
Let the *Hearer* Understand: Translating the Gospel of Mark

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What is the best English translation of the Bible? It is a complicated question. A Bible intended for young readers—for example, the *Contemporary English Version* written at a fourth grade reading level—will necessarily be different from the close to eleventh grade reading level of the *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition* (NRSVue). Considering that over half the adults in the United States only have a sixth grade reading level,¹ does that make the *New International Version* (NIV) or the *Contemporary English Bible* (CEB), which are at about a seventh grade reading level, the “best” translation for general use?

Much more is involved in translating the Bible than the reading level, however. Which Hebrew or Greek texts are the translations based on? Should the translators affirm a self-described Christian “evangelical” commitment like the NIV and *New Living Translation* do? Or should the translation committee reflect a wide range of backgrounds including Jewish or other non-Christian scholars? What about the use of inclusive language? Another important factor that accounts for differences between versions is which translation philosophy is adopted. Translations range from formal equivalence (a “literal,” word-for-word translation) to functional or dynamic equivalence (how the original meaning might be conveyed in modern idiom) to free paraphrase. The differences in translations can be substantial.

Those are all important factors, but it is just as important that translations of the Gospel of Mark reflect that it is a narrative employing a variety of rhetorical devices to persuasively communicate its message. The goal, therefore, is to translate the whole gospel coherently and not just words or verses individually. The recognition of narrative is commonplace now, but *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* was groundbreaking when it appeared in 1982. That book applied narrative criticism to Mark as a literary document. What we have come to realize is that narrative criticism also is crucial for understanding Mark as an oral / aural composition intended for an audience of hearers, an

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acknowledgement that the third edition of the book recognizes.² What this means is that a translation also should be attentive to how it *sounds*.

I find that almost all the major English versions are conceived as primarily literary works and not oriented to aural reception. Bibles today are, of course, printed for a literate audience, but we need to keep in mind that the percentage of those who were literate was very low in antiquity. That means that almost all the early followers in the Christian movement did not read but heard the stories about Jesus or the letters written by Paul. Most English versions, however, obscure oral characteristics of the text in order to make a smoother literary reading. Doing so works better in some instances than others. Hebrews and Luke’s gospel are more intentionally literary works than Paul’s letters or, especially, Mark’s gospel. Another problem is that translating to a specific reading

1. Data from 2024-2025 Literacy Statistics | National Literacy Institute, <https://www.thenationalliteracyinstitute.com/2024-2025-literacy-statistics> (Accessed June 18, 2026). For a comparison of many English versions, cf. “Bible Translation Comparison Chart” at <https://www.bestbiblecommentaries.com/bible-translation-comparison-chart> (Accessed June 18, 2026).

2. David M. Rhoads and Donald Michie, *Mark as Story: An Introduction to the Narrative of a Gospel* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1982). The third edition of this book includes Joanna Dewey as a co-author (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 2012). Cf. pages xi-xii where they discuss the oral / aural aspect.

level tends to “flatten” the translations so that the gospels start sounding very similar.³

I am completing a translation of the Gospel of Mark that tries to preserve its oral / aural character and provides a commentary on my translation choices. We are dealing, of course, with the paradox of focusing on orality when we are working with written texts, but I believe that Mark is well-served by understanding it as a transcription of or as speaker’s notes for an oral performance. So, is it possible and how worthwhile is it for an English translation as a written text to convey an oral background?

There is a significant difference between hearing a spoken word and reading a written text. Socrates (as recorded [!] by Plato in *Phaedrus* 274c–275b) was critical of writing because he claimed it would cause people to be less mindful and weaken genuine memory, would only offer a semblance of truth, and would discourage the kind of dialogue and dialectic he felt was critical for the acquisition of wisdom. Even more is at stake with respect to preaching the gospel. It is my contention that preserving the oral character of Mark’s gospel in the English translation is significant for the intended reception. The gospel is not primarily interested in giving information but is seeking engagement. It does not want the hearer simply to be an objective and detached observer. It wants the hearer to find themselves embedded in the story and to identify with Jesus. A written text works well for an individual to acquire information and to independently process and integrate it. A spoken word, however, creates a relationship between speaker and hearer and encourages interaction and mutual reflection. I do not wish to dismiss the potential impact the private reading of a text can have on a person. I do believe it is a worthwhile and important endeavor, however, that a text—for our purposes here, an English translation—intended for a speaker to deliver to an audience should be aware of and oriented to oral presentation.

