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Habakkuk

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unfoldingWord® Translation Notes

Habakkuk

Introduction to Habakkuk

Part 1: General Introduction

Outline of Habakkuk

Habakkuk asks Yahweh questions (1:1–4)

Yahweh responds (1:5–11)

Habakkuk asks Yahweh more questions (1:12–2:1)

Yahweh responds again (2:2–5)

Habakkuk gives five taunts against the wicked (2:6–20)

Habakkuk prays (3:1–19)

What is the Book of Habakkuk about?

Other prophets spoke against Israel sinning and failing to obey Yahweh. But Habakkuk questioned Yahweh about the things he did. Yahweh said he would punish the people of Judah by sending the Babylonian army. Habakkuk complained because the Babylonians were more wicked than the people of Judah. Yahweh assured Habakkuk that he would also punish the Babylonians. (See: [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/prophet\]\]](#), [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/lawofmoses\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/evil\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/justice\]\]](#))

How should the title of this book be translated?

The traditional title of this book is “The Book of Habakkuk” or just “Habakkuk.” Translators may choose to call it “The Sayings of Habakkuk.” (See: **How to Translate Names (p.83)**)

Who wrote the Book of Habakkuk?

The prophet Habakkuk wrote this book. Scripture does not mention Habakkuk except in this book.

The Chaldean empire is another name for the Babylonian empire. The Book of Habakkuk mentions it several times. This helps us to date Habakkuk’s life. The Chaldean empire had power from about 720 to 538 B.C. Habakkuk probably prophesied about the time of Jeremiah, Zephaniah, and Nahum during the reigns of Kings Josiah, Jehoahaz, and Jehoiakim in Judah.

Part 2: Important Religious and Cultural Concepts

Why did Yahweh use an evil nation to punish Judah?

Habakkuk wanted to know why Yahweh used an evil nation to punish Judah. Yahweh responded that he will judge the evil nations also. But righteous people will live by being faithful to Yahweh.

Part 3: Important Translation Issues

How do I identify the speaker?

Habakkuk spoke to Yahweh and Yahweh answered him. The translator should be careful to identify whether the speaker is Habakkuk or Yahweh in each section. The translator may wish to make the identity of the speaker explicit. (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

What style of writing is the Book of Habakkuk?

In the first two chapters, Habakkuk asks Yahweh questions and Yahweh answers him. The third chapter is a psalm. Habakkuk ends by telling the choirmaster to use stringed instruments.

Does Habakkuk question or challenge Yahweh?

Habakkuk spoke directly to Yahweh and seems to be challenging God. Habakkuk was not questioning the authority of Yahweh. He was telling Yahweh that he does not understand what Yahweh is doing. In some cultures, it may be improper to speak to an authority in this way. It may be necessary to rephrase Habakkuk's questions to emphasize his sincere desire to learn why God is doing what he is doing, without doubting him.

Habakkuk 1

Habakkuk 1 General Notes

Structure and formatting

Some translations set each line of poetry farther to the right than the rest of the text to make it easier to read. The ULT does this with the poetry in 1:1-17.

This chapter is arranged in a series of questions and answers between Yahweh and Habakkuk.

Special concepts in this chapter

Injustice

Habakkuk sees great injustice, especially in the defeat of Israel by the Assyrians. He cries out to Yahweh to ask him to put an end to it. He is questioning Yahweh, but he trusts in him. (See: [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/justice\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/trust\]\]](#))

Chaldeans

Yahweh will raise up the Chaldeans to bring justice to the Hebrew people. They will defeat the Assyrians. At this time, the Chaldeans were an insignificant city and people group. This was probably intended to show the power of Yahweh.

Habakkuk 1:1

The message that Habakkuk the prophet received,

These words introduce the first two chapters of the book. It is implicit that Habakkuk received this message from Yahweh. This can be stated as a complete sentence. Alternate translation: "This is the message that Habakkuk the prophet received from Yahweh." (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 1:2

Yahweh

This is the name of God that he revealed to his people in the Old Testament. See the translationWord page about Yahweh concerning how to translate this.

how long will I cry for help, and you will not hear?

The reader should understand that Habakkuk has been crying to Yahweh for help for a long time. He asks this question because he is frustrated and wants to know how much longer it will be before Yahweh responds. Alternate translation: "how much longer shall I cry for help before you will respond?" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 1:3

Destruction and violence are before me

The words “destruction” and “violence” can be translated with a verbal phrase. The idiom “before me” means that Habakkuk witnesses these things happening. Alternate translation: “I witness people destroying things and acting violently” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-idiom\]\]](#)) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

contention rises up

The word “contention” refers to conflict between people and can be translated with a verbal phrase. Habakkuk speaks of there being more contention between people as if contention rises up. Alternate translation: “there is more conflict between people” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

Habakkuk 1:4

the law is weakened

Habakkuk speaks of people not obeying or enforcing the law as if they had made the law weak and unable to act. Alternate translation: “no one enforces the law” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

the wicked surround the righteous

Habakkuk speaks of wicked people causing righteous people to suffer injustice as if the wicked people surrounded the righteous people. (See: [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-nominaladj\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

false justice goes out

Habakkuk speaks of judges giving decisions that they say are just but that are not as if “false justice” were going out to the people. Alternate translation: “judges give verdicts that are not just” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 1:5

General Information:

General Information:

Yahweh responds to Habakkuk.

be amazed and astonished

The words “amazed” and “astonished” share similar meanings. Together they emphasize the strength of the emotion. Alternate translation: “be very amazed” (See: **Doublet (p.76)**) (See: **Doublet (p.76)**)

in your days

This idiom refers to Habakkuk’s lifetime. Alternate translation: “during your lifetime” (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

when it is reported to you

If your language does not use the passive form in this way, you can state this in active form or in another way that is natural in your language. Alternate translation: “when someone reports it to you” or “when you hear about it” (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**) (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**)

Habakkuk 1:6

look!

The word “look!” here alerts us to pay attention to the surprising information that follows.

impetuous

This could mean: (1) “violent” or (2) “hasty.”

the breadth of the land

This could mean: (1) everywhere in Judah or (2) everywhere in the world. This would be an exaggeration to emphasize how powerful the Chaldean army is. (See: **Hyperbole (p.87)**) (See: **Hyperbole (p.87)**)

Habakkuk 1:7

They are terrifying and fearsome

The words “terrifying” and “fearsome” share similar meanings. Together they emphasize the fear that the Chaldeans instilled in other people. Alternate translation: “They cause others to be greatly terrified” (See: **Doublet (p.76)**) (See: **Doublet (p.76)**)

their judgment and splendor proceed from themselves

The word “splendor” represents their pride in how they view themselves. Yahweh speaks of their opinion of themselves as if the qualities of judgment and splendor came from them. Alternate translation: “because they are prideful, they decide for themselves what judgment looks like” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 1:8

Their horses & their horses

the horses of the Chaldean soldiers

leopards

large, swift cats (See: **Translate Unknowns (p.117)**) (See: **Translate Unknowns (p.117)**)

the evening wolves

This refers to wolves that hunt their prey at night.

their horsemen

the Chaldean soldiers who ride the horses

they fly like an eagle hurrying to eat

Yahweh speaks of how quickly the Chaldeans move in order to conquer their enemies as if they were flying, like an eagle flies swiftly to capture its prey. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 1:9

their multitudes go like the desert wind

Yahweh speaks of how quickly the Chaldeans move as if they were a strong wind that blows in the desert. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

they gather captives like sand

This could mean: (1) the Chaldeans take people captive as easily as one would scoop up sand with his hand. Alternate translation: "they gather captives as one gathers sand" or (2) the Chaldeans take a great number of people captive, as if those people were as many as the grains of sand in the desert. Alternate translation: "they capture as many people as there are grains of sand" (See: **Simile (p.112)**) (See: **Simile (p.112)**)

Habakkuk 1:10

So they mock kings, and rulers are only a mockery for them

These two phrases mean basically the same thing. The word “mockery” can be translated with a verbal phrase. Alternate translation: “So they mock kings, and rulers are only something for them to mock” or “So all they do is mock kings and rulers” (See: [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-parallelism\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#)) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

Habakkuk 1:11

the wind will rush on

Yahweh speaks of how swiftly the Chaldean army moves from one city to the next as it conquers each one as if it were a wind that blows swiftly along. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

guilty men, those whose might is their god

This refers to the Chaldean soldiers.

Habakkuk 1:12

General Information:

General Information:

Habakkuk speaks to Yahweh about the Chaldeans.

Are you not from ancient times, Yahweh my God, my Holy One?

Habakkuk asks this rhetorical question to emphasize the positive answer. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: “You surely are from ancient times, Yahweh my God, my Holy One.” (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

from ancient times

Alternate translation: “eternal”

has ordained them for judgment, and you, Rock, have established them for correction

The word “them” refers to the Chaldeans. The words “judgment” and “correction” can be translated with verbs. The reader should understand that the Chaldeans will judge and correct Yahweh’s people. Alternate translation: “has ordained them to judge his people, and you, Rock, have established them to correct your people” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-explicit\]\]](#)) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

Rock

Habakkuk speaks of Yahweh being the one who protects him and keeps him safe as if he were a rock upon which Habakkuk could stand in order to be out of his enemies’ reach. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 1:13

Your eyes are too pure

Here the word “eyes” represents Yahweh who sees. Alternate translation: “You are too pure” (See: **Synecdoche (p. 115)**) (See: **Synecdoche (p.115)**)

those who betray

This refers to the Chaldeans. The word “betray” refers to people who have been disloyal or have broken agreements that they have made.

Why are you silent while the wicked swallow up those more righteous than they are?

Habakkuk speaks of wicked people destroying others as if the wicked were swallowing them. Alternate translation: “Why are you silent while the wicked destroy those more righteous than they are?” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

those more righteous than they are

This refers to the Israelites, about whom Habakkuk had been complaining. The reader should understand that these are wicked people, but they are “more righteous than” or not as wicked as the Chaldeans. (See: **Irony (p.93)**) (See: **Irony (p.93)**)

Habakkuk 1:14

You make men like fish in the sea

Habakkuk compares the way in which the Chaldeans will kill people without remorse with the way in which people will kill fish without remorse. Alternate translation: “You cause men to become no more important than fish” (See: **Simile (p.112)**) (See: **Simile (p.112)**)

like creeping things without a ruler over them

The words “creeping things” refer to insects and other bugs that crawl about. Just as insects have no ruler to organize and defend them, the people are defenseless before the Chaldean army. The verb may be supplied from the previous phrase. Alternate translation: “you make men as defenseless as insects that have no ruler” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-ellipsis\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-simile\]\]](#)) (See: **Ellipsis (p.78)**)

Habakkuk 1:15

He brings & he drags & his fishnet & he gathers & his dragnet & he rejoices & he is glad

The words “he” and “his” refer to a Babylonian soldier who represents all of the Babylonian soldiers. These pronouns can be stated as plural. Alternate translation: “They bring ... they drag ... their fishnets ... they gather ... their dragnet ... they rejoice ... they are glad” (See: **Synecdoche (p.115)**) (See: **Synecdoche (p.115)**)

all of them & drags men away & gathers them

Here “them” and “men” refer to people in general. This can be stated in first person to include Habakkuk as one of the people. Alternate translation: “all of us ... drags us away ... gathers us” (See: **First, Second or Third Person (p.81)**) (See: **First, Second or Third Person (p.81)**)

He brings all of them up with a fishhook & in his dragnet

Habakkuk speaks of the Chaldeans conquering people easily as if the people were fish that the Chaldeans catch with fishhooks and fishnets. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

fishhook & fishnet & dragnet

tools used to catch fish

Habakkuk 1:16

he sacrifices & his net & his dragnet & he lives & his food

Habakkuk speaks of the weapons that the Chaldeans use to conquer people and nations as if the weapons were fishing nets that they use to catch fish. The words "he" and "his" refer to a Babylonian soldier who represents all of the Babylonian soldiers. These pronouns can be stated as plural. Alternate translation: "they sacrifice ... their nets ... their dragnets ... they live ... their food" (See: [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc://ta/man/translate/figs-synecdoche\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 1:17

Will he therefore keep emptying his net, and will he continually slaughter the nations without mercy?

Habakkuk asks this question because he is frustrated and wants to know how long Yahweh will allow the Chaldeans to continue to destroy people and nations. Alternate translation: "Will you therefore let them empty their fishing nets and continue to slaughter the nations while they feel no compassion?" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Will he & keep emptying his net & will he continually slaughter

In 1:15-17 the singular pronoun "he" and "his" refer to a Babylonian soldier who represents all of the Babylonian soldiers. These pronouns can be stated as plural. Alternate translation: "Will they ... keep emptying their net ... will they continually slaughter" (See: **Synecdoche (p.115)**) (See: **Synecdoche (p.115)**)

keep emptying his net

Habakkuk speaks of the Chaldeans preparing to conquer more nations as if they were fishermen who empty their nets so that they can use them to catch more fish. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2

Habakkuk 2 General Notes

Structure and formatting

Some translations set each line of poetry farther to the right than the rest of the text to make it easier to read. The ULT does this with the poetry in 2:1-20.

This chapter is arranged in a series of questions and answers between Yahweh and Habakkuk.

Special concepts in this chapter

“The righteous will live by his faith”

This is an important phrase in Scripture. Paul also uses it to explain that man is justified by his faith. (See: [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/righteous\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/justice\]\]](#) and **faith (p.121)**)

Habakkuk 2:1

I will stand at my guard post and station myself on the watchtower

These two phrases mean basically the same thing. This could mean: (1) Habakkuk went to an actual post in the watchtower or (2) this is a metaphor in which Habakkuk speaks of waiting eagerly for Yahweh's response as if he were a watchman waiting at his post for the arrival of a messenger. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-parallelism\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

to see what he will say to me

Alternate translation: "to see what Yahweh will say to me"

how I should turn from my complaint

Here the word "turn" refers to returning an answer. Habakkuk considers what answer he will give concerning the things that he has said. (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 2:2

General Information:

General Information:

Yahweh answers Habakkuk.

Record this vision, and write plainly on the tablets

Both of these phrases are saying the same thing in two different ways. Alternate translation: "Write this vision clearly on the tablets" (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

tablets

These are flat pieces of stone or clay that were used for writing.

so that the one reading them might run

This could mean: (1) that the message is easy enough to read that a messenger can read it as he runs from place to place proclaiming the message. Alternate translation: "so that the one reading the tablets might be able to run as he reads" or (2) this is a metaphor in which Yahweh speaks of reading something very quickly as if the person who reads it is running. Alternate translation: "so that the one reading the tablets might be able to read quickly" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2:3

the vision & will finally speak

Yahweh speaks of the events in the vision happening as if the vision were a person who speaks. Alternate translation: “the vision ... will finally happen” or “the vision ... will finally come true” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Though it delays, wait for it. For it will surely come and will not tarry

Yahweh speaks of the events of the vision taking a long time to happen as if the vision were a person who does not arrive soon at his destination. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

will not tarry

This could mean: (1) “will not be late” or (2) “will not come slowly”

Habakkuk 2:4

Look!

The word “Look!” here adds emphasis to what follows.

is puffed up

Yahweh speaks of the person who is prideful as if the person were “puffed up.” Alternate translation: “is very prideful” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2:5

For wine is a betrayer of the arrogant young man

Yahweh speaks of how a person's judgment is impaired by drinking too much wine as if wine were a person who betrays the one who drinks it. Alternate translation: "For the arrogant young man does not get from wine what he wants" (See: **Personification (p.107)**) (See: **Personification (p.107)**)

so that he will not abide

Here the word "abide" refers to dwelling in a home and is a metaphor for having no place to rest. Alternate translation: "so that he will not be able to rest" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

enlarges his desire like the grave and, like death, is never satisfied

Yahweh speaks of there always being more people to die as if "the grave" and "death" were people who are never satisfied with eating. In the same way, this person always wants more and is never satisfied. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

He gathers to himself every nation and gathers up for himself all of the peoples

These two phrases mean basically the same thing. Yahweh speaks of conquering nations and capturing the people as if it were gathering nations and peoples to oneself. Alternate translation: "He conquers for himself the people of every nation" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-parallelism\]\]](#)) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

Habakkuk 2:6

Will not all these create

The words “all these” refer to the nations and peoples from [Habakkuk 2:5](#). This negative rhetorical question emphasizes the positive answer. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: “All of these nations and peoples will certainly create” (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

Woe to the one increasing what is not his

It is implicit that he is increasing his possession of things that do not belong to him. Alternate translation: “Woe to the one who claims for himself more and more things that do not belong to him” (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

For how long will you increase the weight of the pledges you have taken?

