal with? Bring? Account? Plan? Jettison? Even the ESV – which claims to be "essentially literal" – translates the word with dozens of different words, phrases and idioms. Maintaining lexical concordance would result in very poor translation.

Of course there are times when lexical concordance is helpful to maintain, such as when a verbal allusion is present in the Greek. For example, in 1 Corinthians 3:10 Paul identifies himself as a "wise [σοφός] master builder" (NASB), who has laid the foundation for the Corinthian church. Many versions recognize that "wise" is not a normal English adjective for builders and so translate σοφός as "skilled" (HCSB, ESV) or "expert" (NLT, NIV). While these accurately represent the meaning of σοφός in context, they lose an important verbal allusion. In First Corinthians 1-4, Paul has been contrasting the true wisdom of God with the false wisdom of the world. A "wise" builder is therefore one who builds on the true wisdom of God, which is the cross of Jesus Christ. Surprisingly, the ESV – which Grudem holds up as a model of "essentially literal" translation – misses this verbal allusion and translates σοφός idiomatically as "skilled," while the TNIV recognizes the verbal allusion and translates σοφός as "wise." It is in theological passages like this that lexical concordance is helpful to maintain.

The Fallacy of Syntactic Correspondence

In addition to seeking *lexical concordance,* formal equivalence also seeks *syntactic correspondence*, that is, trying to replace infinitives with infinitives, participles with participle, prepositional phrases with prepositional phrases, etc. As with lexical concordance, this is problematic because languages differ – often radically – in their grammar, syntax and idioms. What is important is not whether the Greek has an infinitive or a participle, but how that grammatical construction *functions* in the sentence. Consider, for example, Ephesians 1:3-4:

Greek (UBS 4ᵗʰ ed.)	**ESV**
Εὐλογητὸς ὁ θεὸς καὶ πατὴρ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ, ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς ἐν πάσῃ εὐλογίᾳ πνευματικῇ ἐν τοῖς ἐπουρανίοις ἐν Χριστῷ, καθὼς ἐξελέξατο ἡμᾶς ἐν αὐτῷ πρὸ καταβολῆς κόσμου εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους καὶ ἀμώμους κατενώπιον αὐτοῦ ἐν ἀγάπῃ,	Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places, even as he chose us in him before the foundation of the world, that we should be holy and blameless before him.

Notice that the ESV has introduced many grammatical changes, including replacing a substantival participle (ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς) with a relative clause ("who has blessed us"), a substantival adjective (ἐπουρανίοις) with an adjective and a noun ("heavenly places) and an infinitival phrase (εἶναι ἡμᾶς ἁγίους) with an English purpose clause ("that we should be holy"). All are acceptable changes because – though the grammatical *forms* are

different in Greek and English – they *function* the same way. The ESV, like all good translation, is here following *functional* rather than *formal* equivalence.

A slogan sometimes used for formal equivalence is "As literal as possible, as free as necessary." In other words, the translator stays with one-to-one correspondence until it is necessary to alter this for the sake of *meaning.* But note that even this statement correctly gives priority to *meaning* over form. Formal correspondence is utilized if and when it produces equivalence of meaning. The ultimate goal is not *formal equivalence*, but *functional equivalence.*

Indeed, versions which claim to be "essentially literal" constantly fall back on idiomatic renderings. This is because translators intuitively recognize that in almost every sentence, Greek and Hebrew idioms do not work the way English works. Thus, while translators of literal versions may proceed cautiously with a *method* of formal equivalence (word-for-word replacement), their decisions are in fact governed by a *philosophy* of functional equivalence (change the form whenever necessary to retain the meaning).