What, then, are the rhetorical devices and the oral characteristics of a narrative Greek text, and how might they be conveyed in English translation? We can expect such things as a paratactic style, the use of the historical present or imperfect verbs, a preference for direct speech, dialectical idioms, repetition and resumption, euphony, and chiasmic patterns. The Gospel of Mark displays all these features, and that is why I focus on it.

For example, it is regularly noted that Mark uses εὐθύς = “immediately” 41 times to create a sense of urgency, especially in the opening chapters of the gospel. When the text is performed out

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loud, I reinforce the “immediately” with a snap of my fingers. It is a strong auditory cue for the hearers that establishes the narrative pace. The NRSVue omits translating the word three times and otherwise translates with “immediately” (26 times), “at once” (7 times), “as soon as” (2 times), “just then” (2 times), and “quickly” (1 time). These different wordings may read smoothly in English, but they obscure what a person would hear in the Greek. The more dynamic translation of the CEB does not translate εὐθύς even once, and such an omission has a significant effect on the reception of the text aurally as well as literarily.

Another aspect that is beneficial for oral communication is Mark’s paratactic style. The use of simple connectives allows for a linear, segmented presentation. It first benefits the speaker who in antiquity would likely have memorized the story. The καί = “and” can function somewhat like an “um” and provides them a moment to remember what comes next. It also provides the hearer with a moment to process what is being said.⁴ In addition, using shorter independent clauses, one detail or action after another, also makes it easier for the hearer to follow along. In contrast, with a hypotactic style there may be numerous subordinate clauses, and the hearer needs to listen for or wait for the primary verb in the lengthy sentence in order for it all to make sense.

When I am working in Mark’s gospel, one way I get a sense of how the translation sounds is to compare it to its parallel in Matthew or Luke who both used Mark as a source. I do so because the “literary-izing” of Mark did not start with English translations but already was begun with Mark’s first adopters, Matthew and Luke. As an example of how Mark is edited into a more literary form, consider the scene of Jesus’s baptism in Mark 1:9–11. In Mark’s Greek, apart from the final divine pronouncement, there are five indicative verbs (bolded below) creating five independent clauses. Here is my translation closely following the Greek.⁵

3. Using CoPilot AI, I asked it to estimate the Flesch–Kincaid Readability Tests levels of each of the gospels separately in the NRSVue, NIV, CEB, and CEV. AI results need to be used with some skepticism, but they do appear to confirm each version’s goal and my own sense from reading. E.g., grade levels for the NRSVue: Matthew 11.5; Mark 10.5; Luke 12.0; John 11.0; similarly for the NIV: 8.0; 7.0; 8.5; 8.0. CoPilot was able to estimate a “Difficulty Score” for the Greek of each gospel (on a 100-point scale analyzing vocabulary, clause length, and syntax complexity) with these results: Matthew 55; Mark 35; Luke 80; John 45. This matches my sense of reading the Greek. The thing to note is that Mark and John’s Greek are relatively much simpler, compared to Matthew and Luke, than is reflected in the English versions.

4. There is evidence that using filler words such as “um” can be beneficial in effective oral communication. Cf. Gina Park, “Should you stop saying ‘um’? Here’s what experts said,” updated December 25, 2025, <https://www.cnn.com/2025/12/22/health/filler-words-speech-wellness>. [Accessed June 6, 2025].

5. All translations are my own. The quotations from Mark are drawn from my forthcoming project, *Let the Hearer Understand: A Translation and Performance Guide for Hearing the Gospel of Mark*. (LtHU) When translating Matthew or Luke, I am applying my same,

And so it **happened** in those days ... (*brief pause*) Jesus **came** from Nazareth of Galilee and **was baptized** into the Jordan by John. And immediately, as he was ascending out of the water, he **saw** the heavens being ripped apart and the Spirit like a dove descending into him. And a voice **happened** that came from the heavens: "You, you are my beloved Son; with you I am so delighted!"

In Luke's version of this same incident, there is only one indicative verb that introduces four subordinate infinitive clauses.

And it **happened**, when all the people were baptized, also Jesus, after having been baptized and while praying, that the heaven was opened and that the Holy Spirit descended in bodily form like a dove upon him, and that a voice happened from heaven, "You, you are my beloved Son; with you I am so delighted!"

Try reading both of those aloud as if you were speaking it to someone else. Both use various rhetorical devices to draw attention to the final divine pronouncement. Luke's rendition would have been regarded as a more elevated Greek style, and it is not without its own elegance, but as a single sentence it does require more attention from the hearer. Mark's rendition has a clear sequence that is easier for both the speaker to recall when telling and the hearer to remember when listening.