The word “pledges” refers to objects that people give to others from whom they have borrowed money as a guarantee that they will repay their debt. As the man collects more and more pledges, the total weight of the pledges that he carries increases.

For how long will you increase the weight of the pledges you have taken?

The Chaldeans robbing the people of the nations of their wealth is spoken of as if the Chaldeans were a person who forces others to give him pledges and to pay him what they do not owe. Alternate translation: “For how long will you make yourself rich by extorting others?” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2:7

Will the ones biting at you not rise up suddenly, and the ones terrifying you awaken?

This negative rhetorical question emphasizes the positive answer. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: "The ones biting at you will certainly rise up suddenly, and the ones terrifying you will awaken." (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

the ones biting at you

The Hebrew word translated here as "the ones biting" can also mean "the ones paying interest" or "debtors." In this context, the word probably has both meanings. The phrase is a metaphor in which those whom the man has oppressed and made debtors by forcing them to give him pledges will now oppress him, which is spoken of as if they were biting him. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

the ones terrifying you

This refers to the same debtors. They will terrify the Chaldeans by attacking them in revenge for the pledges that they were forced to give.

rise up & awaken

The people of the nations beginning to act against the Chaldeans is spoken of as if they were to "rise up" and to "awaken" from sleep. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2:8

plunder

to rob or take things by force

you have shed human blood

The idiom “to shed blood” means “to murder.” Alternate translation: “you have murdered people” (See: **Idiom (p. 91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 2:9

the one who carves out evil gains

A person making a profit by violent means is spoken of as if he were “carving out” gains from something. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

the one who carves out evil gains for his house

This could mean: (1) the word “house” is a metaphor in which the Babylonian empire is spoken of as if it were a house that the man builds by means of profits that he gained through violence. Alternate translation: “the one who builds his house with riches that he gained through violence” or (2) the word “house” is a metonym for “family” and the man has made his family rich through violence. Alternate translation: “the one who makes his family rich by violent means” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

so he can set his nest on high to keep himself safe from the hand of evil

The person who builds his house is spoken of as if he were a bird that builds its nest in a high place. The man thinks that his house is secure and free from danger, just as predators are unable to reach the nest. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

safe from the hand of evil

Here the word “hand” is a metonym for power, and the word “evil” is a metonym for people who do evil things. Alternate translation: “safe from the power of evil” or “safe from people who will harm him” (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

Habakkuk 2:10

You have devised shame for your house

Here to “devise shame” means that the plans that the man devised have resulted in shame. One possible meaning is that the word “house” is a metaphor in which the Babylonian empire is spoken of as if it were a house that the man has built. Alternate translation: “By your plans, you have brought shame on the house that you have built” Another possibility is that the word “house” is a metonym for “family.” Alternate translation: “By your plans, you have brought shame on your family” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

cutting off many people

Killing many people is spoken of as if it were cutting those people off, like one would cut a branch from a tree. Alternate translation: “killing many people” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

have sinned against yourself

The idiom “to sin against oneself” means that the person has done things that will result in his own death or destruction. Alternate translation: “have caused your own ruin” or “have brought about your own death” (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 2:11

For the stones will cry out from the wall, and the rafters of timber will answer them

Here the materials with which the man has built his house are personified as witnesses of the crimes that he has committed. If your culture uses different materials to build houses, you could consider using those materials here. (See: **Personification (p.107)**) (See: **Personification (p.107)**)

cry out

Alternate translation: "cry out against you" or "cry out to accuse you"

will answer them

Alternate translation: "will agree with the stones"

Habakkuk 2:12

Woe to the one who builds a city with blood, and who establishes a town in iniquity

These two phrases are saying the same thing in different ways. Alternate translation: "A warning to the Chaldeans who built their cities with what they have stolen from the people they have killed" (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

the one who builds a city with blood

Here the word "blood" is a metonym for murder. It is implicit that the person builds a city by means of the goods that he stole from those whom he has killed. Alternate translation: "the one who kills people and steals their goods in order to build a city" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#)) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-explicit\]\]](#)) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

who establishes a town in iniquity

It is implicit that the person builds a city by means of the goods that he stole from those whom he has killed. Here the word "establishes" means "to begin." Alternate translation: "who starts a town by means of the profit that he has acquired through evil behavior" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 2:13

Is it not from Yahweh of hosts that peoples labor for fire and all the other nations weary themselves for nothing?

This negative rhetorical question emphasizes the positive answer that it anticipates. The two clauses share similar meanings that the work that people do will not last. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: "Yahweh is the one who has determined that the things that people work hard to build will be destroyed by fire and result in nothing." (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-rquestion\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-parallelism\]\]](#)) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

peoples labor for fire

This means that the things that people labor to build are ultimately destined to be fuel for fire. Alternate translation: "peoples labor to build things that will be used as fuel for fire" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 2:14

the land will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh as the waters cover the sea

This simile compares the way in which people everywhere will know of Yahweh's glory with how water fills every part of the sea. (See: **Simile (p.112)**) (See: **Simile (p.112)**)

the land will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of Yahweh

The word "knowledge" can be translated with a verbal phrase. If your language does not use the passive form in this way, you can state this in active form or in another way that is natural in your language. Alternate translation: "people throughout the land will know the glory of Yahweh" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-activepassive\]\]](#)) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

Habakkuk 2:15

the one who forces his neighbors to drink & you make them drunk

The way that the Chaldeans cruelly treated other nations is spoken of as if they were a man who forces his neighbors to become drunk so that he can humiliate them. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

the one who forces his neighbors to drink

It is implied that he makes his neighbor drink wine. Alternate translation: "the one who forces his neighbors to drink wine" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

in order to look at their nakedness

"so you can look at them when they are naked." This refers to the practice of publicly humiliating people by stripping them naked in front of others. Alternate translation: "so that you can humiliate them publicly by stripping them naked" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 2:16

You will be filled with shame instead of glory

The Chaldeans passionately pursuing their own glory is spoken of as if they were eating or drinking it greedily and excessively. Instead of attaining glory, they will find only shame. Alternate translation: "You will bring shame upon yourself instead of the glory that you seek" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Drink

Others treating the Chaldeans the way that the Chaldeans had treated others is spoken of as if the Chaldeans were to drink the wine that they had forced others to drink. Alternate translation: "Drink from the cup" or "Drink the wine" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-explicit\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

you will expose your uncircumcised foreskin

This phrase is similar to the Chaldeans forcing others to strip naked so that they could look at their nakedness. Here the words "uncircumcised foreskin" indicate that they will be humiliated not just by being naked, but because their uncircumcision proves that they do not belong to Yahweh's people. (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

The cup in Yahweh's right hand is coming around to you

Yahweh punishing the Chaldeans is spoken of as if he were forcing them to drink wine from a cup that he holds in his hand. Yahweh's right hand represents his power. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

The cup in Yahweh's right hand

Alternate translation: "The cup that Yahweh holds in his right hand" or "The cup that Yahweh is holding"

is coming around to you

Alternate translation: "will come to you as it did to others" or "will pass along to you"

disgrace will cover your glory

The Chaldeans experiencing disgrace instead of glory is spoken of as if disgrace were an object that covers the glory that they thought they had. Alternate translation: "disgrace will replace your glory" or "people will disgrace you instead of honor you" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 2:17

The violence done to Lebanon will overwhelm you

The Chaldeans being punished for the violence done to Lebanon is spoken of as if their violent actions were a person who will overpower them. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

The violence done to Lebanon

Here, **Lebanon** could mean: (1) it represents the forest of Lebanon. Alternate translation: “The violence done to the trees of Lebanon” or (2) it represents the people of Lebanon. Alternate translation: “The violence done to the people of Lebanon” (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

the destruction of animals will terrify you

The Chaldeans being punished for destroying the animals in Lebanon is spoken of as if their destruction were a person who will terrify them. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

For you have shed human blood & all who live in them

See how you translated this sentence in [Habakkuk 2:8](#).

you have shed human blood

The idiom “to shed blood” means “to murder.” Alternate translation: “you have murdered people” (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 2:18

What does the carved figure profit you?

This rhetorical question emphasizes the negative answer that it anticipates. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: "The carved figure profits you nothing!" (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

you

The word "you" refers to the Chaldeans.

molten metal

This describes metal when it is in its liquid form.

a teacher of lies

This phrase refers to the one who carved or cast the figure. By making a false god, he is teaching a lie.

Habakkuk 2:19

Or to the silent stone

The verb may be supplied from the previous phrase. Alternate translation: "Woe to the one saying to the silent stone" (See: **Ellipsis (p.78)**) (See: **Ellipsis (p.78)**)

Do these things teach?

This rhetorical question emphasizes the negative answer that it anticipates. If it would be helpful in your language, you could express this question as a statement. Alternate translation: "These things cannot teach." or "Wood and stone cannot teach." (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**) (See: **Rhetorical Question (p.109)**)

See, it is overlaid

Alternate translation: "Look at it. You can see for yourself that it is overlaid"

it is overlaid with gold and silver

If your language does not use the passive form in this way, you can state this in active form or in another way that is natural in your language. Alternate translation: "a person overlays the wood or stone with gold and silver" (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**) (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**)

there is no breath at all within it

The idiom "no breath ... within it" means that it is not alive, but dead. Alternate translation: "it is not alive" or "it is dead" (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 2:20

all the land

Here the word "land" is a metonym for the people who live in the land. Alternate translation: "everyone in the land" or "everyone on earth" (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

Habakkuk 3

Habakkuk 3 General Notes

Structure and formatting

Some translations set each line of poetry farther to the right than the rest of the text to make it easier to read. The ULT does this with the poetry in 3:1-19.

Special concepts in this chapter

Poetry

Although this is a prayer, it is in the form of poetry. Habakkuk uses startling imagery to show his fear of Yahweh. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/writing-poetry\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///tw/dict/bible/kt/fear\]\]](#))

Habakkuk 3:1

The prayer of Habakkuk the prophet:

These words introduce the third chapter of this book. This can be stated as a complete sentence. Alternate translation: "This is the prayer that Habakkuk the prophet prayed to Yahweh." (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

Habakkuk 3:2

I have heard your report

This could mean: (1) "I have heard people talk about what you have done in the past" or (2) "I have heard what you just said."

revive your work

Habakkuk speaks of Yahweh doing again the things that he has done in the past as if Yahweh were to cause his work to live again. Alternate translation: "bring your work back to life" or "what you did before, do again" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

in the midst of these times

This idiom refers to the time at which Habakkuk prayed this prayer, as opposed to times when Yahweh had acted in the past to rescue his people. Alternate translation: "in our own times" (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

make it known

Alternate translation: "make your work known" or "cause people to know your work"

Habakkuk 3:3

God came from Teman, and the Holy One from Mount Paran

Teman and Mount Paran were both located south of Judah. Habakkuk speaks of God coming to Judah from the direction of Mount Sinai.

His glory covered the heavens

“His splendor covered the sky.” Here the word “glory” refers to the bright light that biblical writers often associate with God’s presence.

the earth was full of his praise

Here the word “praise” is a metonym for God’s qualities that cause people to praise him. Alternate translation: “the earth was full of his glory” (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

Habakkuk 3:4

With brightness like the light

Here the word “brightness” likely refers to the brightness that is often associated with Yahweh’s glory. This could mean: (1) the brightness of Yahweh’s glory was like flashes of lightning or (2) the brightness of Yahweh’s glory was like the rising of the sun.

two-pronged rays flash from his hand

Habakkuk speaks of flashes of lightning as if they were two-pronged weapons that Yahweh holds in his hand. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

there he hid his power

The word “there” refers to Yahweh’s hand. This could mean: (1) the lightning bolts that Habakkuk can see are only a small representation of the full power that he cannot see hidden in Yahweh’s hand or (2) Yahweh hides his power in his hand until he is ready to use it.

Habakkuk 3:5

(There are no notes for this verse.)

Habakkuk 3:6

He stood

This means that Yahweh stopped walking and stood still, not that he stood up from a seated position.

measured the earth

This could mean: (1) the word translated as “measured” can be “shook” or (2) he surveyed the earth the way a conqueror would before assigning portions to his governors.

eternal mountains & everlasting hills

“mountains that have existed since the beginning of time ... hills that will exist until the end of time.” If your language has no different words for “hills” and “mountains” or for “eternal” and “everlasting,” you can combine them as the UST has done.

Even the eternal mountains were shattered

If your language does not use the passive form in this way, you can state this in active form or in another way that is natural in your language. Alternate translation: “Even the eternal mountains crumbled” or “He shattered even the eternal mountains” (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**) (See: **Active or Passive (p.70)**)

the everlasting hills bowed down

The hills being flattened like level ground is spoken of as if they were people who bow down before Yahweh. Alternate translation: “the everlasting hills collapsed” (See: **Personification (p.107)**) (See: **Personification (p.107)**)

His path is everlasting

This could mean: (1) the words “His path” may be a metaphor that speaks of Yahweh and his actions as a path on which he walks. Alternate translation: “He is everlasting” or (2) Habakkuk speaks of the path upon which Yahweh walks in the vision as being everlasting, indicating that this is the same path that Yahweh had taken in ancient times. Alternate translation: “He walks along an ancient path” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 3:7

I saw the tents of Cushan in affliction, and the fabric of the tents in the land of Midian trembling

This could mean: (1) the words “the tents” and “the fabric of the tents” are metonyms for the people who live in those tents. Alternate translation: “I saw the people who live in tents in the land of Cushan in affliction, and the people who live in tents in the land of Midian trembling” or (2) this is a metaphor in which Habakkuk speaks of the tents in Cushan and Midian being blown about by a storm as if the tents were people who were trembling in affliction. Alternate translation: “I saw the tents of Cushan blown about like people in affliction, and the fabric of the tents in the land of Midian trembling as if they were people” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

Cushan

Here, **Cushan** could mean (1) the name of a people group otherwise unknown or (2) the same as Cush. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/translate-names\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/translate-unknown\]\]](#)) (See: **How to Translate Names (p.83)**)

Habakkuk 3:8

you rode upon your horses and your victorious chariots

The phrases “your horses” and “your victorious chariots” both refer to the same thing. This speaks of Yahweh as if he were a warrior riding a horse-drawn chariot into battle. Alternate translation: “you rode your horse-drawn chariots to victory” (See: **Doublet (p.76)**) (See: **Doublet (p.76)**)

Habakkuk 3:9

You have brought out your bow without a cover

This means that Yahweh has removed his bow from its protective case and is prepared to shoot. Alternate translation: "You have prepared to shoot your bow" (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

You divided the earth with rivers

This could mean: (1) "You created rivers that divide the lands through which they run" or (2) "You split open the earth and rivers flowed forth."