To illustrate this again, compare the Greek text with the English of the ESV in Hebrews 1:1:

Greek (UBS 4th ed.)	**ESV**
Πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως πάλαι ὁ θεὸς λαλήσας τοῖς πατράσιν ἐν τοῖς προφήταις.	Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets,

Lexically, of course*, the ESV has changed all of God's words* by replacing Greek words with English ones. Grammatically, the ESV has radically altered the entire verse, rearranging the word order and changing five of the seven main grammatical forms. Two adverbs (πολυμερῶς καὶ πολυτρόπως) were changed into prepositional phrases ("at many times and in many ways"), another adverb (πάλαι) was changed into an English idiom ("long ago"), a noun (τοῖς πατράσιν) into a prepositional phrase ("to our fathers"), a definite article (τοῖς) into a possessive adjective ("our"), and a participle (λαλήσας) into a finite verb ("spoke"). The only grammatical forms which remain unchanged are the noun "God" (ὁ θεός) and the prepositional phrase "by the prophets" (ἐν τοῖς προφήταις). Even these, however, were interpreted and altered. The noun in Greek has an article ("*the* God") which the ESV has dropped. The prepositional phrase ἐν τοῖς προφήταις required interpretation, since the Greek could mean "in the prophets," "by the prophets," "among the prophets," "with the prophets," etc. The ESV has also changed the structure of the whole, turning what in Greek is a subordinate participial phrase into an independent clause.

If we follow Grudem's thesis, we should be appalled at such a radical rewriting of God's words. This translation is anything but "essentially literal". But of course, in fact it is a very good translation. This is because the translators have chosen *not* to be *literal,* but to be *idiomatic,* that is, to *interpret* every Greek word, phrase and idiom in context and then to replace these with more natural English words, phrases and idioms which express the *same meaning.* This is a fine example of *functional equivalence.* It is ultimately irrelevant whether an adverb is replaced by a prepositional phrase or a participle replaced by a verb. The question that matters is, "Is the meaning reproduced?"

Note the important breakthrough this example provides: the meaning of Hebrews 1:1 *is not transferred by retaining formal equivalence, but by reproducing the function of its*

various parts. What is true of Hebrews 1:1 is true of all translation. If we reproduce the *meaning* accurately, we are reproducing God's Word accurately. What is ironic and contradictory is that when "essentially literal" versions change the grammar and syntax, Grudem considers this to be just good translation policy ("as free as necessary"), but when functional equivalent versions do it, they are translating general ideas instead of words, and distorting the very words God gave us.

Grudem seeks to avoid this obvious contradiction by advocating "*essentially* literal" (rather than strict literal) translation. The problem is the word "essentially" carries no qualitative value. When does a translation become "*essentially* literal"? Grudem attempts a definition:

> The main point is that essentially literal translations attempt to represent *the meaning of every word* in the original in some way or other in the resulting translation.[12] [italics his]

Unfortunately this definition is broad enough to drive a (linguistic) truck through. Notice that the goal Grudem sets is "meaning" not form, and that this is achieved "in some way or other" (that is, any way you can!). This sounds suspiciously like functional rather than formal equivalence. Grudem would no doubt counter that his emphasis is on making sure "every word" is translated. But this is problematic since languages do not communicate with words standing alone, but with words *in functional relationship with other words.* For example, in Hebrews 1:1 the single adverb πολυμερῶς is translated in the ESV with the prepositional phrase "at many times." A *word* is translated with a *phrase* to capture the *meaning.* Similarly in Ephesians 1:3 the ESV translates a *participial phrase* (ὁ εὐλογήσας ἡμᾶς) with a *relative clause* ("who has blessed us"). But if words can be translated with phrases, and phrases with clauses, then Grudem's goal of translating "the meaning of every word" really means *the accurate rendition of the meaning of phrases and clauses.* Translation is not about replacing words, but about reproducing *how those words function* in phrases, clauses, idioms and collocations. This is *functional* not *formal* equivalence.

The fundamental problem with "literal" translation is that it begins with the wrong goal – the reproduction of *form* – when the ultimate goal of translation is to reproduce the *meaning* of the text. The most reliable translation philosophy is not "as literal as possible," but rather "reproduce the *meaning*; follow the form when it promotes this goal." By focusing first on form rather than meaning, literal versions have a tendency to produce readings which are awkward, unnatural, obscure or inaccurate. Of course no translation is perfect and examples of poor translations can be found in all versions. The point is that accuracy is best achieved when translators exegete each word, phrase, clause, idiom and collocation in the source language and then find an equivalent one in the receptor language. It is always dangerous to assume one-to-one equivalency.