In spoken English, a paratactic style that frequently uses "and" as a conjunction sounds childish, so it is used much less in written English. In Mark's Greek, *καί* is used 1100 times. As a broad measure of how this plays out in English translations, consider the number of times these versions use "and" in Mark.

- New American Standard Bible (a literal, formal translation): 1053 times
- NRSVue (somewhat literal, formal translation): 795 times
- NIV (promoted as a dynamic translation): 579 times
- CEB (promoted as a dynamic translation): 513 times⁶

Most of the reduction of "and" in the versions is due to omission in order to avoid sounding simplistic. They may read more smoothly, but when speaking the text, the "and" does have a purpose.

The use of the historical present (using a present tense indicative instead of the expected aorist in narratives) is another rhetorical device that adds vividness to a story and draws attention to key

mostly formal, translation principles to make more direct comparisons.

6. Statistics are derived from searches using Accordance Bible software. In my LtHU translation, I use "and" 1132 times, since I regularly translate Mark's aorist circumstantial participles connected to aorist indicative verbs as coordinating circumstantial participles.

moments. In English, we often use it when telling jokes to better engage the hearer.⁷ In Mark, there are about 145 instances of its use. The first time it is used is in 1.12 where, instead of "drove him out," Mark has: "And immediately the Spirit, it **drives** him **out** into the wilderness." Once again, Matthew and Luke 'literary-ize' Mark. Matthew has 78 instances of the historical present but retains only 21 of Mark's. Luke only has about 5 instances and only retains one of Mark's. As for the major English versions, following traditional literary English guidelines, none of them translate a historical present with a present tense verb.⁸ It may be proper English, but by not translating with a present tense, the liveliness of Mark's story, especially when delivered orally, is lost.

We can further see Mark's oral presentation style as compared to a more literary one in the parable of the mustard seed. Again, before turning to see how modern English versions deal with this passage, the oral nature of Mark becomes clear when we compare it to Matthew's recasting of it. Read both out loud and be aware of how each sounds. *See chart below.*

In reporting Jesus' opening to the parable, note Mark's use of subjunctive mood verbs (*ὅμοιωσωμεν* = How could we liken; *θῶμεν* = could we present) in the questions. Just by using a question, the hearer is invited to engage with Jesus' reflection. The use of the subjunctive's uncertainty provides additional space for thinking about a response. In contrast, if an indicative mood verb had been used ("How shall we liken ...? What shall we present ...?"), it would imply that there is a definite answer that the speaker will provide. Matthew, however, avoids a question altogether and uses a declarative statement. Mark's invitation to reflection is changed into Matthew's sharing of information. With Mark, there

Mark 4:30-32 LtHU	Matthew 13:31-32
And <i>Jesus</i> used to say, "How could we liken the kingdom of God? Or with what parable could we present it? ... As a seed! Of mustard! Which, when it's sown on the earth— though it is smallest of all the seeds that are on the earth— and when it's sown, it sprouts up and becomes greatest of all the herbs and forms great branches, so that under its shade the birds of heaven are able to nest."	<i>Jesus</i> put before them another parable, saying, "The kingdom of the heavens is like a mustard seed that someone, having taken it, sowed in his field—which is the smallest of all the seeds— but when it has grown, it is the greatest of herbs and becomes a tree, so that the birds of heaven come and nest in its branches."

7. A typical example is, "This guy **goes** into a bar ..." instead of "This guy **went** into a bar ..."

8. The New American Standard Bible translates historical presents as past tense but indicates such instances with an asterisk. There are a few English translations that do intentionally translate the historical presents with a present tense verb at least most if not all the time: *The New Testament: A Translation* by David Bentley Hart, *Mark: GlossaHouse Illustrated Greek-English New Testament* by Michael W. Halcomb and Fredrick J. Long, *I Tell You, This Is the Way It Is: Engaging the Gospel of Mark in Performance* by Phil Ruge-Jones, *The Gospel of Mark (Scholars Bible)* by Daryl D. Schmidt, *Provoking The Gospel of Mark: A Storyteller's Commentary, Year B* by Richard W. Swanson.

is an interaction between the speaker and hearer. With Matthew, the reader passively receives instruction.