Habakkuk 3:10

The mountains saw you and twisted in pain

The effects that Yahweh's presence has on the mountains is spoken of as if the mountains were people who writhe in pain. This may refer either to the mountains shaking from an earthquake or to the water from the storm eroding the sides of the mountains as the streams flow down. (See: **Personification (p.107)**) (See: **Personification (p.107)**)

Downpours of water passed over them

This could mean: (1) torrential rains fell on the mountains or (2) the rain caused raging streams to flow down the mountains.

the deep sea raised a shout

The loud noises that the sea makes as the wind and storm pass over it are spoken of as if the sea were a person who begins to shout loudly. Alternate translation: "the deep sea became loud" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

It lifted up its waves

The level of the water in the sea rising and the storm winds causing waves in the sea is spoken of as if the sea were a person who lifts its waves. Alternate translation: "Waves began to form in the sea" (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 3:11

The sun and moon stood still

The sun and moon not moving in the sky is spoken of as if they were people who stopped walking and stood still. Alternate translation: “The sun and moon stopped moving” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-personification\]\]](#)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

in their high places

Alternate translation: “in the sky”

at the flash of your arrows & at the lightning of your flashing spear

These two phrases share similar meanings and tell why the sun and moon have stood still. The lightning flashes in the sky are spoken of as if they were arrows that Yahweh shoots from his bow or a shining spear that he throws through the sky. (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-parallelism\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Parallelism (p.104)**)

the flash of your arrows as they fly

Alternate translation: “the flash of your flying arrows”

Habakkuk 3:12

indignation

anger of a person who has suffered injustice

you have threshed the nations

Yahweh punishing the people of the nations is spoken of as if he threshed the nations. Threshing refers to the practice of having an ox or some other animal trample upon grain stalks in order to crush them and remove the grain. (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 3:13

You went out for the salvation of your people

The word “salvation” can be translated with a verb. Alternate translation: “You went out to save your people” (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

your anointed one

Here this phrase refers to one whom Yahweh has chosen. This could mean: (1) “the people you have chosen” or “the nation you have chosen” or (2) “the king you have chosen.”

You shatter the head of the house of the wicked to lay bare from the base up to the neck

This could mean: (1) killing the leader and destroying the people is spoken of as if someone were destroying a house. Here the leader is the head, that is, the roof of the house; and “base” and “neck” represent other parts of the house. Alternate translation: “You destroy the roof of the wicked house and demolish the rest of the building” or “You kill the leader of the wicked nation and completely destroy the nation” or (2) Killing the leader and removing honor and power from the people is spoken of as if someone were shattering a person’s head and stripping off all of his clothes. Here the leader is the “head,” and “house” represents the people who are the body. Alternate translation: “The wicked people and their leader are like a man whose head you crush and whose body you strip naked from foot to neck” or “You kill the leader of the wicked people and completely remove all of the people’s power” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metonymy\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Metonymy (p.102)**)

Habakkuk 3:14

You have pierced the head of his warriors with his own arrows

The word “his” refers to the leader of the Chaldeans. This could mean: (1) this is a metaphor in which the warriors are spoken of as if they were a body and the leader were the head. Alternate translation: “You have killed with his own spear the one who leads the warriors” or (2) the word “head” refers to the heads of each of the warriors. Alternate translation: “With the leader’s own spear, you have pierced the heads of each of his warriors” (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

they came like a storm

The power and quickness of the Chaldeans as they attacked the people of Israel is compared to the coming of a sudden storm. Alternate translation: “they came quickly like a storm” (See: **Simile (p.112)**) (See: **Simile (p.112)**)

their gloating was like one who devours the poor in a hiding place

The word “gloating” here means to rejoice for bad reasons and can be translated with a verb. The warriors treating people cruelly or killing them is spoken of as if the warriors were wild beasts who carry their prey to their hiding places in order to eat it. Alternate translation: “they gloated like a person who secretly abuses poor people” or “they rejoiced when they oppressed the poor, acting as if they would eat them like a beast eats its prey in its den” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-abstractnouns\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-metaphor\]\]](#)) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

Habakkuk 3:15

heaped up the great waters

Yahweh causing the waters to surge is spoken of as if he heaped the water up into piles. Alternate translation: "caused the great waters to surge" (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 3:16

General Information:

General Information:

Habakkuk describes his reaction to his vision of Yahweh.

I heard

You may indicate what it is that Habakkuk heard. This could mean: (1) “I heard everything in that vision” or (2) “I heard Yahweh approach like a great storm” (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

my inner parts trembled

The word translated here as “inner parts” is literally “belly.” If your language has a specific internal organ that it uses to express the feeling of great fear, you could consider using it here. Alternate translation: “my heart beat rapidly” or “my stomach turned” (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**) (See: **Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information (p.73)**)

My lips quivered at the sound

Quivering lips is another spontaneous response that comes with great fear.

Decay comes into my bones

Habakkuk speaks of having no strength in his body as if his bones began to decay. You may consider using an idiom from your own language here. Alternate translation: “My body goes limp, as if my bones were rotting” (See: [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-idiom\]\]](#) and [\[\[rc:///ta/man/translate/figs-explicit\]\]](#)) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

under myself I tremble

The words “under myself” refer to what is below him. This idiom could mean: (1) “my legs tremble” or (2) “I tremble where I stand.” (See: **Idiom (p.91)**) (See: **Idiom (p.91)**)

Habakkuk 3:17

General Information:

General Information:

Habakkuk describes his reaction to his vision of Yahweh.

though the produce of the olive tree disappoints

Alternate translation: “though the produce of the olive tree fails” or “though the olive tree fails to produce olives”

though the flock is cut off from the fold

The word “flock” may refer to sheep or goats, or both. The word “fold” refers to the fenced-in area where shepherds keep their flock. Habakkuk speaks of the flock dying as if someone were to cut off the flock, as a person would cut a branch from a tree. Alternate translation: “though all the flock dies and the folds are empty” (See: **Metaphor (p. 96)**) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)

Habakkuk 3:18

the God of my salvation

The word “salvation” can be translated with a verb. Alternate translation: “the God who saves me” (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**) (See: **Abstract Nouns (p.68)**)

Habakkuk 3:19

he makes my feet like the deer's. He makes me go forward on my high places

Habakkuk speaks of Yahweh keeping him safe and enabling him to survive during difficult times as if Yahweh were to make him as sure-footed as a deer that can climb easily on rugged and dangerous mountain sides. (See:

Metaphor (p.96)) (See: **Metaphor (p.96)**)



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Abstract Nouns

Description

Abstract nouns are nouns that refer to attitudes, qualities, events, or situations. These are things that cannot be seen or touched in a physical sense, such as happiness, weight, unity, friendship, health, and reason. This is a translation issue because some languages may express a certain idea with an abstract noun, while others would need a different way to express it.

This page answers the question: *What are abstract nouns and how do I deal with them in my translation?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Parts of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Sentence Structure ([UTA PDF](#))

Remember that nouns are words that refer to a person, place, thing, or idea. Abstract nouns are the nouns that refer to ideas. These can be attitudes, qualities, events, situations, or even relationships between those ideas. These are things that cannot be seen or touched in a physical sense, such as joy, peace, creation, goodness, contentment, justice, truth, freedom, vengeance, slowness, length, weight, and many, many more.

Some languages, such as Biblical Greek and English, use abstract nouns a lot. They provide a way of giving names to actions or qualities. With names, people who speak these languages can talk about the concepts as though they were things. For example, in languages that use abstract nouns, people can say, "I believe in the forgiveness of sin." But some languages do not use abstract nouns very much. In these languages, speakers may not have the two abstract nouns "forgiveness" and "sin," but they would express the same meaning in other ways. For example, they would express, "I believe that God is willing to forgive people after they have sinned," by using verb phrases instead of nouns for those ideas.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

The Bible that you translate from may use abstract nouns to express certain ideas. Your language might not use abstract nouns for some of those ideas. Instead, it might use phrases to express those ideas. Those phrases will use other kinds of words such as adjectives, verbs, or adverbs to express the meaning of the abstract noun. For example, "What is its **weight**?" could be expressed as "How much does it **weigh**?" or "How **heavy** is it?"

Examples From the Bible

From **childhood** you have known the sacred writings ... (2 Timothy 3:15a ULT)

The abstract noun "childhood" refers to when someone was a child.

But **godliness** with **contentment** is great **gain**. (1 Timothy 6:6 ULT)

The abstract nouns "godliness" and "contentment" refer to being godly and content. The abstract noun "gain" refers to something that benefits or helps someone.

Today **salvation** has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. (Luke 19:9 ULT)

The abstract noun "salvation" here refers to being saved.

The Lord does not move slowly concerning his promises, as some consider **slowness** to be (2 Peter 3:9a ULT)

The abstract noun "slowness" refers to the lack of speed with which something is done.

He will both bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the **purposes** of the heart. (1 Corinthians 4:5b ULT)

The abstract noun "purposes" refers to the things that people want to do and the reasons they want to do them.

Translation Strategies

If an abstract noun would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider using it. If not, here is another option:

(1) Reword the sentence with a phrase that expresses the meaning of the abstract noun. Instead of a noun, the new phrase will use a verb, an adverb, or an adjective to express the idea of the abstract noun.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Reword the sentence with a phrase that expresses the meaning of the abstract noun. Instead of a noun, the new phrase will use a verb, an adverb, or an adjective to express the idea of the abstract noun. Alternative translations are indented below the Scripture example.

... from **childhood** you have known the sacred writings ... (2 Timothy 3:15a ULT)

Ever since **you were a child** you have known the sacred writings.

But **godliness** with **contentment** is great **gain**. (1 Timothy 6:6 ULT)

But **being godly** and **content** is very **beneficial**. But we **benefit** greatly when we **are godly** and **content**. But we **benefit** greatly when we **honor and obey God** and when we are **happy with what we have**.

Today **salvation** has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. (Luke 19:9 ULT)

Today the people in this house **have been saved** ... Today God **has saved** the people in this house ...

The Lord does not move slowly concerning his promises, as some consider **slowness** to be. (2 Peter 3:9a ULT)

The Lord does not move slowly concerning his promises, as some consider **moving slowly** to be.

He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal the **purposes** of the heart. (1 Corinthians 4:5b ULT)

He will bring to light the hidden things of darkness and reveal **the things that people want to do and the reasons that they want to do them**.

"

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:3](#); [Habakkuk 1:12](#); [Habakkuk 2:14](#); [Habakkuk 3:13](#); [Habakkuk 3:14](#); [Habakkuk 3:18](#)

Active or Passive

Some languages use both active and passive sentences. In active sentences, the subject does the action. In passive sentences, the subject is the one that receives the action. Here are some examples with their subjects bolded:

- Active: **My father** built the house in 2010.
- Passive: **The house** was built in 2010.

Translators whose languages do not use passive sentences will need to know how they can translate passive sentences that they find in the Bible. Other translators will need to decide when to use a passive sentence and when to use the active form.

This page answers the question: *What do active and passive mean, and how do I translate passive sentences?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Sentence Structure ([UTA PDF](#))

Verbs ([UTA PDF](#))

Description

Some languages have both active and passive forms of sentences.

- In the active form, the subject does the action and is always mentioned.
- In the passive form, the action is done to the subject, and the one who does the action is not always mentioned.

In the examples of active and passive sentences below, we have bolded the subject.

- active: **My father** built the house in 2010.
- passive: **The house** was built by my father in 2010.
- passive: **The house** was built in 2010. (This does not tell who did the action.)

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

All languages use active forms. Some languages use passive forms, and some do not. Some languages use passive forms only for certain purposes, and the passive form is not used for the same purposes in all of the languages that use it.

Purposes for the Passive

- The speaker is talking about the person or thing the action was done to, not about the person who did the action.
- The speaker does not want to tell who did the action.
- The speaker does not know who did the action.

Translation Principles Regarding the Passive

- Translators whose language does not use passive forms will need to find another way to express the idea.
- Translators whose language has passive forms will need to understand why the passive is used in a particular sentence in the Bible and decide whether or not to use a passive form for that purpose in his translation of the sentence.

Examples From the Bible

Then their shooters shot at your soldiers from off the wall, and some of the king's servants **were killed**, and your servant Uriah the Hittite **was killed** too. (2 Samuel 11:24 ULT)

This means that the enemy's shooters shot and killed some of the king's servants, including Uriah. The point is what happened to the king's servants and Uriah, not who shot them. The purpose of the passive form here is to keep the focus on the king's servants and Uriah.

When the men of the city arose early in the morning, and see, the altar of Baal **was torn down**.
(Judges 6:28a ULT)

The men of the town saw what had happened to the altar of Baal, but they did not know who broke it down. The purpose of the passive form here is to communicate this event from the perspective of the men of the town.

It would be better for him if a millstone **were put** around his neck and he **were thrown** into the sea. (Luke 17:2a ULT)

This describes a situation in which a person ends up in the sea with a millstone around his neck. The purpose of the passive form here is to keep the focus on what happens to this person. Who does these things to the person is not important.

Translation Strategies

If your language would use a passive form for the same purpose as in the passage that you are translating, then use a passive form. If you decide that it is better to translate without a passive form, here are some strategies that you might consider.

(1) Use the same verb in an active sentence and tell who or what did the action. If you do this, try to keep the focus on the person receiving the action. (2) Use the same verb in an active sentence, and do not tell who or what did the action. Instead, use a generic expression like "they" or "people" or "someone." (3) Use a different verb.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Use the same verb in an active sentence and tell who did the action. If you do this, try to keep the focus on the person receiving the action.

A loaf of bread **was given** him every day from the street of the bakers. (Jeremiah 37:21b ULT)

The king's servants gave Jeremiah a loaf of bread every day from the street of the bakers.

(2) Use the same verb in an active sentence, and do not tell who did the action. Instead, use a generic expression like "they" or "people" or "someone."

It would be better for him if a millstone **were put** around his neck and he **were thrown** into the sea. (Luke 17:2a ULT)

It would be better for him if **they were to put** a millstone around his neck and **throw** him into the sea. It would be better for him if **someone were to put** a heavy stone around his neck and **throw** him into the sea.

(3) Use a different verb in an active sentence.

A loaf of bread **was given** him every day from the street of the bakers. (Jeremiah 37:21 ULT)

He **received** a loaf of bread every day from the street of the bakers.

Next we recommend you learn about:

[Abstract Nouns \(UTA PDF\)](#)

[Word Order \(UTA PDF\)](#)

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:5](#); [Habakkuk 2:19](#); [Habakkuk 3:6](#)

Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information

Assumed knowledge is whatever a speaker assumes his audience knows before he speaks and gives them some kind of information. The speaker does not give the audience this information because he believes that they already know it.

This page answers the question: *How can I be sure that my translation communicates the assumed knowledge and implicit information along with the explicit information of the original message?*

When the speaker does give the audience information, he can do so in two ways. The speaker gives explicit information in what he states directly. Implicit Information is what the speaker does not state directly because he expects his audience to be able to learn it from other things he says.

Description

When someone speaks or writes, he has something specific that he wants people to know or do or think about. He normally states this directly. This is explicit information.

The speaker assumes that his audience already knows certain things that they will need to think about in order to understand this information. Normally he does not tell people these things, because they already know them. This is called assumed knowledge.

The speaker does not always directly state everything that he expects his audience to learn from what he says. Implicit information is information that he expects people to learn from what he says even though he does not state it directly.

Often, the audience understands this implicit information by combining what they already know (assumed knowledge) with the explicit information that the speaker tells them directly.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

All three kinds of information are part of the speaker's message. If one of these kinds of information is missing, then the audience will not understand the message. Because the target translation is in a language that is very different from the biblical languages and is made for an audience that lives in a very different time and place than the people in the Bible, many times the assumed knowledge or the implicit information is missing from the message. In other words, modern readers do not know everything that the original speakers and hearers in the Bible knew. When these things are important for understanding the message, it is helpful if you include this information in the text or in a footnote.

Examples From the Bible

Then a scribe came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus said to him, "Foxes **have holes**, and the birds of the sky **have nests**, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:19-20 ULT)

Jesus did not say what foxes and birds use holes and nests for, because he assumed that the scribe would have known that foxes sleep in holes in the ground and birds sleep in their nests. This is **assumed knowledge**.

Jesus did not directly say here "I am the Son of Man" but, if the scribe did not already know it, then that fact would be **implicit information** that he could learn because Jesus referred to himself that way. Also, Jesus did not state explicitly that he travelled a lot and did not have a house that he slept in every night. That is **implicit information** that the scribe could learn when Jesus said that he had nowhere to lay his head.