Brief Critique of Grudem's Article

Since thousands of examples could be marshaled to demonstrate that formal equivalence does not necessarily produce equivalence of meaning, how can Dr. Grudem

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[12] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?" 20.

argue that only essentially literal translations safeguard the plenary inspiration of Scripture? We turn next to a brief critique of his article.

The title, "Are Only *Some* Words of Scripture Breathed Out by God?" is itself misleading, implying that functional equivalent versions omit words that were inspired by God. Of course by this criterion all translations are rendered guilty, since every Bible version replaces *all* of the Hebrew and Greek words of the original text. Grudem assumes the literalist fallacy we have already refuted above, that word-for-word replacement necessarily captures more precisely God's intended meaning.

Missing words?

Grudem's treatment of the translation evidence is also fallacious. In part IV, which he entitles "Dynamic equivalence translations often leave out the meanings of some words that are in the original text," [13] he presents a number of examples where functional equivalent versions apparently fail to translate words present in the original. For example, while the ESV and other formal equivalent versions render Proverbs 13:24, "Whoever spares the rod..." the NLT translates "If you refuse to discipline your children...." Similarly, while the ESV renders 1 Corinthians 13:12, "For now we see in a mirror dimly, but then face to face," the NLT has "...but then we will see everything with perfect clarity." Grudem uses clever titles for the apparent loss – "The disappearing rod of discipline," "The lost faces," "The missing sword" (Rom. 13:4) – and accuses these versions of removing God's words from Scripture.

Several comments are in order. First, Grudem fails to acknowledge that the purpose of these functional equivalent versions is to clarify the meaning of these idioms for readers who might not understand them. Who can reasonably deny that using *both* formal and functional versions provides us with greater insight into God's Word? Grudem might spend less time attacking these excellent versions – produced by hundreds of the finest evangelical scholars – and more time telling readers to use *every tool* available to mine the riches of God's Word.

But there is also a linguistic problem with Grudem's argument. Most of the examples he cites are metaphorical idioms. These are notoriously difficult to translate, both because of cultural differences and because of the existence of both *live and dead metaphors* in every language. A live metaphor illustrates a point with a concrete image. "Spare the rod" takes the reader's mind first to a switch or rod used to punish a child, and then to the abstract concept of punishment. However, most metaphors in any language are dead, that is, they have lost the concrete image and the hearer's mind goes directly to the abstract concept. Consider the following metaphorical idioms in English:

He drove the point home.	That's a piece of cake.
She lost face.	My salary is chicken feed.
That's the last straw.	He changed his mind.
That's just sour grapes.	We must not lose our heads.
He's a couch potato.	That is a far cry from what I actually said.
We got our clocks cleaned!	He kicked the bucket.
That's as easy as pie.	

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[13] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?" 30-45. Grudem uses the older term "dynamic equivalence" throughout his paper even though this translation theory is more commonly referred to today as "functional equivalence." See de Waard and Nida, *From One Language to Another,* 7-8.

In these and most other idioms, the reader's mind goes directly to the abstract meaning without pausing to think about the metaphorical "picture." The first idiom means something like "he made his argument well." Readers would not first envision either driving or a home. "She lost face" means "she lost social status." No reader would envision a face disappearing. Nor would readers normally picture straw, chickens, potatoes, clocks, pies, cakes, grapes, minds, beheadings, distant shouting, or buckets with these other idioms. The metaphors have become so familiar that the reader does not consider the "picture," instead moving directly to the abstract meaning. These are dead metaphors. Translated literally, they would miscommunicate to readers of another language. "That's as simple as a desert pastry" would be a poor translation of "that's as easy as pie."

The difficulty for translators is determining whether metaphorical idioms in Scripture are live or dead. For example, in Grudem's example "mighty works *done by his hands*" (Mark 6:2), did the hearers envision literal hands, or did they immediately think "...accomplished by him." Similarly, in the idiom "bear the sword" (Rom. 13:4), did the original readers visualize a literal sword, or did they immediately think "administer judicial punishment." These are difficult decisions and require careful study of the historical and literary context of a passage. One cannot simply say, "translate literally just to be safe." Turning a dead metaphor into a live one introduces a foreign element and so false meaning into Scripture. In his presentation, Grudem fails to appreciate the complex nature of metaphors and idioms or to acknowledge the scholarly literature related to them.[14] Instead, he simply accuses functional equivalent versions of "removing God's words." This is both unfair and inaccurate. All Bible versions – even the ESV – recognize the presence of metaphorical idioms in Scripture and leave certain words "un-translated."

