

translation,

4 ways

Mapping the field of translation studies through Thomas Wayment's monumental endeavor to translate the New Testament

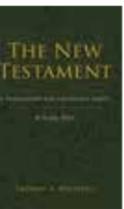


“Are you insane? Do you hate the Bible?” Thomas Wayment, a professor in the Department of Comparative Arts & Letters, described some colleagues’ reactions to his decision to create a new translation of the New Testament. While some of his friends assumed he might want to “fix” the Bible, others supposed he just loved it so much he couldn’t get enough. But according to Wayment, the “why” was multifaceted. As he worked, his process engaged several of the major translation areas of study, and his motivations evolved. What might have begun as an attempt to make the New Testament more accessible to modern readers developed into an experience he called “transformative.” Wayment said, “I had a chance personally to read every word and ponder on a very intellectual level, and it shaped me in ways I never thought it would. I wanted to do that for everyone.”

As in all ambitious scholarship, Wayment pursued questions that didn’t fall neatly into narrow definitions within the College of Humanities. However, to contextualize his work within the four major areas of study encompassing translation in the College, Wayment shared examples from these fields for this issue of *Humanities*: translation and interpretation, literary studies, localization and translation, and literary translation.

by Thomas Wayment
and Erin Jackson

Unfold for more





▶ 1. TRANSLATION & INTERPRETATION

Perhaps the most familiar field, translation and interpretation involves converting communication from one language into another in written and spoken forms.

Traditionally “translation” refers to the converting of texts while “interpretation” refers to spoken renditions that often occur simultaneously. However, as older papyri and newer technologies are discovered, even text translations can become available instantaneously. And, like localization, scholars in this field agree that the best translations or interpretations depend not only on the translator’s or interpreter’s knowledge of vocabulary in both languages but also their knowledge of the subject matter being communicated. Wayment recommends three online resources that put Bible translation options at your fingertips.

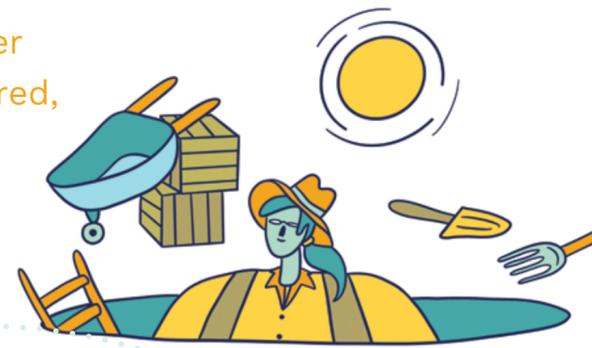
Biblegateway.com This resource allows readers to compare Bible texts with literal translations to those that attempt to adhere more to the author’s intent. Here, Wayment’s top recommendations are the English Standard Version (ESV) or the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), both of which offer differing points of emphasis. According to Wayment, “The ESV is more literal, and the NRSV tends to focus on the meaning rather than on word for word literalness.”

The NET Bible Wayment recommends this version due to its extensive translation notes, sometimes 50 or more footnotes per chapter. These alternate wordings provide context for the translators’ choices. Wayment called these “the best free notes available online.”

blueletterbible.org This online Bible provides Strong’s concordance numbers and Hebrew translations, which Wayment describes this way:

If you know, for example, a verse in the Hebrew Bible or the New Testament speaks of ‘atonement’ or speaks of ‘anger’ or any word that’s loaded in meaning, you can click on that word and choose to find out what the optional definitions are. What’s also fascinating about Strong’s concordance is it will typically give you almost all of the other instances that word appears in the New Testament. You don’t have to rely on someone to tell you what it means; you can look up the meaning of the word on your own and see how other authors used the term, and you don’t need training in Hebrew to do so.

As older papyri and newer technologies are discovered, more Bible translations become available to us.



▶ 2. LITERARY STUDIES

Literary studies is the study of literature and the use of literary methods for examining the human experience. This area of study includes analyses of histories, race, class, gender, the arts, and more.

By analyzing the text of the New Testament from the word choice to the overarching message, Wayment hoped to create a new translation that modern readers would, like him, want to engage with personally.

To illustrate where the King James Version (KJV) translators’ choices limited readers’ engagement, Wayment cited the example that Greek genders were often reduced to the masculine in the KJV English. He said,

The Greek word ἀδελφός, which is typically translated as “brother,” means “brother” only when it is clear there are only men there. This is the general New Testament term for a “group of believers.” . . . We absolutely need to remember that these audiences, these people, were men and women equally. But in all of those examples, when we do know it’s only men in the group—I try to note that in my translation as well.

While gender, race, class, and other issues might seem like hot buttons in modern media, Wayment recommends the Bible as a resource to talk about issues as a family.

Someone I know very well said, “I like reading the Old Testament but it’s sometimes like an R-rated soap opera.” I tell her not to say that in church! But she’s not totally wrong. You can’t get 34 chapters into the Book of Genesis without the rape of a sister of the twelve sons of Israel and the annihilation of a whole people. And the Bible allows and creates opportunities to discuss things that our age needs. So, for example without reading it, with the Bible’s becoming impenetrable to us, we don’t take the opportunities to deal with the Hebrew Bible’s genocide. Whole peoples are annihilated. I’m not saying that the Bible has the answer. I’m saying that you and the Spirit have the answer, and the Bible creates the story. . . . What do we do about these things today? The Bible has a story about a prophetically guided experience.



not even close

Myriad references for translation of the New Testament are known today. To visualize: the yellow dot represents the eight manuscripts the KJV translators used. For scale, the blue circle represents the wealth of manuscripts available for comparison today: 5,300.

▶ 3. LITERARY TRANSLATION

Literary translation is the translation of literature into other languages. This includes the translation of ancient languages into modern renditions so that they can reach a wider, contemporary audience.