Woe to you, Chorazin! Woe to you, Bethsaida! If the mighty deeds had been done in **Tyre and Sidon** which were done in you, they would have repented long ago in sackcloth and ashes. But

I say to you, it will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the **day of judgment** than for you.
(Matthew 11:21-22 ULT)

Jesus assumed that the people he was speaking to knew that Tyre and Sidon were very wicked, and that the day of judgment is a time when God will judge every person. Jesus also knew that the people he was talking to believed that they were good and did not need to repent. Jesus did not need to tell them these things. This is all **assumed knowledge**.

An important piece of **implicit information** here is that the people he was speaking to would be judged more severely than the people of Tyre and Sidon would be judged **because** they did not repent.

Why do your disciples violate the traditions of the elders? For **they do not wash their hands when they eat bread**. (Matthew 15:2 ULT)

One of the traditions of the elders was a ceremony in which people would wash their hands in order to be ritually clean before eating. People thought that in order to be righteous, they had to follow all the traditions of the elders. This was **assumed knowledge** that the Pharisees who were speaking to Jesus expected him to know. By saying this, they were accusing his disciples of not following the traditions, and thus not being righteous. This is **implicit information** that they wanted him to understand from what they said.

Translation Strategies

If readers have enough assumed knowledge to be able to understand the message, along with any important implicit information that goes with the explicit information, then it is good to leave that knowledge unstated and leave the implicit information implicit. If the readers do not understand the message because one of these is missing for them, then follow these strategies:

- (1) If readers cannot understand the message because they do not have certain assumed knowledge, then provide that knowledge as explicit information.
- (2) If readers cannot understand the message because they do not know certain implicit information, then state that information clearly, but try to do it in a way that does not imply that the information was new to the original audience.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) If readers cannot understand the message because they do not have certain assumed knowledge, then provide that knowledge as explicit information.

Jesus said to him, "Foxes **have holes**, and the birds of the sky **have nests**, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:20 ULT)

The assumed knowledge was that the foxes slept in their holes and birds slept in their nests.

Jesus said to him, "Foxes **have holes to live in**, and the birds of the sky **have nests to live in**, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head and sleep."

It will be more tolerable for **Tyre and Sidon** at the day of judgment than for you (Matthew 11:22 ULT)

The assumed knowledge was that the people of Tyre and Sidon were very, very wicked. This can be stated explicitly.

At the day of judgment, it will be more tolerable for **those cities of Tyre and Sidon, whose people were very wicked**, than it will be for you. or At the day of judgment, It will be more tolerable for those **wicked cities, Tyre and Sidon**, than for you.

Why do your disciples violate the traditions of the elders? For **they do not wash their hands** when they eat bread. (Matthew 15:2 ULT)

The assumed knowledge was that one of the traditions of the elders was a ceremony in which people would wash their hands in order to be ritually clean before eating, which they must do to be righteous. It was not to remove germs from their hands to avoid sickness, as a modern reader might think.

Why do your disciples violate the traditions of the elders? For **they do not go through the ceremonial handwashing ritual of righteousness** when they eat bread.

(2) If readers cannot understand the message because they do not know certain implicit information, then state that information clearly, but try to do it in a way that does not imply that the information was new to the original audience.

Then a scribe came to him and said, "Teacher, I will follow you wherever you go." Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head." (Matthew 8:19-20 ULT)

The implicit information is that Jesus himself is the Son of Man. Other implicit information is that if the scribe wanted to follow Jesus, then, like Jesus, he would have to live without a house.

Jesus said to him, "Foxes have holes, and the birds of the sky have nests, but **I, the Son of Man, have no home to rest in. If you want to follow me, you will live as I live.**"

It will be more tolerable for Tyre and Sidon at the day of judgment than for you (Matthew 11:22 ULT)

The implicit information is that God would not only judge the people; he would punish them. This can be made explicit.

At the day of judgment, God will **punish Tyre and Sidon**, cities whose people were very wicked, **less severely than he will punish you.** or: At the day of judgment, God will **punish you more severely** than Tyre and Sidon, cities whose people were very wicked.

Modern readers may not know some of the things that the people in the Bible and the people who first read it knew. This can make it hard for them to understand what a speaker or writer says, and to learn things that the speaker left implicit. Translators may need to state some things explicitly in the translation that the original speaker or writer left unstated or implicit.

Next we recommend you learn about:

Making Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information Explicit ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Introduction to Habakkuk](#); [Habakkuk 1:1](#); [Habakkuk 1:2](#); [Habakkuk 1:17](#); [Habakkuk 2:6](#); [Habakkuk 2:12](#); [Habakkuk 2:13](#); [Habakkuk 2:15](#); [Habakkuk 2:16](#); [Habakkuk 3:1](#); [Habakkuk 3:9](#); [Habakkuk 3:16](#)

Doublet

Description

We are using the word “doublet” to refer to two words or phrases that are used together and either mean the same thing or mean very close to the same thing. Often they are joined with the word “and.” Unlike [Hendiadys](#), in which one of the words modifies the other, in a doublet the two words or phrases are equal and are used to emphasize or intensify the one idea that is expressed by the two words or phrases.

This page answers the question: *What are doublets and how can I translate them?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

A very similar issue is the repetition of the same word or phrase for emphasis, usually with no other words between them. Because these figures of speech are so similar and have the same effect, we will treat them here together.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

In some languages people do not use doublets. Or they may use doublets, but only in certain situations, so a doublet might not make sense in their language in some verses. People might think that the verse is describing two ideas or actions, when it is only describing one. In this case, translators may need to find some other way to express the meaning expressed by the doublet.

Examples From the Bible

He has one people **scattered** and **dispersed** among the peoples (Esther 3:8 ULT)

The bolded words mean the same thing. Together they mean the people were spread out.

He attacked two men **more righteous** and **better** than himself. (1 Kings 2:32b ULT)

This means that they were “much more righteous” than he was.

You have decided to prepare **false** and **deceptive** words. (Daniel 2:9b ULT)

This means that they had decided to lie, which is another way of saying that they intended to deceive people.

... like of a lamb **without blemish** and **without spot**. (1 Peter 1:19b ULT)

This means that he was like a lamb that did not have any defect—not even one.

Then they approached {and} woke him up, saying, “**Master! Master!** We are perishing!” (Luke 8:24 ULT)

The repetition of “Master” means that the disciples called to Jesus urgently and continually.

Translation Strategies

If a doublet would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider using it. If not, consider these strategies.

- (1) Translate only one of the words or phrases.
- (2) If the doublet is used to intensify the meaning, translate one of the words or phrases and add a word that intensifies it such as “very” or “great” or “many.”
- (3) If the doublet is used to intensify or emphasize the meaning, use one of your language's ways of doing that.

Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Translate only one of the words.

You have decided to prepare **false** and **deceptive** words. (Daniel 2:9b ULT)

"You have decided to prepare **false** things to say."

(2) If the doublet is used to intensify the meaning, translate one of the words and add a word that intensifies it such as "very" or "great" or "many."

He has one people **scattered** and **dispersed** among the peoples (Esther 3:8 ULT)

"He has one people **very spread out**."

(3) If the doublet is used to intensify or emphasize the meaning, use one of your language's ways of doing that.

... like a lamb **without blemish** and **without spot**. (1 Peter 1:19b ULT)

- English can emphasize this with "any" and "at all."

"... like a lamb **without any blemish at all**."

Then they approached {and} woke him up, saying, "**Master! Master!** We are perishing!" (Luke 8:24 ULT)

Then they approached {and} woke him up, **urgently shouting, "Master!**
We are perishing!"

"

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:5](#); [Habakkuk 1:7](#); [Habakkuk 3:8](#)

Ellipsis

Description

An ellipsis¹ occurs when a speaker or writer leaves out one or more words that normally should be in the sentence. The speaker or writer does this because he knows that the hearer or reader will understand the meaning of the sentence and supply the words in his mind when he hears or reads the words that are there. For example:

So the wicked will not stand in the judgment, **nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.**
(Psalm 1:5 ULT)

There is ellipsis in the second part because “nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous” is not a complete sentence. The speaker assumes that the hearer will understand what it is that sinners will not do in the assembly of the righteous by filling in the action from the previous clause. With the action filled in, the complete sentence would read:

So the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor **will** sinners **stand** in the assembly of the righteous.

Two Types of Ellipsis

A Relative Ellipsis happens when the reader has to supply the omitted word or words from the context. Usually the word is in the previous sentence, as in the example above.

An Absolute Ellipsis happens when the omitted word or words are not in the context, but the phrases are common enough in the language that the reader is expected to supply what is missing from this common usage or from the nature of the situation.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

Readers who see incomplete sentences or phrases may not know that there is information missing that the writer expects them to fill in. Or readers may understand that there is information missing, but they may not know what information is missing because they do not know the original biblical language, culture, or situation as the original readers did. In this case, they may fill in the wrong information. Or readers may misunderstand the ellipsis if they do not use ellipsis in the same way in their language.

Examples From the Bible

Relative Ellipsis

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf **and Sirion like a young ox.** (Psalm 29:6 ULT)

The writer wants his words to be few and to make good poetry. The full sentence with the information filled in would be:

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf and **he makes** Sirion **skip** like a young ox.

Watch carefully, therefore, how you walk—**not as unwise but as wise.** (Ephesians 5:15b ULT)

This page answers the question: *What is ellipsis ?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Sentence Structure ([UTA PDF](#))

The information that the reader must understand in the second parts of these sentences can be filled in from the first parts:

Watch carefully, therefore, how you walk—**walk** not as unwise but **walk** as wise,

Absolute Ellipsis

Then when he had come near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And so he said, “Lord, **that I might recover my sight.**” (Luke 18:40b-41 ULT)

It seems that the man answered in an incomplete sentence because he wanted to be polite and not directly ask Jesus for healing. He knew that Jesus would understand that the only way he could receive his sight would be for Jesus to heal him. The complete sentence would be:

“Lord, **I want you to heal me so** that I might receive my sight.”

To Titus, a true son in our common faith. Grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior. (Titus 1:4 ULT)

The writer assumes that the reader will recognize this common form of a blessing or wish, so he does not need to include the full sentence, which would be:

To Titus, a true son in our common faith. **May you receive** grace and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Savior.

Translation Strategies

If ellipsis would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider using it. If not, here is another option:

(1) Add the missing words to the incomplete phrase or sentence.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Add the missing words to the incomplete phrase or sentence.

So the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor **sinner in the assembly** of the righteous. (Psalm 1:5 ULT)

So the wicked will not stand in the judgment, and **sinner will not stand in the assembly** of the righteous.

Then when he had come near, he asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” And so he said, “Lord, **that I might recover my sight.**” (Luke 18:40b-41 ULT)

Then when the man was near, Jesus asked him, “What do you want me to do for you?” He said, “Lord, **I want you to heal me** that I might receive my sight.”

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf **and Sirion like a young ox.** (Psalm 29:6 ULT)

He makes Lebanon skip like a calf, and **he makes** Sirion **skip** like a young ox.

English has a punctuation symbol which is also called an ellipsis. It is a series of three dots (...) used to indicate an intentional omission of a word, phrase, sentence or more from text without altering its original meaning. This translationAcademy article is not about the punctuation mark, but about the concept of omission of words that normally should be in the sentence.

"

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:14](#); [Habakkuk 2:19](#)

First, Second or Third Person

Normally a speaker refers to himself as “I” and the person he is speaking to as “you.” Sometimes in the Bible a speaker refers to himself or to the person he is speaking to with terms other than “I” or “you.”

Description

- First person — This is how a speaker normally refers to himself. English uses the pronouns “I” and “we.” (Also: me, my, mine; us, our, ours)
- Second person — This is how a speaker normally refers to the person or people he is speaking to. English uses the pronoun “you.” (Also: your, yours)
- Third person — This is how a speaker refers to someone else. English uses the pronouns “he,” “she,” “it,” and “they.” (Also: him, his, her, hers, its; them, their, theirs) Noun phrases like “the man” or “the woman” are also third person.

This page answers the question: *What are first, second, and third person, and how do I translate when a third person form does not refer to the third person?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Making Assumed Knowledge and Implicit Information Explicit ([UTA PDF](#))

Pronouns ([UTA PDF](#))

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

Sometimes in the Bible a speaker uses the third person to refer to himself or to the people he is speaking to. Readers might think that the speaker was referring to someone else. They might not understand that he meant “I” or “you.”

Examples From the Bible

Sometimes people used the third person instead of “I” or “me” to refer to themselves.

But David said to Saul, “**Your servant** used to keep **his** father’s sheep.” (1 Samuel 17:34 ULT)

David referred to himself in the third person as “your servant” and used “his.” He was calling himself Saul’s servant in order to show his humility before Saul.

Then Yahweh answered Job out of a fierce storm and said, “... Do you have an arm like **God’s**? Can you thunder with a voice like **his**?” (Job 40:6, 9 ULT)

God referred to himself in the third person with the words “God’s” and “his.” He did this to emphasize that he is God, and he is powerful.

Sometimes people use the third person instead of “you” or “your” to refer to the person or people they are speaking to.

Abraham answered and said, “Look, I have undertaken to speak to my Lord, even though I am only dust and ashes!” (Genesis 18:27 ULT)

Abraham was speaking to the Lord, and referred to the Lord as “My Lord” rather than as “you.” He did this to show his humility before God.

So also my heavenly Father will do to you, if **each of you** does not forgive **his** brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:35 ULT)

After saying “each of you,” Jesus used the third person “his” instead of “your.”

Translation Strategies

If using the third person to mean “I” or “you” would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider using it. If not, here are some other options.

- (1) Use the third person phrase along with the pronoun “I” or “you.”
- (2) Simply use the first person (“I”) or second person (“you”) instead of the third person.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Use the third person phrase along with the pronoun “I” or “you.”

But David said to Saul, “**Your servant** used to keep **his** father’s sheep.” (1 Samuel 17:34)

But David said to Saul, “**I, your servant**, used to keep **my** father’s sheep.”

- (2) Simply use the first person (“I”) or second person (“you”) instead of the third person.

Then Yahweh answered Job out of a fierce storm and said, “... Do you have an arm like **God’s**? Can you thunder with a voice like **his**?” (Job 40:6, 9 ULT)

Then Yahweh answered Job out of a fierce storm and said, “... Do you have an arm like **mine**? Can you thunder with a voice like **mine**?”

So also my heavenly Father will do to you if **each of you** does not forgive **his** brother from your heart. (Matthew 18:35 ULT)

So also my heavenly Father will do to you if **each of you** does not forgive **your** brother from your heart.

Next we recommend you learn about:

Forms of You ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:15](#)

How to Translate Names

Description

The Bible contains the names of many people, groups of people, and places. Some of these names may sound strange and be hard to say. Sometimes readers may not know what a name refers to, and sometimes they may need to understand what a name means. This page will help you see how you can translate these names and how you can help people understand what they need to know about them.

This page answers the question: *How can I translate names that are new to my culture?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Translate Unknowns ([UTA PDF](#))

Meaning of names

Most names in the Bible have meaning. Most of the time, names in the Bible are used simply to identify the people and places they refer to, but sometimes the meaning of a name is especially important.

For this **Melchizedek**, king of Salem, priest of God Most High, was the one who met Abraham returning from the slaughter of the kings and blessed him. (Hebrews 7:1 ULT)

Here the writer uses the name “Melchizedek” primarily to refer to a man who had that name, and the title “king of Salem” tells us that he ruled over a certain city.

His name first indeed means “king of righteousness,” and then also “king of Salem,” that is, “king of peace.” (Hebrews 7:2b ULT)

Here the writer explains the meanings of Melchizedek’s name and title because those things tell us more about the person. Other times, the writer does not explain the meaning of a name because he expects the reader to already know the meaning. If the meaning of the name is important to understand the passage, you can include the meaning in the text or in a footnote.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- Readers may not know some of the names in the Bible. They may not know whether a name refers to a person or place or something else.
- Readers may need to understand the meaning of a name in order to understand the passage.
- Some names may have different sounds or combinations of sounds that are not used in your language or are unpleasant to say in your language. For strategies to address this problem, see [Borrow Words](#).
- Some people and places in the Bible have two names. Readers may not realize that two names refer to the same person or place.