In telling this parable in Mark's rendering, I imagine that there is a pause after the questions of verse 30 to let the hearer think for a moment. The response given in verse 31 then becomes something of a shared insight between the speaker and hearer. Note that this creates some awkward grammar. Verses 31 and 32 do not really compose a proper complete sentence. There is a description of the seed's size which interrupts the telling, and so the phrase, "when it's sown," is repeated to resume the account. I suspect that most English teachers would critique this part as being wordy and repetitious with direction to simplify it. And that is exactly what Matthew does.⁹ Overall, Jesus' parable as recounted by Mark is an engaging story that Matthew has rendered as an objective report.

What do the English versions do when translating the parable as presented in Mark 4:30–32? Here is my LtHU translation again alongside some other major English versions.

LtHU And *Jesus* used to say, "How could we liken the dominion of God? Or with what parable could we present it? ... As a seed! Of mustard! Which, when it's sown on the earth—though it is smallest of all the seeds that are on the earth—and when it's sown, it sprouts up and becomes greatest of all the herbs and forms great branches, so that under its shade the birds of heaven are able to nest."

NASB And He was saying, "How shall we picture the kingdom of God, or by what parable shall we present it? "*It is* like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the soil, though it is the smallest of all the seeds that are upon the soil, yet when it is sown, it grows up and becomes larger than all the garden plants, and forms large branches, with the result that THE BIRDS OF THE SKY can NEST UNDER its shade."¹⁰

NRSVue He also said, "With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable will we use for it? It is like a mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds of the air can make nests in its shade."

NIV Again he said, "What shall we say the kingdom of God is like, or what parable shall we use to describe

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it? It is like a mustard seed, which is the smallest of all seeds on earth. Yet when planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all garden plants, with such big branches that the birds can perch in its shade."

CEB He continued, "What's a good image for God's kingdom? What parable can I use to explain it? Consider a mustard seed. When scattered on the ground, it's the smallest of all the seeds on the earth; but when it's planted, it grows and becomes the largest of all vegetable plants. It produces such large branches that the birds in the sky are able to nest in its shade."

Looking first at the conjunctions, the initial καί is rendered with the simple "and" or with "also" or "again." Those are acceptable translations, but they do obscure the predominance of καί as the primary conjunction in Mark. We also note that the CEB omits the conjunction altogether but uses the verb "continued" to more elegantly—but not formally or orally—make the connection to the previous parable. That observation points to another small detail. The verb used is ἔλεγεν, the imperfect form of the verb for "to say." The default case for narrative is the aorist tense, so the imperfect is a marked tense. The NRSVue and NIV do default to the aorist "he said." The NASB is attentive to the imperfect and translates with "he was saying," a common way of rendering a past progressive sense. My LtHU captures the imperfect sense by envisioning the likely scenario of Jesus telling this parable multiple times. Is this distinction between the imperfect and aorist renderings significant? Not really, but if the goal is engaging the hearer, it is worthwhile preserving Mark's intentional use of the imperfect tense which strikes a more lively, conversational tone compared to the dry, literary convention of "he said."

I highlighted above that Mark's use of the subjunctive mood for presenting Jesus' questions was a strong oral indicator, and it invites the auditors into reflection with Jesus. In the versions, the NASB and NIV render the verbs as simple future tense using "shall," implying a specific answer that Jesus will provide. The CEB has a similar sense but renders with a simple present using "is" and "can." In doing so, it imitates exactly what Luke does in Luke 13.18. The NRSVue oddly uses both a present ("can we compare") and a future ("will we use") which may read well enough but certainly does not reflect Mark's Greek.

When we turn to Jesus' expression of the solution, my LtHU

9. Much more could be said exegetically about this parable as it appears in Matthew, Mark, and Luke, but I am focusing on oral and literary differences. Luke 13:19 omits the detail about the smallness of the seed, and the result is a clear, uninterrupted statement about the mustard seed's growth.

10. Note that the NASB puts "It is" in italics to indicate that these words are not in the Greek text and have been added for clarity. Cf. my discussion below. The use of the capital letters indicates that it is a quotation drawn from the Old Testament, and a footnote provides the references.

reflects the lack of a verb in the Greek. The NASB, NRSVue, and NIV all supply a verbal phrase—"It is"—that allows the translation to fulfill formal English grammar convention. The CEB translates even more loosely with the imperative, "Consider." It certainly is possible in Greek to omit a verb and imply it, especially with a verb of being such as "is." My argument, however, is that translating with "As a seed! Of mustard!" not only makes perfect sense when spoken but is more effective at engaging with the hearers. The use of exclamation points further adds to the liveliness of the declaration that is missed in a flat reading.