When translating an author’s work, especially that of an ancient author, Wayment pointed out,

One of the big things that modern scholarship does is question traditional authorship. . . . A modern scholar is looking at these texts and saying, well, does the Gospel of Matthew look like a Galilean tax collector’s language? That’s a legitimate question. With Paul or others, are all of the Pauline letters written by the same person? We question the tradition that Matthew wrote [the Gospel of] Matthew because nowhere in it does he say that he wrote it. . . . It’s not a confrontation to faith to question the authorship, it’s an awareness of what’s going on.

One of the most famous examples literary translation scholars have identified as incorrect is in Matthew 5:22, “If any is angry with his brother without cause. . . .” According to Wayment,

“Without cause” is a single Greek word, and Joseph Smith crossed it out in his Bible. We now know manuscript-wise that this word creeps in during the fifth or sixth century to justify anger. It’s not part of the original Gospel of Matthew.

Along with Matthew, throughout his process of translating Paul’s letters, Wayment grew to love Paul more. He said, “For the entire Christian world, Romans is the most important book in the New Testament, full stop. It’s the book of books, it’s the reason we have the New Testament. It’s the reason that Paul is so important.” Still, he acknowledges that Paul’s letters are often poorly understood if not disliked compared to other books of scripture. One of the reasons for this, suspects Wayment, is the impenetrability of the KJV translation in Paul’s letters. In order to make each verse seem equally important, the KJV translators incorporated into the running text things like hymns and poems that Paul had quoted. Wayment said,

When you start to realize that there are hymns in Timothy, the Gospel of John, Philipians, and Colossians, then you start to realize that these people, whoever wrote the hymns, in fact, predated Paul. These hymns are almost certainly not Paul’s authorship, or John’s. They included grammar and language that bear the marks of other authors. And now we have one of the earliest things ever written about Jesus. And that’s kind of cool to me.

The difference translation makes

1 Corinthians 1:30: “And because of him, you are in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God. Righteousness, sanctification, and redemption.” As a translator, I puzzled over that for a long moment. The word ‘became’ is a passive form of the verb, and

it says, that Christ became righteous. That would imply that He progressed from one state of wisdom to another state of wisdom, from one state of righteousness to another. Now, that works really well for ‘redemption.’ He wasn’t ‘redemption,’ and then He was ‘redemption.’

He was in one state of sanctification and then existed in another state of sanctification; he was in one state of righteousness and he became righteousness. It’s really hard to convey what Paul is saying. There is no single word in English to capture this. He progressed from a state of grace to another state of grace. D&C 93 does a wonderful job to help clarify this. But we don’t have that option to understand Christ’s progression when we’re dealing with a single translation that doesn’t clearly draw attention to this topic.”

▶ 4. LOCALIZATION

Localization is translation for an audience in a specific locale, recognizing the subtle differences in culture, word choice, and usage in a particular geographical region or among a culturally specific group.

As the Church grows globally, it is essential to provide translations of scriptures to new congregations. But should those translations be created from the KJV, the original Greek, or more modern, reader-friendly translations? Significantly, the Church’s scriptures in Portuguese and Spanish were translated into modern vernacular in 2009 and 2015. President Nelson, Elder Holland, and Elder Uchtdorf have quoted other modern language translations in recent talks.

To highlight this issue, Wayment said, “Imagine what it’s like to be a Filipino Latter-day Saint speaking English as a second language reading a Shakespearean Bible. It’s impossible. It’s like understanding Jesus through Shakespeare.” And the Church’s growth is not limited to non-English-speaking members. Wayment explained,

We are creating an elite group who can read the KJV translation . . . we’re the elites. We read it, we get it, we can conjugate those verbs and pray in KJV English, but so few people can. . . . And so, that’s our challenge. We want to communicate; we want to be part of a larger Bible culture. But our Bible isn’t part of American Bible culture anymore. And that’s part of the thing that’s pushing me, as a translator, to go into this space that’s very uncomfortable, that’s very hard to exist in and has some challenges.

I want to ask the hard question. The Bible needs to communicate the Word of God. It needs to communicate the idea that it’s scripture, whatever translation we’re using. And the question is, can the KJV still do that? And my contention is that it does for you but not for a lot of other people. It does to some of my ward members, and to some it doesn’t. It’s great if we’re over 40 or 50, but it’s not great to a younger crowd. When you see frustration on your youth’s faces and in your family studies . . . that’s because it’s a foreign language to many of them.

The more and more a Bible becomes a foreign language to us, the more we miss the force of stories that really are saying something. When there’s a kind of fixation on any kind of translation, whether it be the KJV or the NIV or any other, it tends to miss the fact that there’s a richness out there that’s available to us. . . . There’s a lot of value in thinking of the Bible not as a single fixed translation that’s 400+ years old. The Bible itself is subject to new translation in productive ways that don’t have to be confrontational to us.

I want to introduce what the Bible in a modern language can do for us. Modern translations can ask new questions and help us see new things.

Thomas Wayment is a professor in the Department of Comparative Arts & Letters. This article is adapted from his 2019 BYU Education Week series “Translating the New Testament: Our Latter-day Saint Bible Heritage” that took place on BYU campus August 19–23, 2019.



Saint Paul, the human

“I think Paul is the one who shaped me the most. I got to look at his anger, his frustration. And it may make you a little uncomfortable, but he loses control in a number of places. When you translate every single word that he wrote, it really makes you feel close to him. When you, yourself, have moments in your life when you’re about to lose control, fortunately you don’t write a letter that will be recorded for 2000 years. Paul did! But the moment that I think really came to the fore, when I grew to love Paul, is when I started to watch him apologize in Galatians after getting so frustrated.”