Some of God's Words missing from the ESV
(Actually dead metaphors correctly recognized as such)[15]

Reference	Literal idiom	ESV rendering
The missing donkey (Mark 9:42)	"millstone of a donkey"	"great millstone"
The absent pupil (Deut. 32:1)	"pupil of his eye"	"apple of his eye"
The empty belly (Matt. 1:18)	"having in belly"	"with child" (= pregnant)
The hidden loins (1 Peter 1:13)	"gird up your loins"	"prepare your minds for action"
The silenced ear (Matt. 10:27)	"hear in the ear"	"hear whispered"
Disappearing faces (Matt. 22:16)	"look at people's faces"	"swayed by appearances"
The lost sons (Mark 2:19)	"sons of the bridechamber"	"wedding guests"
The barren birth (James 1:23)	"face of his birth"	"natural face"
The runaway wheel (James 3:16)	"wheel of birth"	"cycle of life"

Selective Presentation of the Evidence

In addition to this inadequate discussion of linguistic issues, Grudem's paper also reveals a highly selective presentation of the evidence. As noted above, he deals only with a few select idioms, not with the many aspects of functional equivalence which are

[14] See, for example, John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1974), 124-150, who provide criteria for recognizing live or dead metaphors and guidelines for translating them.
[15] I gleaned some of these idioms from a list compiled by linguist and Bible translator Wayne Leman, available at http://www.geocities.com/bible_translation/ntidioms.htm.

essential for good translation. He also fails to mention that footnotes in the NLT at 1
Cor. 13:12 ("Greek *see face to face*") and Rom. 16:16 ("Greek *with a sacred kiss*")
identify the metaphor, so that the translation alerts the reader to both the literal expression
and the abstract meaning. In addition, the revised NLT (2004) sometimes reintroduces
the concrete imagery. For example, Proverbs 13:24 is now rendered, "Those who spare
the rod of discipline hate their children" – a rendering which retains both the idiom and
the abstract meaning.[16] The NLT translators are clearly wrestling with whether these
metaphors are live or dead, and are trying to get it right.

   Furthermore, in checking Grudem's references, I found that the NIV (and TNIV)
sided with the formal equivalent versions in eleven of his thirteen examples. (In his ETS
paper, Grudem only cited the NIV when it disagreed with his conclusion [4x], never
when it agreed [13x].) Yet he still concludes that "there is so much dynamic equivalence
influence in the NIV that I cannot teach theology or ethics from it." [17] Such an extreme
conclusion hardly seems warranted from the evidence presented.

Conclusion

   The Muslim doctrine of divine inspiration limits Allah's revelation to the Arabic
words of the Koran. According to this doctrine, there is no such thing as a translation of
the Koran, only commentaries. That is why we hear Muslim children memorizing the
Koran in Arabic, even though they have no idea what it means.

   But that is not the Protestant and evangelical doctrine of divine inspiration, which
focuses not just on Hebrew or Greek words, but on *the author's intended meaning.*
When I am lecturing on Bible translation, I will sometimes hold up my English Bible and
ask the audience, "Is this God's Word?" They, of course, answer with a resounding
"Yes!" I absolutely agree! I believe that an English translation remains God's Word
because – although it reproduces *none* of the original Hebrew and Greek words – it
faithfully reproduces the *meaning of the text.* Inspiration refers to the author's intention
as communicated through human language. Yet since languages differ from one another
with reference to words, phrases, grammatical constructions, idioms, and collocations,
the author's meaning cannot be reproduced by simply replacing Hebrew or Greek words
with English ones. The text must first be exegeted – phrase-by-phrase, clause-by-clause,
paragraph-by-paragraph – to determine the original meaning. Then it must be carefully
and painstakingly translated into different words, phrases, idioms and collocations which
express that *same meaning* in English. This is a challenging process which requires
careful use of all the tools available to linguists, translators and biblical scholars. You
cannot shortcut the process by tacking the ambiguous word "essentially" onto an
inadequate translation philosophy.