Examples From the Bible

Then you crossed over the **Jordan** and came to **Jericho**, and the men of Jericho, and the **Amorites** ... fought against you, but I gave them into your hand. (Joshua 24:11 ULT)

Readers might not know that “Jordan” is the name of a river, “Jericho” is the name of a city, and “Amorites” is the name of a group of people.

She said, “Do I really continue to see, even after he has seen me?” Therefore, the well was called **Beer Lahai Roi**. (Genesis 16:13b-14a ULT)

Readers may not understand the second sentence if they do not know that “Beer Lahai Roi” means “Well of the Living One who sees me.”

And she called his name **Moses** and she said, "For out of the water I drew him." (Exodus 2:10b ULT)

Readers may not understand why she said this if they do not know that the name Moses sounds like the Hebrew words "pull out."

Saul was in agreement with his execution. (Acts 8:1a ULT)

But when the apostles, Barnabas and **Paul**, heard of it, they tore their clothing. (Acts 14:14a ULT)

Readers may not know that the names Saul and Paul refer to the same person.

Translation Strategies

- (1) If readers cannot easily understand from the context what kind of a thing a name refers to, you can add a word to clarify it.
- (2) If readers need to understand the meaning of a name in order to understand what is said about it, copy the name and tell about its meaning either in the text or in a footnote.
- (3) Or if readers need to understand the meaning of a name in order to understand what is said about it, and that name is used only once, translate the meaning of the name instead of copying the name.
- (4) If a person or place has two different names, use one name most of the time and the other name only when the text tells about the person or place having more than one name or when it says something about why the person or place was given that name. Write a footnote when the source text uses the name that is used less frequently.
- (5) Or if a person or place has two different names, then use whatever name is given in the source text, and add a footnote that gives the other name.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) If readers cannot easily understand from the context what kind of a thing a name refers to, you can add a word to clarify it.

Then you crossed over the **Jordan** and came to **Jericho**, and the men of Jericho, and the **Amorites** ... fought against you, but I gave them into your hand. (Joshua 24:11 ULT)

You went over the **Jordan River** and came to the **city of Jericho**. The men of Jericho fought against you, along with **the tribe of the Amorites**.

At that hour, certain Pharisees approached, saying to him, "Leave and go away from here, because **Herod** wants to kill you." (Luke 13:31 ULT)

At that hour, certain Pharisees approached, saying to him, "Go and leave here, because **King Herod** wants to kill you."

- (2) If readers need to understand the meaning of a name in order to understand what is said about it, copy the name and tell about its meaning either in the text or in a footnote.

And she called his name **Moses** and she said, "For out of the water I drew him." (Exodus 2:10b ULT)

She called his name **Moses (which sounds like 'drawn out')**, and she said, "For out of the water I drew him."

- (3) Or if readers need to understand the meaning of a name in order to understand what is said about it, and that name is used only once, translate the meaning of the name instead of copying the name.

She said, "Do I really continue to see, even after he has seen me?" Therefore, the well was called **Beer Lahai Roi**. (Genesis 16:13b-14a ULT)

She said, "Do I really continue to see, even after he has seen me?"
Therefore, the well was called **Well of the Living One who sees me**.

(4) If a person or place has two different names, use one name most of the time and the other name only when the text tells about the person or place having more than one name or when it says something about why the person or place was given that name. Write a footnote when the source text uses the name that is used less frequently. For example, Paul is called "Saul" before Acts 13 and "Paul" after Acts 13. You could translate his name as "Paul" all of the time, except in Acts 13:9 where it talks about him having both names.

... a young man named **Saul**. (Acts 7:58b ULT)

... a young man named **Paul** ¹

The footnote would look like:

^[1] Most versions say "Saul" here, but most of the time in the Bible he is called "Paul."

Then later in the story, you could translate this way:

But **Saul**, who is also called **Paul**, was filled with the Holy Spirit; (Acts 13:9)

But **Saul**, who is also called **Paul**, was filled with the Holy Spirit;

(5) Or if a person or place has two names, use whatever name is given in the source text, and add a footnote that gives the other name. For example, you could write "Saul" where the source text has "Saul" and "Paul" where the source text has "Paul."

a young man named **Saul** (Acts 7:58 ULT)

a young man named **Saul**

The footnote would look like:

^[1] This is the same man who is called Paul beginning in Acts 13.

Then later in the story, you could translate this way:

But **Saul**, who is also called **Paul**, was filled with the Holy Spirit; (Acts 13:9)

But **Saul**, who is also called **Paul**, was filled with the Holy Spirit;

Then after the story has explained the name change, you could translate this way.

It came about in Iconium that **Paul** and Barnabas entered together into the synagogue (Acts 14:1 ULT)

It came about in Iconium that **Paul**¹ and Barnabas entered together into the synagogue

The footnote would look like:

^[1] This is the same man who was called Saul before Acts 13.

Next we recommend you learn about:

Copy or Borrow Words ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Introduction to Habakkuk](#); Habakkuk 3:7

Hyperbole

Description

A speaker or writer can use exactly the same words to say something that he means as completely true, or as generally true, or as a hyperbole. This is why it can be hard to decide how to understand a statement. For example, the sentence below could mean three different things.

It rains here every night.

The speaker means this as literally true if he means that it really does rain here every night.

The speaker means this as a **generalization** if he means that it rains here most nights.

The speaker means this as a **hyperbole** if he wants to say that it rains more than it actually does, usually in order to express a strong attitude toward the amount or frequency of rain, such as being annoyed or being happy about it.

This page answers the question: *What are hyperboles? What are generalizations? How can I translate them?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Hyperbole

In hyperbole, a figure of speech that uses exaggeration, a speaker deliberately describes something with an extreme or even unreal statement, usually to show his strong feeling or opinion about it. He expects people to understand that he is exaggerating.

They will not leave **stone upon stone in you**. (Luke 19:44b ULT)

This is an exaggeration. It means that the enemies will completely destroy Jerusalem.

Moses was educated in **all the wisdom of the Egyptians**. (Acts 7:22a ULT)

This hyperbole means that he had learned everything an Egyptian education could offer.

Generalization

This is a statement that is true most of the time or in most situations that it could apply to.

The one who ignores instruction **will have poverty and shame**, but **honor will come** to him who learns from correction. (Proverbs 13:18)

These generalizations tell about what normally happens to people who ignore instruction and what normally happens to people who learn from correction. There may be some exceptions to these statements, but they are generally true.

And when you pray, do not make useless repetitions as **the Gentiles do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words**. (Matthew 6:7)

This generalization tells about what Gentiles were known for doing. Many Gentiles did this. It does not matter if a few did not. The point was that the hearers should not join in this well-known practice.

Even though a hyperbole or a generalization may have a strong-sounding word like “all,” “always,” “none,” or “never,” it does not necessarily mean **exactly** “all,” “always,” “none,” or “never.” It simply means “most,” “most of the time,” “hardly any,” or “rarely.”

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

Readers need to be able to understand whether or not a statement is literally true.

If readers realize that a statement is not literally true, they need to be able to understand whether it is a hyperbole, a generalization, or a lie. (Though the Bible is completely true, it tells about people who did not always tell the truth.)

Examples From the Bible

Examples of Hyperbole

If your hand causes you to stumble, **cut it off**. It is better for you to enter into life maimed ... (Mark 9:43a ULT)

When Jesus said to cut off your hand, he meant that we should **do whatever extreme things** we need to do in order not to sin. He used this hyperbole to show how extremely important it is to try to stop sinning.

The Philistines gathered together to fight against Israel with 3,000 chariots, 6,000 men to drive the chariots, and troops **as numerous as the sand on the seashore**. (1 Samuel 13:5a ULT)

The bolded phrase is an exaggeration for the purpose of expressing the emotion that the Philistine army was overwhelming in number. It means that there were **many, many** soldiers in the Philistine army.

But as his anointing teaches you **everything** and is true and is not a lie, and just as it has taught you, remain in him. (1 John 2:27b ULT)

This is a hyperbole. It expresses the assurance that God's Spirit teaches us about **all things that we need to know**. God's Spirit does not teach us about everything that it is possible to know.

When they found him, they also said to him, "**Everyone** is looking for you." (Mark 1:37 ULT)

The disciples probably did not mean that everyone in the city was looking for Jesus, but that **many people** were looking for him, or that all of Jesus' closest friends there were looking for him. This is an exaggeration for the purpose of expressing the emotion that they and many others were worried about him.

Examples of Generalization

Can **any good thing** come out of Nazareth? (John 1:46b ULT)

This rhetorical question is meant to express the generalization that there is nothing good in Nazareth. The people there had a reputation for being uneducated and not strictly religious. Of course, there were exceptions.

One of them, of their own prophets, has said, "**Cretans are always liars, evil beasts, lazy bellies**." (Titus 1:12 ULT)

This is a generalization that means that Cretans had a reputation to be like this because, in general, this is how Cretans behaved. It is possible that there were exceptions.

A lazy hand causes a person to be poor, but the hand of the diligent person gains riches. (Proverbs 10:4 ULT)

This is generally true, and it reflects the experience of most people. It is possible that there are exceptions in some circumstances.

Caution

- Do not assume that something is an exaggeration just because it seems to be impossible. God does miraculous things.

They saw Jesus **walking on the sea** and coming near the boat. (John 6:19b ULT)

This is not hyperbole. Jesus really walked on the water. It is a literal statement.

- Do not assume that the word “all” is always a generalization that means “most.”

Yahweh is righteous in **all** his ways and gracious in **all** he does. (Psalms 145:17 ULT)

Yahweh is always righteous. This is a completely true statement.

Translation Strategies

If the hyperbole or generalization would be natural and people would understand it and not think that it is a lie, consider using it. If not, here are other options.

- (1) Express the meaning without the exaggeration.
- (2) For a generalization, show that it is a generalization by using a phrase like “in general” or “in most cases.”
- (3) For a hyperbole or a generalization, add a word like “many” or “almost” to show that the hyperbole or generalization is not meant to be exact.
- (4) For a hyperbole or a generalization that has a word like “all,” “always,” “none,” or “never,” consider deleting that word.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Express the meaning without the exaggeration.

The Philistines gathered together to fight against Israel: 3,000 chariots, 6,000 men to drive the chariots, and troops **as numerous as the sand on the seashore**. (1 Samuel 13:5a ULT)

The Philistines gathered together to fight against Israel: 3,000 chariots, 6,000 men to drive the chariots, and **a great number of troops**.

- (2) For a generalization, show that it is a generalization by using a phrase like “in general” or “in most cases.”

The one who ignores instruction will have poverty and shame. (Proverbs 13:18a ULT)

In general, the one who ignores instruction will have poverty and shame

When you pray, do not make useless repetitions as the **Gentiles do**, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words. (Matthew 6:7 ULT)

And when you pray, do not make useless repetitions as the Gentiles **generally** do, for they think that they will be heard because of their many words.

- (3) For a hyperbole or a generalization, add a word like “many” or “almost” to show that the hyperbole or generalization is not meant to be exact.

The **whole** country of Judea and **all** the people of Jerusalem went out to him. (Mark 1:5a ULT)

Almost all the country of Judea and **almost all** the people of Jerusalem went out to him. or:

Many of the country of Judea and **many** of the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

(4) For a hyperbole or a generalization that has a word like “all,” “always,” “none,” or “never,” consider deleting that word.

The **whole** country of Judea and **all** the people of Jerusalem went out to him. (Mark 1:5a ULT)

The country of Judea and the people of Jerusalem went out to him.

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Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:6](#)

Idiom

An idiom is a figure of speech made up of a group of words that, as a whole, has a meaning that is different from what one would understand from the meanings of the individual words. Someone from outside of the culture usually cannot understand an idiom without someone inside the culture explaining its true meaning. Every language uses idioms. Some English examples are:

- You are pulling my leg. (This means, “You are teasing me by telling me something that is not true.”)
- Do not push the envelope. (This means, “Do not take a matter to its extreme.”)
- This house is under water. (This means, “The debt owed for this house is greater than its actual value.”)
- We are painting the town red. (This means, “We are going around town tonight celebrating very intensely.”)

This page answers the question: *What are idioms and how can I translate them?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Description

An idiom is a phrase that has a special meaning to the people of the language or culture who use it. Its meaning is different than what a person would understand from the meanings of the individual words that form the phrase.

He **set his face** to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51b ULT)

The words “set his face” is an idiom that means “decided.”

Sometimes people may be able to understand an idiom from another culture, but it might sound like a strange way to express the meaning.

I am not worthy that you would **come under my roof**. (Luke 7:6b ULT)

The phrase “come under my roof” is an idiom that means “enter my house.”

Put these words **into your ears**. (Luke 9:44a ULT)

This idiom means “Listen carefully and remember what I say.”

Purpose: An idiom is probably created in a culture somewhat by accident when someone describes something in an unusual way. But, when that unusual way communicates the message powerfully and people understand it clearly, other people start to use it. After a while, it becomes a normal way of talking in that language.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- People can easily misunderstand idioms in the original languages of the Bible if they do not know the cultures that produced the Bible.
- People can easily misunderstand idioms that are in the source language Bibles if they do not know the cultures that made those translations.
- It is useless to translate idioms literally (according to the meaning of each word) when the target language audience will not understand what they mean.

Examples From the Bible

Then all Israel came to David at Hebron and said, “Look, we are your **flesh and bone**.” (1 Chronicles 11:1 ULT)

This means, “We and you belong to the same race, the same family.”

■ The children of Israel went out **with a high hand**. (Exodus 14:8b ASV)

This means, "The Israelites went out defiantly."

■ the one who **lifts up my head** (Psalm 3:3b ULT)

This means, "the one who helps me."

Translation Strategies

If the idiom would be clearly understood in your language, consider using it. If not, here are some other options.

- (1) Translate the meaning plainly without using an idiom.
- (2) Use a different idiom that people use in your own language that has the same meaning.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Translate the meaning plainly without using an idiom.

■ Then all Israel came to David at Hebron and said, "Look, we are your **flesh and bone**." (1 Chronicles 11:1 ULT)

■ Look, we all **belong to the same nation**.

■ Then he **set his face** to go to Jerusalem. (Luke 9:51b ULT)

■ He started to travel to Jerusalem, **determined to reach it**.

■ I am not worthy that you would come **under my roof**. (Luke 7:6b ULT)

■ I am not worthy that you should enter **my house**.

- (2) Use an idiom that people use in your own language that has the same meaning.

■ Put these words **into your ears**. (Luke 9:44a ULT)

■ **Be all ears** when I say these words to you.

■ My **eyes grow dim** from grief. (Psalm 6:7a ULT)

■ I am crying my **eyes out**

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Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:5](#); [Habakkuk 2:1](#); [Habakkuk 2:8](#); [Habakkuk 2:10](#); [Habakkuk 2:17](#); [Habakkuk 2:19](#); [Habakkuk 3:2](#); [Habakkuk 3:16](#)

Irony

Description

Irony is a figure of speech in which the sense that the speaker intends to communicate is actually the opposite of the literal meaning of the words. Sometimes a person does this by using someone else's words, but in a way that communicates that he does not agree with them. People do this to emphasize how different something is from what it should be, or how someone else's belief about something is wrong or foolish. It is often humorous.

This page answers the question: *What is irony and how can I translate it?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Then Jesus answered and said to them, "People who are well do not have need of a physician, but those who have sickness. I did not come to call the righteous, but sinners to repentance."
(Luke 5:31-32 ULT)

When Jesus spoke of "righteous people," he was not referring to people who were truly righteous, but to people who wrongly believed that they were righteous. By using irony, Jesus communicated that they were wrong to think that they were better than others and did not need to repent.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

If someone does not realize that a speaker is using irony, he will think that the speaker actually believes what he is saying. He will understand the passage to mean the opposite of what it was intended to mean.

Examples From the Bible

How well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your tradition! (Mark 7:9b ULT)

Here Jesus praises the Pharisees for doing something that is obviously wrong. Through irony, he communicates the opposite of praise: He communicates that the Pharisees, who take great pride in keeping the commandments, are so far from God that they do not even recognize that their traditions are breaking God's commandments. The use of irony makes the Pharisee's sin more obvious and startling.