In verses 31 and 32, as already noted, the grammar of the Greek is awkward, but we can hear it and easily understand it when spoken. The speaker picks up the topic of the mustard seed with a relative clause ("which ..."), describes it being sown, then recalls the detail about its small size and inserts it as something of an aside, and then resumes the narrative by repeating verbatim the phrase about sowing. (ὅταν σπαρῇ = when it is sown) The LTHU, NASB, and NRSVue closely reflect the Greek. The CEB rewords to create a better complete sentence, but it also, apparently for the sake of variety, uses different words (scattered, planted) to translate σπαρῇ. Doing so adds connotations and obscures the oral cue of repeating the "when it is sown." The NIV decides to thoroughly rework the translation for the sake of smoother reading. It omits the first reference to sowing altogether and creates two independent clauses. It makes for an efficient, grammatically proper reading, but it does not reflect the Greek, nor does it particularly sound like how people talk.

Another important difference between listening to a speaker as compared to reading a text is that a reader can simply look back in the text to confirm something that was recorded earlier. That is not possible with oral communication, so a speaker can help the hearers make connections by providing structures in the discourse and using verbal links and repetitions. Mark's whole gospel is something of a triptych with Jesus' baptism, transfiguration, and crucifixion. Each scene highlights a pronouncement that Jesus is God's son. The baptism and crucifixion each have an explicit verbal cue using the unusual word σχίζω to describe how the heavens or the Temple curtain were "ripped apart." These are the only two times the word is used in Mark, so it behooves a translation to use the same dramatic word in both instances. Most versions do use some form of "torn" both times. The CEB, however, uses different English words to describe how the heavens "split open" and how the Temple curtain was "torn in two." Those word choices are certainly appropriate in context, but it obscures the connection between the two events for hearers or readers. Another example that is clear in the Greek is that the πνεῦμα = "Spirit" descends into Jesus at his baptism, and he ἐξέπνευσεν < ἐκπνέω = "expires," literally the spirit goes out at his crucifixion. English versions translate this latter verb with "gave up the ghost" (KJV), "breathed his last," (NRSVue, NIV), or "died" (NASB, CEB). The versions are not translating incorrectly, but someone hearing or reading in English would miss the connection between the two events.

It is a worthwhile goal to have our English translations reflect as much as possible the "voice" and intent of the Markan narrator so that we can let the hearer understand.

While it is useful to translate word repetitions consistently, translation is not simply a matter of using the same English gloss for a Greek word. Context and English usage does require flexibility in translation. Still, what this means is that what is heard in the Greek is not always heard in the English. One example where it would be helpful to be as consistent as possible is with the word παραδίδωμι which is used 20 times in Mark. The basic idea relates to "handing over" something. Ten times it is used in reference to Judas "betraying" Jesus. It first is used in 1:14, however, when John the Baptizer was "delivered over" to the authorities. In the Greek, what is heard is that John being delivered over foreshadows that Jesus is going to be "delivered over." The word becomes a thematic cue, and we discover further that the Jewish authorities deliver Jesus over to Pilate (15:1,10), that Pilate delivers Jesus to be crucified (15:15), and that Jesus' followers will be delivered over to various trials (13:9, 11, 12). That is, all these instances hold together linking John the Baptizer to Jesus and Jesus to his followers. The NIV, however, says that John was "put in prison," and that Jesus was "betrayed" or "handed over" and that Jesus' followers will be "betrayed" or "handed over" or "arrested." With this example, using "delivered over" or "handed over" consistently will allow the hearer to make the important connection.

Many other examples could be given of how attending to the rhetorical strategies and the oral nature of Mark's Greek gospel provide challenges and opportunities when translating into English. Consider also that Mark himself breaks the narrative curtain in 13:14 and says, "Let the reader understand." There have been numerous proposals for understanding what exactly is intended with this statement,¹¹ but the reader is also a hearer and is responsible for making sure their hearers understand. I am not arguing that there is one translation that solves all the issues. The Word of God is bigger than the words of the Bible. And I am not suggesting that only a Greek scholar reading the Greek text can truly understand. Still, it is a worthwhile goal to have our English translations reflect as much as possible the "voice" and intent of the Markan narrator so that we can let the hearer understand and experience the truth of Jesus' redemptive ministry that Mark wants to communicate and encourage faithfulness in Jesus' followers.

11. Jeffrey Hubbard summarizes many of the possibilities in: "Let the Reader Understand": Ancient Pedagogy and the Social Setting of Mark," *Novum Testamentum* 65.3 (2023): 285–305, <https://doi.org/10.1163/15685365-bja10052>.