   Grudem speaks disparagingly of the work of Eugene Nida and those who have
brought linguistic theory to bear on biblical studies – calling dynamic equivalence the
"culprit" behind the missing words of Scripture.[18] But I have learned immensely from
linguists and translators like Nida, and have found linguistics an invaluable tool for
understanding the complexities of New Testament Greek. We must recall that it was not

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[16] Cf. 1 Kings 2:10 in the revised NLT, which modifies the reading Grudem criticizes.
[17] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?" 49.
[18] Grudem, "Are Only *Some* Words?"50.

so long ago that biblical scholars were committing dreadful lexical and semantic errors because of linguistic naïveté.[19] The simple fact is that God has revealed himself through human language, and the more we understand how language works, the better we will comprehend his inspired and authoritative Word. Functional equivalent versions are particularly helpful because they recognize that the purpose of language is to *effectively communicate* God's divine message to human minds and hearts. As biblical scholars we should encourage the use of every tool available to bring us closer to that goal.
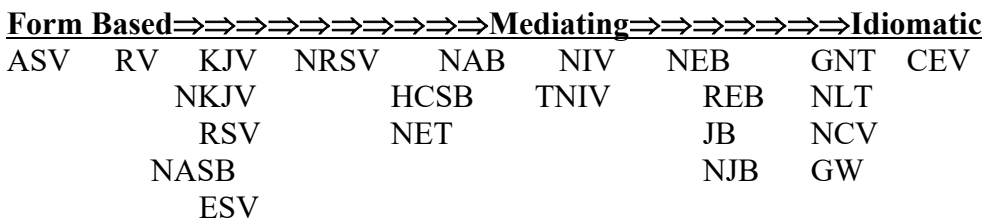
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[19] A point brought home well by James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961) and D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2nd ed. 1996).

Appendix
Towards Clearer Definitions for Translation Theories

As we have seen, all translations alter Greek and Hebrew *forms* in order to communicate meaning. So what is the difference? It seems to me different versions modify forms with different goals in mind: **literal versions** modify forms until the text is *comprehensible;* **mediating versions** until the text is *clear;* **idiomatic versions** until the text is *natural.*

	Literal versions (formal equivalence)	Mediating versions	Idiomatic versions (functional equivalence)
Examples	KJV, NKJV, NASB, NRSV, RSV, ESV	NIV, TNIV, NAB, NJB, HCSB, NET	NLT, NCV, GNT, GW, CEV
Goal	**COMPREHENSION:** Alter the form until the text is *comprehensible.*	**CLARITY:** Alter the form until the text is *clear.*	**NATURALNESS***:* Alter the form until the text is *natural, idiomatic English.*
Strengths	Helps to capture metaphors, verbal allusions & ambiguities.	Achieves both accuracy and clarity.	Greatest comprehension. Communicates the message clearly and naturally.
Weaknesses	Can result in awkward English ("Biblish"), obscurity, and inaccuracy. Comprehension test can fail.	More interpretation, so greater margin for interpretive error. Sometimes uses unnatural English.	Even more interpretation, so greater margin for error. Sometimes loses nuances of meaning in pursuit of simplicity and clarity.

Continuum of Translations

Form Based⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒Mediating⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒⇒Idiomatic

Form Based				Mediating			Idiomatic	
ASV	RV	KJV	NRSV	NAB	NIV	NEB	GNT	CEV
		NKJV		HCSB	TNIV	REB	NLT	
		RSV		NET		JB	NCV	
		NASB				NJB	GW	
		ESV						

Key

American Standard Version (ASV)	Holman Christian Standard (HCSB)	New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)
Revised Version (RV)	New English Translation (NET)	God's Word (GW)
King James Version (KJV)	New American Bible (NAB)	New Living Translation (NLT)
New King James Version (NKJV)	New International Version (NIV)	Contemporary English Version (CEV)
New American Standard Bible (NASB)	Today's NIV (TNIV)	Good News Bible (GNB; TEV)
Revised Standard Version (RSV)	New English Bible (NEB)	Phillip's Modern English (PME)
English Standard Version (ESV)	Revised English Bible (REB)	The Message (M)
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	Jerusalem Bible (JB)	Living Bible (LB)