"Present your case," says Yahweh; "present your best arguments for your idols," says the King of Jacob. **"Let them bring us their own arguments; have them come forward and declare to us what will happen, so we may know these things well. Have them tell us of earlier predictive declarations, so we can reflect on them and know how they were fulfilled."** (Isaiah 41:21-22 ULT)

People worshiped idols as if their idols had knowledge or power, and Yahweh was angry at them for doing that. So he used irony and challenged their idols to tell what would happen in the future. He knew that the idols could not do this, but by speaking as if they could, he mocked the idols, making their inability more obvious, and rebuked the people for worshiping them.

Can you lead light and darkness to their places of work? Can you find the way back to their houses for them? **Undoubtedly you know, for you were born then; "the number of your days is so large!"** (Job 38:20-21 ULT)

Job thought that he was wise. Yahweh used irony to show Job that he was not so wise. The two phrases in bold above are irony. They emphasize the opposite of what they say, because they are so obviously false. They emphasize that Job could not possibly answer God's questions about the creation of light because Job was not born until many, many years later.

Already you are satisfied! Already you have become rich! **You began to reign** apart from us, and I wish you really did reign, so that we also might reign with you. (1 Corinthians 4:8 ULT)

The Corinthians considered themselves to be very wise, self-sufficient, and not in need of any instruction from the Apostle Paul. Paul used irony, speaking as if he agreed with them, to show how proudly they were acting and how far from being wise they really were.

Translation Strategies

If the irony would be understood correctly in your language, translate it as it is stated. If not, here are some other strategies.

- (1) Translate it in a way that shows that the speaker is saying what someone else believes.
- (2) The irony is **not** found in the literal words of the speaker, but instead the true meaning is found in the opposite of the literal meaning of the speaker's words.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Translate it in a way that shows that the speaker is saying what someone else believes.

How well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your tradition! (Mark 7:9a ULT)

You think that you are doing well when you reject God's commandment so you may keep your tradition! **You act like it is good to reject God's commandment** so you may keep your tradition!

I did not come to call **the righteous**, but sinners to repentance. (Luke 5:32 ULT)

I did not come to call **people who think that they are righteous** to repentance, but to call sinners to repentance.

- (2) Translate the actual, intended meaning of the statement of irony.

How well you reject the commandment of God so that you may keep your tradition! (Mark 7:9a ULT)

You are doing a terrible thing when you reject the commandment of God so you may keep your tradition!

"Present your case," says Yahweh; "present your best arguments for your idols," says the King of Jacob. **"Let them bring us their own arguments; have them come forward and declare to us what will happen, so we may know these things well. Have them tell us of earlier predictive declarations, so we can reflect on them and know how they were fulfilled."** (Isaiah 41:21-22 ULT)

'Present your case,' says Yahweh; 'present your best arguments for your idols,' says the King of Jacob. Your idols **cannot bring us their own arguments or come forward to declare to us what will happen** so we may know these things well. We cannot hear them because **they cannot speak** to tell us their earlier predictive declarations, so we cannot reflect on them and know how they were fulfilled.

Can you lead light and darkness to their places of work? Can you find the way back to their houses for them? **Undoubtedly you know, for you were born then; the number of your days is so large!** (Job 38:20-21 ULT)

Can you lead light and darkness to their places of work? Can you find the way back to their houses for them? **You act like you know how light and darkness were created, as if you were there; as if you are as old as creation, but you are not!**

Next we recommend you learn about:

Litotes ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:13](#)

Metaphor

Description

A metaphor is a figure of speech in which someone speaks of one thing as if it were a different thing because he wants people to think about how those two things are alike.

For example, someone might say, “The girl I love is a red rose.”

A girl and a rose are very different things, but the speaker considers that they are alike in some way. The hearer’s task is to understand in what way they are alike.

This page answers the question: *What is a metaphor and how can I translate a Bible passage that has one?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Simile ([UTA PDF](#))

The Parts of a Metaphor

The example above shows us that a metaphor has three parts. In this metaphor, the speaker is talking about “the girl I love.” This is the **Topic**. The speaker wants the hearer to think about what is similar between her and “a red rose.” The red rose is the **Image** to which he compares the girl. Most probably, he wants the hearer to consider that they are both beautiful. This is the **Idea** that the girl and the rose both share, and so we may also call it the **Point of Comparison**.

Every metaphor has three parts:

- The **Topic**, the item being immediately discussed by the writer/speaker.
- The **Image**, the physical item (object, event, action, etc.) which the speaker uses to describe the topic.
- The **Idea**, the abstract concept or quality that the physical **Image** brings to the mind of the hearer when he thinks of how the **Image** and the **Topic** are similar. Often, the **Idea** of a metaphor is not explicitly stated in the Bible, but it is only implied from the context. The hearer or reader usually needs to think of the **Idea** himself.

Using these terms, we can say that a metaphor is a figure of speech that uses a physical **Image** to apply an abstract **Idea** to the speaker’s **Topic**.

Usually, a writer or speaker uses a metaphor in order to express something about a **Topic**, with at least one **Point of Comparison (Idea)** between the **Topic** and the **Image**. Often in metaphors, the **Topic** and the **Image** are explicitly stated, but the **Idea** is only implied. The writer/speaker often uses a metaphor in order to invite the readers/listeners to think about the similarity between the **Topic** and the **Image** and to figure out for themselves the **Idea** that is being communicated.

Speakers often use metaphors in order to strengthen their message, to make their language more vivid, to express their feelings better, to say something that is hard to say in any other way, or to help people remember their message.

Sometimes speakers use metaphors that are very common in their language. However, sometimes speakers use metaphors that are uncommon, and even some metaphors that are unique. When a metaphor has become very common in a language, often it becomes a “passive” metaphor, in contrast to uncommon metaphors, which we describe as being “active.” Passive metaphors and active metaphors each present a different kind of translation problem, which we will discuss below.

Passive Metaphors

A passive metaphor is a metaphor that has been used so much in the language that its speakers no longer regard it as one concept standing for another. Linguists often call these “dead metaphors.” Passive metaphors are extremely common. Examples in English include the terms “table **leg**,” “family **tree**,” “book **leaf**” (meaning a page in

a book), or the word “crane” (meaning a large machine for lifting heavy loads). English speakers simply think of these words as having more than one meaning. Examples of passive metaphors in Biblical Hebrew include using the word “hand” to represent “power,” using the word “face” to represent “presence,” and speaking of emotions or moral qualities as if they were “clothing.”

Patterned Pairs of Concepts Acting as Metaphors

Many ways of metaphorical speaking depend on pairs of concepts, where one underlying concept frequently stands for a different underlying concept. For example, in English, the direction “up” (the Image) often represents the concepts of “more” or “better” (the Idea). Because of this pair of underlying concepts, we can make sentences such as “The price of gasoline is going **up**,” “A **highly** intelligent man,” and also the opposite kind of idea: “The temperature is going **down**,” and “I am feeling very **low**.”

Patterned pairs of concepts are constantly used for metaphorical purposes in the world’s languages because they serve as convenient ways to organize thought. In general, people like to speak of abstract qualities (such as power, presence, emotions, and moral qualities) as if they were body parts, or as if they were objects that could be seen or held, or as if they were events that could be watched as they happened.

When these metaphors are used in normal ways, it is rare that the speaker and audience regard them as figurative speech. Examples of metaphors in English that go unrecognized are:

- “Turn the heat **up**.” More is spoken of as up.
- “Let us **go ahead** with our debate.” Doing what was planned is spoken of as walking or advancing.
- “You **defend** your theory well.” Argument is spoken of as war.
- “A **flow** of words.” Words are spoken of as liquids.

English speakers do not view these as metaphorical expressions or figures of speech, so it would be wrong to translate them into other languages in a way that would lead people to pay special attention to them as figurative speech. For a description of important patterns of this kind of metaphor in biblical languages, please see [Biblical Imagery — Common Patterns](#) and the pages it will direct you to.

When translating something that is a passive metaphor into another language, do not treat it as a metaphor. Instead, just use the best expression for that thing or concept in the target language.

Active Metaphors

These are metaphors that people recognize as one concept standing for another concept, or one thing for another thing. Metaphors make people think about how the one thing is like the other thing, because in most ways the two things are very different. People also easily recognize these metaphors as giving strength and unusual qualities to the message. For this reason, people pay attention to these metaphors. For example,

But for you who fear my name, the sun of righteousness will rise with healing in its wings.
(Malachi 4:2a ULT)

Here, God speaks about his salvation as if it were the sun rising in order to shine its rays on the people whom he loves. He also speaks of the sun’s rays as if they were wings. Also, he speaks of these wings as if they were bringing medicine that would heal his people. Here is another example:

And he said to them, “Go and tell that fox ...” (Luke 13:32a ULT)

Here, “that fox” refers to King Herod. The people listening to Jesus certainly understood that Jesus was intending for them to apply certain characteristics of a fox to Herod. They probably understood that Jesus intended to communicate that Herod was evil, either in a cunning way or as someone who was destructive, murderous, or who took things that did not belong to him, or all of these.

Active metaphors require the translator’s special care to make a correct translation. To do so, you need to understand the parts of a metaphor and how they work together to produce meaning.

Jesus said to them, “I am the bread of life; he who comes to me will not be hungry, and he who believes in me will never be thirsty.” (John 6:35 ULT)

In this metaphor, Jesus called himself the bread of life. The **Topic** is “I” (meaning Jesus himself) and the **Image** is “bread.” Bread was the primary food that people ate in that place and time. The similarity between bread and Jesus is that people need both to live. Just as people need to eat food in order to have physical life, people need to trust in Jesus in order to have eternal life. The **Idea** of the metaphor is “life.” In this case, Jesus stated the central Idea of the metaphor, but often the Idea is only implied.

Purposes of Metaphor

- One purpose of metaphor is to teach people about something that they do not know (the **Topic**) by showing that it is like something that they already do know (the **Image**).
- Another purpose is to emphasize that something (the **Topic**) has a particular quality (the **Idea**) or to show that it has that quality in an extreme way.
- Another purpose is to lead people to feel the same way about the **Topic** as they would feel about the **Image**.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- People may not recognize that something is a metaphor. In other words, they may mistake a metaphor for a literal statement, and thus, misunderstand it.
- People may not be familiar with the thing that is used as an image, and so, not be able to understand the metaphor.
- If the topic is not stated, people may not know what the topic is.
- People may not know the points of comparison that the speaker wants them to understand. If they fail to think of these points of comparison, they will not understand the metaphor.
- People may think that they understand the metaphor, but they do not. This can happen when they apply points of comparison from their own culture, rather than from the biblical culture.

Translation Principles

- Make the meaning of a metaphor as clear to the target audience as it was to the original audience.
- Do not make the meaning of a metaphor more clear to the target audience than you think it was to the original audience.

Examples From the Bible

Listen to this word, **you cows of Bashan**, (Amos 4:1q ULT)

In this metaphor Amos speaks to the upper-class women of Samaria (“you,” the Topic) as if they were cows (the Image). Amos does not say what similarity(s) he intends between these women and cows. He wants the reader to think of them, and he fully expects that readers from his culture will easily do so. From the context, we can see that he means that the women are like cows in that they are fat and interested only in feeding themselves. If we were to apply similarities from a different culture, such as that cows are sacred and should be worshiped, we would get the wrong meaning from this verse.

NOTE: Amos does not actually mean that the women are cows. He speaks to them as human beings.

Yet, Yahweh, you are our father; **we are the clay. You are our potter**; and we all are the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8 ULT)

The example above has two related metaphors. The Topic(s) are “we” and “you,” and the Image(s) are “clay” and “potter.” The similarity between a potter and God is the fact that both make what they wish out of their material.

The potter makes what he wishes out of the clay, and God makes what he wishes out of his people. The Idea being expressed by the comparison between the potter's clay and "us" is that **neither the clay nor God's people have a right to complain about what they are becoming.**

Jesus said to them, "Take heed and beware of **the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees.**"
The disciples reasoned among themselves and said, "It is because we did not take bread."
(Matthew 16:6-7 ULT)

Jesus used a metaphor here, but his disciples did not realize it. When he said "yeast," they thought he was talking about bread, but "yeast" was the Image in his metaphor, and the Topic was the teaching of the Pharisees and Sadducees. Since the disciples (the original audience) did not understand what Jesus meant, it would not be good to state clearly here what Jesus meant.

Translation Strategies

If people would understand the metaphor in the same way that the original readers would have understood it, go ahead and use it. Be sure to test the translation to make sure that people do understand it in the right way.

If people do not or would not understand it, here are some other strategies.

- (1) If the metaphor is a common expression in the source language or expresses a patterned pair of concepts in a biblical language (that is, it is a passive metaphor), then express the **Idea** in the simplest way preferred by your language.
- (2) If the metaphor seems to be an active metaphor, you can translate it literally **if you think that the target language also uses this metaphor in the same way to mean the same thing as in the Bible**. If you do this, be sure to test it to make sure that the language community understands it correctly.
- (3) If the target audience does not realize that it is a metaphor, then change the metaphor to a simile. Some languages do this by adding words such as "like" or "as." See [Simile](#).
- (4) If the target audience would not know the **Image**, see [Translate Unknowns](#) for ideas on how to translate that image.
- (5) If the target audience would not use that **Image** for that meaning, use an image from your own culture instead. Be sure that it is an image that could have been possible in Bible times.
- (6) If the target audience would not know what the **Topic** is, then state the topic clearly. (However, do not do this if the original audience did not know what the Topic was.)
- (7) If the target audience would not know the intended similarity (the **Idea**) between the topic and the image, then state it clearly.
- (8) If none of these strategies is satisfactory, then simply state the **Idea** plainly without using a metaphor.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) If the metaphor is a common expression in the source language or expresses a patterned pair of concepts in a biblical language (that is, a passive metaphor), then express the Idea in the simplest way preferred by your language.

Then, see, one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, came, and when he saw him, **fell at his feet.** (Mark 5:22 ULT)

Then one of the leaders of the synagogue, named Jairus, came, and when he saw him, **immediately bowed down in front of him.**

- (2) If the metaphor seems to be an active metaphor, you can translate it literally **if you think that the target language also uses this metaphor in the same way to mean the same thing as in the Bible**. If you do this, be sure to test it to make sure that the language community understands it correctly.

But Jesus said to them, "He wrote this commandment to you because of your **hardness of heart.**" (Mark 10:5 ULT)

It was because of your **hard hearts** that he wrote you this law.

We made no change to this one, but it must be tested to make sure that the target audience correctly understands this metaphor.

(3) If the target audience does not realize that it is a metaphor, then change the metaphor to a simile. Some languages do this by adding words such as “like” or “as.”

Yet, Yahweh, you are our father; we **are the clay**. You **are our potter**; and we all are the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8 ULT)

And yet, Yahweh, you are our father; we are **like** clay. You are **like** a potter; and we all are the work of your hand.

(4) If the target audience would not know the **Image**, see [Translate Unknowns](#) for ideas on how to translate that image.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you **to kick against a goad**. (Acts 26:14b ULT)

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to **kick against a pointed stick**.

(5) If the target audience would not use that **Image** for that meaning, use an image from your own culture instead. Be sure that it is an image that could have been possible in Bible times.

Yet, Yahweh, you are our father; we are the **clay**. You are our **potter**; and we all are the work of your hand. (Isaiah 64:8 ULT)

“And yet, Yahweh, you are our father; we are the **wood**. You are our **carver**; and we all are the work of your hand.” “And yet, Yahweh, you are our father; we are the **string**. You are the **weaver**; and we all are the work of your hand.”

(6) If the target audience would not know what the **Topic** is, then state the topic clearly. (However, do not do this if the original audience did not know what the topic was.)

Yahweh lives; may **my rock** be praised. May the God of my salvation be exalted. (Psalm 18:46 ULT)

Yahweh lives; **He is my rock**. May he be praised. May the God of my salvation be exalted.

(7) If the target audience would not know the intended similarity between the Topic and the Image, then state it clearly.

Yahweh lives; may **my rock** be praised. May the God of my salvation be exalted. (Psalm 18:46 ULT)

Yahweh lives; may he be praised because he is the rock **under which I can hide from my enemies**. May the God of my salvation be exalted.

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you **to kick against a goad**. (Acts 26:14 ULT)

Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? You **fight against me and hurt yourself like an ox that kicks against its owner’s pointed stick**.

(8) If none of these strategies are satisfactory, then simply state the idea plainly without using a metaphor.

I will make you to become **fishers of men**. (Mark 1:17b ULT)

I will make you to become **people who gather men**. Now you gather fish.

I will make you **gather people**.

To learn more about specific metaphors, see [Biblical Imagery — Common Patterns](#).

"

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:4](#); [Habakkuk 1:7](#); [Habakkuk 1:8](#); [Habakkuk 1:9](#); [Habakkuk 1:11](#); [Habakkuk 1:12](#); [Habakkuk 1:13](#); [Habakkuk 1:15](#); [Habakkuk 1:16](#); [Habakkuk 1:17](#); [Habakkuk 2:2](#); [Habakkuk 2:3](#); [Habakkuk 2:4](#); [Habakkuk 2:5](#); [Habakkuk 2:6](#); [Habakkuk 2:7](#); [Habakkuk 2:9](#); [Habakkuk 2:10](#); [Habakkuk 2:15](#); [Habakkuk 2:16](#); [Habakkuk 2:17](#); [Habakkuk 3:2](#); [Habakkuk 3:4](#); [Habakkuk 3:6](#); [Habakkuk 3:10](#); [Habakkuk 3:11](#); [Habakkuk 3:12](#); [Habakkuk 3:14](#); [Habakkuk 3:15](#); [Habakkuk 3:17](#); [Habakkuk 3:19](#)

Metonymy

Description

Metonymy is a figure of speech in which an item (either physical or abstract) is called not by its own name, but by the name of something closely associated with it. A metonym is a word or phrase used as a substitute for something that it is associated with.

This page answers the question: *What is a metonymy?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

... and **the blood** of Jesus his Son cleanses us from every sin. (1 John 1:7b ULT)

The blood represents Christ's death.

And he took **the cup** in the same way after supper, saying, "**This cup** is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you." (Luke 22:20 ULT)

The cup represents the wine that is in the cup.

Metonymy can be used

- as a shorter way of referring to something
- to make an abstract idea more meaningful by referring to it with the name of a physical object associated with it

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

The Bible uses metonymy very often. Speakers of some languages are not familiar with metonymy and they may not recognize it when they read it in the Bible. If they do not recognize the metonymy, they will not understand the passage or, worse yet, they will get a wrong understanding of the passage. Whenever a metonym is used, people need to be able to understand what it represents.

Examples From the Bible

The Lord God will give to him **the throne** of his father David. (Luke 1:32b ULT)

A throne represents the authority of a king. "Throne" is a metonym for "kingly authority," "kingship," or "reign." This means that God would make him become a king who would follow King David.

Then immediately his **mouth** was opened (Luke 1:64a ULT)

The mouth here represents the power to speak. This means that he was able to talk again.

Who warned you to flee from **the wrath** that is coming? (Luke 3:7b ULT)

The word "wrath" or "anger" is a metonym for "punishment." God was extremely angry with the people and, as a result, he would punish them.

Translation Strategies

If people would easily understand the metonym, consider using it. Otherwise, here are some options.

- (1) Use the metonym along with the name of the thing it represents.
- (2) Use only the name of the thing the metonym represents.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Use the metonym along with the name of the thing it represents.

And he took the cup in the same way after the supper, saying, “**This cup** is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.” (Luke 22:20 ULT)

He took the cup in the same way after supper, saying, “**The wine in this cup** is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you.”

This verse also contains a second metonym: The cup, (representing the wine it contains) also represents the new covenant made with the blood Christ shed for us.

(2) Use the name of the thing the metonym represents.

The Lord God will give him **the throne** of his father David. (Luke 1:32b ULT)

“The Lord God will give him **the kingly authority** of his father, David.” or:
“The Lord God will **make him king** like his ancestor, King David.”

Who warned you to flee from **the wrath** that is coming? (Luke 3:7b ULT)

“Who warned you to flee from God’s coming **punishment**?”

To learn about some common metonymies, see [Biblical Imagery — Common Metonymies](#).

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Referenced in: [Habakkuk 2:9](#); [Habakkuk 2:12](#); [Habakkuk 2:17](#); [Habakkuk 2:20](#); [Habakkuk 3:3](#); [Habakkuk 3:7](#); [Habakkuk 3:13](#)

Parallelism

Description

Parallelism is a poetic device in which two phrases or clauses that are similar in structure or idea are used together. The following are some of the different kinds of parallelism.

- The second clause or phrase means the same as the first. This is called synonymous parallelism.
- The second clarifies or strengthens the meaning of the first.
- The second completes what is said in the first.
- The second says something that contrasts with the first, but adds to the same idea.

This page answers the question: *What is parallelism?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Parallelism is most commonly found in Old Testament poetry, such as in the books of Psalms and Proverbs. It also occurs in Greek in the New Testament, both in the four gospels and in the apostles' letters.

This article will only discuss synonymous parallelism, the kind in which the two parallel phrases mean the same thing, because that is the kind that presents a problem for translation. Note that we use the term "synonymous parallelism" for long phrases or clauses that have the same meaning. We use the term "[doublet](#)" for words or very short phrases that mean basically the same thing and are used together.

In the poetry of the original languages, synonymous parallelism has several effects:

- It shows that something is very important by saying it more than once and in more than one way.
- It helps the hearer to think more deeply about the idea by saying it in different ways.
- It makes the language more beautiful and raises it above the ordinary way of speaking.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

Some languages would not use synonymous parallelism. They would either think it odd that someone said the same thing twice, or, since it is in the Bible, they would think that the two phrases must have some difference in meaning. For them it would be confusing, rather than beautiful. They would not understand that the repetition of the idea in different words serves to emphasize the idea.

Examples From the Bible

Your word is a lamp to my feet
and a light for my path. (Psalm 119:105 ULT)

Both parts of the sentence are metaphors saying that God's word teaches people how to live. That is the single idea. The words "lamp" and "light" are similar in meaning because they refer to light. The words "my feet" and "my path" are related because they refer to a person walking. Walking is a metaphor for living.

You make him to rule over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet (Psalm 8:6 ULT)

Both lines say that God made man the ruler of everything. "To rule over" is the same idea as putting things "under his feet," and "the works of your [God's] hands" is the same idea as "all things."

Yahweh sees everything a person does
and watches all the paths he takes. (Proverbs 5:21 ULT)

The first phrase and the second phrase mean the same thing. There are three ideas that are the same between these two phrases. "Sees" corresponds to "watches," "everything...does" corresponds to "all the paths...takes," and "a person" corresponds to "he."

Praise Yahweh, all you nations;
exalt him, all you peoples! (Psalm 117:1 ULT)

Both parts of this verse tell people everywhere to praise Yahweh. The words 'Praise' and 'exalt' mean the same thing. The words 'Yahweh' and 'him' refer to the same person. The terms 'all you nations' and 'all you peoples' refer to the same people.

For Yahweh has a lawsuit with his people,
and he will fight in court against Israel. (Micah 6:2b ULT)

The two parts of this verse say that Yahweh has a serious disagreement with his people, Israel. These are not two different disagreements or two different groups of people.

Translation Strategies

For most kinds of parallelism, it is good to translate both of the clauses or phrases. For synonymous parallelism, it is good to translate both clauses if people in your language understand that the purpose of saying something twice is to strengthen a single idea. But if your language does not use parallelism in this way, then consider using one of the following translation strategies.

- (1) Combine the ideas of both clauses into one.
- (2) If it appears that the clauses are used together to show that what they say is really true, you could combine the ideas of both clauses into one and include words that emphasize the truth such as "truly" or "certainly."
- (3) If it appears that the clauses are used together to intensify an idea in them, you could combine the ideas of both clauses into one and use words like "very," "completely," or "all."

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Combine the ideas of both clauses into one.

Until now you have dealt deceitfully with me and you have spoken lies to me. (Judges 16:13, ULT)

Delilah expressed this idea twice to emphasize that she was very upset.

Until now you have deceived me with your lies.
Yahweh sees everything a person does and watches all the paths he takes. (Proverbs 5:21 ULT)

The phrase "all the paths he takes" is a metaphor for "all he does."

Yahweh pays attention to everything a person does.
For Yahweh has a lawsuit with his people, and he will fight in court against Israel. (Micah 6:2 ULT)

This parallelism describes one serious disagreement that Yahweh had with one group of people. If this is unclear, the phrases can be combined:

For Yahweh has a lawsuit with his people, Israel.

- (2) If it appears that the clauses are used together to show that what they say is really true, you could combine the ideas of both clauses into one and include words that emphasize the truth such as "truly" or "certainly."

Yahweh sees everything a person does and watches all the paths he takes. (Proverbs 5:21 ULT)

Yahweh truly sees everything a person does.

You make him to rule over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet
(Psalm 8:6 ULT)

You have certainly made him to rule over everything that you have created.

(3) If it appears that the clauses are used together to intensify an idea in them, you could combine the ideas of both clauses into one and use words like “very,” “completely” or “all.”

Until now you have dealt deceitfully with me and you have spoken lies to me. (Judges 16:13, ULT)

All you have done is lie to me.

Yahweh sees everything a person does and watches all the paths he takes. (Proverbs 5:21 ULT)

Yahweh sees absolutely everything that a person does.

Next we recommend you learn about:

Personification ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:10](#); [Habakkuk 2:1](#); [Habakkuk 2:2](#); [Habakkuk 2:5](#); [Habakkuk 2:12](#); [Habakkuk 3:11](#)

Personification

Description

Personification is a figure of speech in which someone speaks of something as if it could do things that animals or people can do. People often do this because it makes it easier to talk about things that we cannot see:

Such as wisdom:

Does not Wisdom call out? (Proverbs 8:1a ULT)

Or sin:

Sin crouches at the door. (Genesis 4:7b ULT)

People also use personification because it is sometimes easier to talk about people's relationships with non-human things such as wealth as if they were relationships between people.

You cannot serve God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24b ULT)

In each case, the purpose of the personification is to highlight a certain characteristic of the non-human thing. As in metaphor, the reader needs to think of the way that the thing is like a certain kind of person.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- Some languages do not use personification.
- Some languages use personification only in certain situations.

Examples From the Bible

You cannot **serve** God and wealth. (Matthew 6:24b ULT)

Jesus speaks of wealth as if it were a master whom people might serve. Loving money and basing one's decisions on it is like serving it as a slave would serve his master.

Does not Wisdom **call** out? Does not Understanding **raise her voice**? (Proverbs 8:1 ULT)

The author speaks of wisdom and understanding as if they were woman who calls out to teach people. This means that they are not something hidden, but something obvious that people should pay attention to.

Translation Strategies

If the personification would be understood clearly, consider using it. If it would not be understood, here are some other ways for translating it.

- (1) Add words or phrases to make the human (or animal) characteristic clear.
- (2) In addition to Strategy (1), use words such as "like" or "as" to show that the sentence is not to be understood literally.
- (3) Find a way to translate it without the personification.

This page answers the question: *What is personification?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Add words or phrases to make the human (or animal) characteristic clear.

Sin crouches at the door. (Genesis 4:7b ULT) — God speaks of sin as if it were a wild animal that is waiting for the chance to attack. This shows how dangerous sin is. An additional phrase can be added to make this danger clear.

Sin is at your door, **waiting to attack you**.

(2) In addition to Strategy (1), use words such as “like” or “as” to show that the sentence is not to be understood literally.

Sin crouches at the door. (Genesis 4:7b ULT) — This can be translated with the word “as.”

Sin is crouching at the door, **just as a wild animal does as it waits to attack a person..**

(3) Find a way to translate it without the personification.

Even the **winds and the sea obey him**. (Matthew 8:27b ULT) — The men speak of the “wind and the sea” as if they are able to hear and obey Jesus, just as people can. This could also be translated without the idea of obedience by speaking of Jesus controlling them.

He even **controls the winds and the sea**.

NOTE: We have broadened our definition of “personification” to include “zoomorphism” (speaking of other things as if they had animal characteristics) and “anthropomorphism” (speaking of non-human things as if they had human characteristics) because the translation strategies for them are the same.

Next we recommend you learn about:

Apostrophe ([UTA PDF](#))

Biblical Imagery — Common Patterns ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 2:5](#); [Habakkuk 2:11](#); [Habakkuk 3:6](#); [Habakkuk 3:10](#)

Rhetorical Question

A rhetorical question is a question that a speaker asks when he is more interested in expressing his attitude about something than in getting information about it. Speakers use rhetorical questions to express deep emotion or to encourage hearers to think deeply about something. The Bible contains many rhetorical questions, often to express surprise, to rebuke or scold the hearer, or to teach. Speakers of some languages use rhetorical questions for other purposes as well.

This page answers the question: *What are rhetorical questions and how can I translate them?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Sentence Types ([UTA PDF](#))

Description

A rhetorical question is a question that strongly expresses the speaker's attitude toward something. Often the speaker is not looking for information at all. Or, if he is asking for information, it is not usually the information that the question appears to ask for. The speaker is more interested in expressing his attitude than in getting information.

But those who stood by said, **"Are you insulting the high priest of God?"**(Acts 23:4 ULT)

The people who asked Paul this question were not asking if he was insulting God's high priest. Rather, they used this question to accuse Paul of insulting the high priest.

The Bible contains many rhetorical questions. These rhetorical questions might be used for the purposes: of expressing attitudes or feelings, rebuking people, teaching something by reminding people of something they know and encouraging them to apply it to something new, or introducing something they want to talk about.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- Some languages do not use rhetorical questions; for them a question is always a request for information.
- Some languages use rhetorical questions, but for purposes that are different or more limited than in the Bible.
- Because of these differences between languages, some readers might misunderstand the purpose of a rhetorical question in the Bible.

Examples From the Bible

Do you not still rule the kingdom of Israel? (1 Kings 21:7b ULT)

Jezebel used the question above to remind King Ahab of something he already knew: he still ruled the kingdom of Israel. The rhetorical question made her point more strongly than if she had merely stated it, because it forced Ahab to admit the point himself. She did this in order to rebuke him for being unwilling to take over a poor man's property. She was implying that, since he was the king of Israel, he had the power to take the man's property.

Will a virgin forget her jewelry, a bride her veils? Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number! (Jeremiah 2:32 ULT)

God used the question above to remind his people of something they already knew: a young woman would never forget her jewelry or a bride forget her veils. He then rebuked his people for forgetting him who is so much greater than those things.

Why did I not die when I came out from the womb? (Job 3:11a ULT)

Job used the question above to show deep emotion. This rhetorical question expresses how sad he was that he did not die as soon as he was born. He wished that he had not lived.

And how has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord would come to me? (Luke 1:43 ULT)

Elizabeth used the question above to show how surprised and happy she was that the mother of her Lord came to her.

Or what man is there among you, of whom his son will ask for a loaf of bread, but he will give him a stone? (Matthew 7:9 ULT)

Jesus used the question above to remind the people of something they already knew: a good father would never give his son something bad to eat. By introducing this point, Jesus could go on to teach them about God with his next rhetorical question:

Therefore, if you who are evil know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give good things to those who ask him? (Matthew 7:11 ULT)

Jesus used this question to teach the people in an emphatic way that God gives good things to those who ask him.

What is the kingdom of God like, and what can I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed that a man took and threw into his garden ... (Luke 13:18b-19a ULT)

Jesus used the question above to introduce what he was going to talk about. He was about to compare the kingdom of God to something. In this case, he compared the kingdom of God to a mustard seed.

Translation Strategies

In order to translate a rhetorical question accurately, first be sure that the question you are translating truly is a rhetorical question and is not an information question. Ask yourself, "Does the person asking the question already know the answer to the question?" If so, it is a rhetorical question. Or, if no one answers the question, did the person who asked it expect to receive an answer? If not, it is a rhetorical question.

When you are sure that the question is rhetorical, then be sure that you understand the purpose for the rhetorical question. Is it to encourage or rebuke or shame the hearer? Is it to bring up a new topic? Is it to do something else?

When you know the purpose of the rhetorical question, then think of the most natural way to express that purpose in the target language. It might be as a question, or a statement, or an exclamation.

If using the rhetorical question would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider doing so. If not, here are other options:

(1) Add the answer after the question. (2) Change the rhetorical question to a statement or exclamation. (3) Change the rhetorical question to a statement, and then follow it with a short question. (4) Change the form of the question so that it communicates in your language what the original speaker communicated in his.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) Add the answer after the question.

Will a virgin forget her jewelry, a bride her veils? Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number! (Jeremiah 2:32 ULT)

Will a virgin forget her jewelry, a bride her veils? **Of course not!** Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number!

Or what man is there among you, of whom his son will ask for a loaf of bread, but he will give him a stone? (Matthew 7:9 ULT)

Or what man is there among you, of whom his son will ask for a loaf of bread, but he will give him a stone? **None of you would do that!**

(2) Change the rhetorical question to a statement or exclamation.

What is the kingdom of God like, and what can I compare it to? It is like a mustard seed. (Luke 13:18-19a ULT)

This is what the kingdom of God is like. It is like a mustard seed ...

Are you insulting the high priest of God? (Acts 23:4b ULT) (Acts 23:4 ULT)

You should not insult God's high priest!

Why did I not die when I came out from the womb? (Job 3:11a ULT)

I wish I had died when I came out from the womb!

And how has this happened to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? (Luke 1:43 ULT)

How wonderful it is that the mother of my Lord has come to me!

(3) Change the rhetorical question to a statement, and then follow it with a short question.

Do you not still rule the kingdom of Israel? (1 Kings 21:7b ULT)

You still rule the kingdom of Israel, **do you not?**

(4) Change the form of the question so that it communicates in your language what the original speaker communicated in his.

Or what man is there among you, of whom his son will ask for a loaf of bread, but he will give him a stone? (Matthew 7:9 ULT)

If your son asks you for a loaf of bread, **would you give him a stone?**

Will a virgin forget her jewelry, a bride her veils? Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number! (Jeremiah 2:32 ULT)

What virgin would forget her jewelry, and what bride would forget her veils? Yet my people have forgotten me for days without number

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Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:12](#); [Habakkuk 2:6](#); [Habakkuk 2:7](#); [Habakkuk 2:13](#); [Habakkuk 2:18](#); [Habakkuk 2:19](#)

Simile

Description

A simile is a comparison of two things that are not normally thought to be similar. The simile focuses on a particular trait the two items have in common, and it includes the words “like,” “as,” or “than.”

This page answers the question: *What is a simile?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

When he saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were troubled and discouraged, **like sheep not having a shepherd**. (Matthew 9:36)

Jesus compared the crowds of people to sheep without a shepherd. Sheep grow frightened when they do not have a good shepherd to lead them in safe places. The crowds were like that because they did not have good religious leaders.

See, I send you out **as sheep in the midst of wolves**, so be as wise **as the serpents** and harmless **as the doves**. (Matthew 10:16 ULT)

Jesus compared his disciples to sheep and their enemies to wolves. Wolves attack sheep; Jesus' enemies would attack his disciples.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper **than any two-edged sword**. (Hebrews 4:12a ULT)

God's word is compared to a two-edged sword. A two-edged sword is a weapon that can easily cut through a person's flesh. God's word is very effective in showing what is in a person's heart and thoughts.

Purposes of Simile

- A simile can teach about something that is unknown by showing how it is similar to something that is known.
- A simile can emphasize a particular trait, sometimes in a way that gets people's attention.
- Similes help form a picture in the mind or help the reader experience what he is reading about more fully.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- People may not know how the two items are similar.
- People may not be familiar with both of the items being compared.

Examples From the Bible

Suffer hardship with me, **as a good soldier** of Christ Jesus. (2 Timothy 2:3 ULT)

In this simile, Paul compares suffering with what soldiers endure, and he encourages Timothy to follow their example.

Just as the lightning flashing from a place under the sky shines to another place under the sky, so will the Son of Man be. (Luke 17:24b ULT)

This verse does not tell how the Son of Man will be like the lightning. But in context we can understand from the verses before it that just as lightning flashes suddenly and everyone can see it, the Son of Man will come suddenly and everyone will be able to see him. No one will have to be told about it.

Translation Strategies

If people would understand the correct meaning of a simile, consider using it. If they would not, here are some strategies you can use:

(1) If people do not know how the two items are alike, tell how they are alike. However, do not do this if the meaning was not clear to the original audience. (2) If people are not familiar with the item that something is compared to, use an item from your own culture. Be sure that it is one that could have been used in the cultures of the Bible. If you use this strategy, you may want to put the original item in a footnote. (3) Simply describe the item without comparing it to another.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) If people do not know how the two items are alike, tell how they are alike. However, do not do this if the meaning was not clear to the original audience.

See, I send you out **as sheep in the midst of wolves**. (Matthew 10:16a ULT) — This compares the danger that Jesus' disciples would be in with the danger that sheep are in when they are surrounded by wolves.

See, I send **you out among wicked people** and you will be in danger from them **as sheep are in danger when they are among wolves**.

For the word of God is living and active and sharper **than any two-edged sword**. (Hebrews 4:12a ULT)

For the word of God is living and active and **more powerful than a very sharp two-edged sword**.

(2) If people are not familiar with the item that something is compared to, use an item from your own culture. Be sure that it is one that could have been used in the cultures of the Bible. If you use this strategy, you may want to put the original item in a footnote.

See, I send you out **as sheep in the midst of wolves**, (Matthew 10:16a ULT) — If people do not know what sheep and wolves are, or that wolves kill and eat sheep, you could use some other animal that kills another.

See, I send you out **as chickens in the midst of wild dogs**.

How often did I long to gather your children together, just **as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings**, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37b ULT)

How often I wanted to gather your children together, **as a mother closely watches over her infants**, but you refused!

If you have faith **as a grain of mustard** ... (Matthew 17:20)

If you have faith even as small **as a tiny seed**,

(3) Simply describe the item without comparing it to another.

See, I send you out **as sheep in the midst of wolves**. (Matthew 10:16a ULT)

See, I send you out among **people who will want to harm you**.

How often did I long to gather your children together, just **as a hen gathers her chickens under her wings**, but you were not willing! (Matthew 23:37b ULT)

How often I wanted to **protect you**, but you refused!

Next we recommend you learn about:

Metaphor ([UTA PDF](#))

Biblical Imagery — Common Patterns ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:9](#); [Habakkuk 1:14](#); [Habakkuk 2:14](#); [Habakkuk 3:14](#)

Synecdoche

Description

Synecdoche is a figure of speech in which a speaker uses a part of something to refer to the whole thing, or uses the whole to refer to a part.

■ **My soul** magnifies the Lord. (Luke 1:46b ULT)

Mary was very happy about what the Lord was doing, so she said “my soul,” which means the inner, emotional part of herself, to refer to her whole self.

■ So **the Pharisees** said to him, “Look, why are they doing that which is not lawful?” (Mark 2:24a ULT)

The Pharisees who were standing there did not all say the same words at the same time. Instead, it is more likely that one man representing the group said those words.

Reasons This Is a Translation Issue

- Some readers may not recognize the synecdoche and thus misunderstand the words as a literal statement.
- Some readers may realize that they are not to understand the words literally, but they may not know what the meaning is.

Example From the Bible

■ Then I looked on all the deeds that **my hands** had accomplished. (Ecclesiastes 2:11a ULT)

“My hands” is a synecdoche for the whole person because clearly the arms and the rest of the body and the mind were also involved in the person’s accomplishments. The hands are chosen to represent the person because they are the parts of the body most directly involved in the work.

Translation Strategies

If the synecdoche would be natural and give the right meaning in your language, consider using it. If not, here is another option:

(1) State specifically what the synecdoche refers to.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

(1) State specifically what the synecdoche refers to.

■ “**My soul** magnifies the Lord.” (Luke 1:46b ULT)

■ “**I** magnify the Lord.”

So **the Pharisees** said to him ... (Mark 2:24a ULT)

■ **A representative of the Pharisees** said to him ...

Then I looked on all the deeds that **my hands** had accomplished. (Ecclesiastes 2:11a ULT)

■ I looked on all the deeds that **I** had accomplished

This page answers the question: *What is a synecdoche, and how can I translate such a thing into my language?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

Figures of Speech ([UTA PDF](#))

Metonymy ([UTA PDF](#))

Biblical Imagery — Common Metonymies ([UTA PDF](#))

Next we recommend you learn about:

Metonymy ([UTA PDF](#))

Biblical Imagery — Common Metonymies ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:13](#); [Habakkuk 1:15](#); [Habakkuk 1:17](#)

Translate Unknowns

While working to translate the Bible, you (the translator) might find yourself asking: “How do I translate words like lion, fig tree, mountain, priest, or temple when people in my culture have never seen these things and we do not have a word for them?”

This page answers the question: *How can I translate ideas that my readers are not familiar with?*

In order to understand this topic, it would be good to read:

[Sentence Structure \(UTA PDF\)](#)

Description

Unknowns are things that occur in the source text that are not known to the people of your culture. The unfoldingWord® Translation Words pages and the unfoldingWord® Translation Notes will help you understand what they are. After you understand them, you will need to find ways to refer to those things so that people who read your translation will understand what they are.

They said to him, “We have nothing here except five loaves of **bread** and two fish.” (Matthew 14:17 ULT)

Bread is a particular food made by mixing finely crushed grains with oil, and then cooking the mixture so that it is dry. (Grains are the seeds of a kind of grass.) In some cultures people do not have bread and do not know what it is.

Reason This Is a Translation Issue

- Readers may not know some of the things that are in the Bible because those things are not part of their own culture.
- Readers may have difficulty understanding a text if they do not know some of the things that are mentioned in it.

Translation Principles

- Use words that are already part of your language if possible.
- Keep expressions short if possible.
- Represent God’s commands and historical facts accurately.

Examples From the Bible

So I will turn Jerusalem into piles of ruins, a hideout for **jackals**. (Jeremiah 9:11a ULT)

Jackals are wild animals like dogs that live in only a few parts of the world. So they are not known in many places.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep’s clothing, but inwardly they are ravenous **wolves**. (Matthew 7:15 ULT)

If wolves do not live where the translation will be read, the readers may not understand that they are fierce, wild animals like dogs that attack and eat sheep.

They offered him wine mixed with **myrrh**, but he did not drink it. (Mark 15:23 ULT)

People may not know what myrrh is and that it was used as a medicine.

... to him who made **great lights** ... (Psalm 136:7a ULT)

Some languages have terms for things that give light, like the sun and fire, but they have no general term for lights.

Your sins ... will be white like **snow**. (Isaiah 1:18b ULT)

People in many parts of the world have not seen snow, but they may have seen it in pictures.

Translation Strategies

Here are ways you might translate a term that is not known in your language:

- (1) Use a phrase that describes what the unknown item is, or what is important about the unknown item for the verse being translated.
- (2) Substitute something similar from your language if doing so does not falsely represent a historical fact.
- (3) Copy the word from another language, and add a general word or descriptive phrase to help people understand it.
- (4) Use a word that is more general in meaning.
- (5) Use a word or phrase that is more specific in meaning.

Examples of Translation Strategies Applied

- (1) Use a phrase that describes what the unknown item is, or what is important about the unknown item for the verse being translated.

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but are inwardly they are **ravenous wolves**. (Matthew 7:15 ULT)

Beware of false prophets, who come to you in sheep's clothing, but **inwardly they are very hungry and dangerous animals**.

"Ravenous wolves" is part of a metaphor here, so the reader needs to know that they are very dangerous to sheep in order to understand this metaphor. (If sheep are also unknown, then you will need to also use one of the translation strategies to translate sheep, or change the metaphor to something else, using a translation strategy for metaphors. See [Translating Metaphors](#).)

"We have nothing here except five **loaves of bread** and two fish." (Matthew 14:17 ULT)

We have nothing here except five **loaves of baked grain seeds** and two fish.

- (2) Substitute something similar from your language if doing so does not falsely represent a historical fact.

Your sins ... will be white like **snow**. (Isaiah 1:18b ULT) This verse is not about snow. It uses snow in a figure of speech to help people understand how white something will be.

Your sins ... will be white like **milk**.

Your sins ... will be white like **the moon**.

- (3) Copy the word from another language, and add a general word or descriptive phrase to help people understand it.

Then they tried to give Jesus wine that was mixed with **myrrh**. But he refused to drink it. (Mark 15:23 ULT) — People may understand better what myrrh is if it is used with the general word "medicine."

Then they tried to give Jesus wine that was mixed with **a medicine called myrrh**. But he refused to drink it.

"We have nothing here except five **loaves of bread** and two fish." (Matthew 14:17 ULT) —
People may understand better what bread is if it is used with a phrase that tells what it is made
of (seeds) and how it is prepared (crushed and baked).

We have nothing here except five loaves of **baked crushed seed bread**
and two fish.

(4) Use a word that is more general in meaning.

I will turn Jerusalem into piles of ruins, a hideout for **jackals** (Jeremiah 9:11a ULT)

I will turn Jerusalem into piles of ruins, a hideout for **wild dogs**

"We have nothing here except five **loaves of bread** and two fish." (Matthew 14:17 ULT)

We have nothing here except five **loaves of baked food** and two fish.

(5) Use a word or phrase that is more specific in meaning.

... to him who made **great lights** ... (Psalm 136:7a ULT)

to him who made **the sun and the moon**

Next we recommend you learn about:

Copy or Borrow Words ([UTA PDF](#))

How to Translate Names ([UTA PDF](#))

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 1:8](#)



unfoldingWord® Translation Words

Version 76

faith

Definition:

In general, the term "faith" refers to a belief, trust or confidence in someone or something.

- To "have faith" in someone is to believe that what he says and does is true and trustworthy.
- To "have faith in Jesus" means to believe all of God's teachings about Jesus. It especially means that people trust in Jesus and his sacrifice to cleanse them from their sin and to rescue them from the punishment they deserve because of their sin.
- True faith or belief in Jesus will cause a person to produce good spiritual fruits or behaviors because the Holy Spirit is living in him.
- Sometimes "faith" refers generally to all the teachings about Jesus, as in the expression "the truths of the faith."
- In contexts such as "keep the faith" or "abandon the faith," the term "faith" refers to the state or condition of believing all the teachings about Jesus.

Translation Suggestions:

- In some contexts, "faith" can be translated as "belief" or "conviction" or "confidence" or "trust."
- For some languages these terms will be translated using forms of the verb "believe." (See: [abstractnouns](#))
- The expression "keep the faith" could be translated by "keep believing in Jesus" or "continue to believe in Jesus."
- The sentence "they must keep hold of the deep truths of the faith" could be translated by "they must keep believing all the true things about Jesus that they have been taught."
- The expression "my true son in the faith" could be translated by something like "who is like a son to me because I taught him to believe in Jesus" or "my true spiritual son, who believes in Jesus."

(See also: [believe](#), [faithful](#))

Bible References:

- 2 Timothy 4:7
- Acts 6:7
- Galatians 2:20-21
- James 2:20

Examples from the Bible stories:

- **5:6** When Isaac was a young man, God tested Abraham's **faith** by saying, "Take Isaac, your only son, and kill him as a sacrifice to me."
- **31:7** Then he (Jesus) said to Peter, "You man of little **faith**, why did you doubt?"
- **32:16** Jesus said to her, "Your **faith** has healed you. Go in peace."
- **38:9** Then Jesus said to Peter, "Satan wants to have all of you, but I have prayed for you, Peter, that your **faith** will not fail."

Word Data:

- Strong's: H0529, H0530, G16800, G36400, G41020, G60660

"

Referenced in: [Habakkuk 2 General Notes](#)

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