

ENGLISH BIBLES And Their Translation from the Original Languages

I. INTRODUCTION

In the last hundred years, versions of the Bible have increased so rapidly that the average reader is confused about which to choose. In addition to the varying reading levels and literary styles of the different translations, the reader often finds himself facing potentially-confusing issues such as "manuscript variations," and basic questions as to why some translations look so different from others.

The purpose of this paper is to examine some of the issues involved in making a translation. This will necessitate a look into the science of textual criticism to find out how we got our present Old Testament and New Testament texts, and also a look into the problems a translator faces.

II. TEXTUAL CRITICISM AND THE BIBLICAL TEXTS

Definition of Textual Criticism

The first problem in translation of the Scriptures is to determine the correct Hebrew or Greek text from which the translating will be done. This is done by the science of textual criticism. Textual criticism is "the study of copies of any written work of which the autograph (the original) is unknown, with the purpose of ascertaining the original text." ¹ It is often called "lower criticism," in contrast to "higher criticism," which deals "with the questions of authorship, date of composition, destination, etc." ²

The Old Testament and Textual Criticism

There are relatively few texts of the Old Testament in existence today (in comparison to New Testament texts). Until about 60 years ago, the best Hebrew texts available were a small group of texts copied by some Jewish scribes, the Masoretes, during the 5th to 10th centuries, A.D. In 1948, and the years following, a very important group of manuscripts, the Dead Sea Scrolls, were discovered. These manuscripts were about 1000 years older than the Masoretic texts. Comparison of these two groups of Old Testament texts shows a substantial agreement, with very few differences, most of which are insignificant errors such as spelling variations. In addition to these Hebrew manuscripts, the Greek Septuagint

¹ Greenlee, J. Harold, Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1964) p. 11.

² Geisler, Norman L., and William E. Nix, A General Introduction to the Bible, (Chicago: Moody Press, 1968) pp. 451, 452.

translation of the Old Testament is also in substantial literal agreement to the Hebrew Masoretic texts. (Some other ancient translations also exist, but the Septuagint is the most significant of them.)

A good explanation for this lack of variants is the fact that the Jews had an "almost superstitious reverence for the Bible."³ They took extreme care in copying the Scripture, having a very large list of rules and regulations to go by.⁴ They would even destroy any copy they were making, that did not perfectly match the manuscripts that were being copied.

Therefore, we have few Old Testament texts, but they are good copies of the autographs (the originals). Because of this agreement of manuscripts, there seems to be little argumentation over the critical text of the Old Testament.⁵ There is some tendency, today, for translators to give more consideration to the various ancient translations, than there has been in the past. But even this does not result in many significant variations.

The New Testament and Textual Criticism

Background Information

There are a great number of Greek New Testament manuscripts. The earliest copies were done on papyrus, which was made by gluing together, in opposite directions, strips of pith cut from the heart of the papyrus reed. Vellum and parchment, made from animal skins, became prominent in the 4th century. The writing style of the earlier manuscripts was in a printed form similar to capital letters, called uncials. The letters were written together without breaks and with very little punctuation. Eventually, a form of writing was developed, called minuscule. It consisted of smaller letters in a running hand, much like cursive letters, today. Punctuation was now beginning to be used and eventually spaces were placed between words. In general, the minuscules are of a later date than the uncials.

Today we have about 125 papyri fragments (2nd-3rd century), over 300 uncials (4th-9th century), and nearly 2900 minuscules (9th-15th century). In addition to these, we have over 35,000 quotations of the New Testament (not always word-for-word) and various other writings (many of late origin) containing passages of scripture.

The Treatment of Errors by Textual Criticism

The main problem in textual criticism lies in determining the true text of the New Testament. The "rules" used by the Jews in copying and proofreading the Old Testament were, for the most part, not used in copying the New Testament. Many errors crept into the copies made of the New Testament. Each time a

³ Ibid., p. 252.

⁴ Ibid., p. 240-242.

⁵ The critical text is "an edited text of the Bible which attempts, by critical comparison and evaluation of all the manuscript evidence, to most closely approximate what is in the autographs..." In contrast the Textus Receptus, or Majority text, "is the Greek text presumed to underlie the Authorized Version of 1611 (the King James Version). This text...is based on few early manuscripts and is opposed by...those who accept a 'critical text'." Geisler and Nix, pp. 450, 454.

text was copied there was the possibility of adding a mistake to the text or (if the scribe had several texts on hand to examine) of removing mistakes already present in the text.

The great majority of these errors are just mere accidents, and are quite obvious. The scribe might have incorrectly read the manuscript or misspelled the word. Sometimes he missed a line (when two were almost identical), or copied a line twice. Sometimes a note in the margin might be thought of as part of the text or as a correction.

Deliberate changes have also occurred. Sometimes rough Greek expressions were "smoothed out." Parallel passages may be harmonized (for example: The Lord's Prayer in Matthew and Luke), or quotations of Old Testament passages may be changed to agree with the passage as found in the Old Testament. Sometimes, if a scribe found two variants of one passage, he might copy both. For the most part, however, these changes "are often quite inconsequential as far as the meaning is concerned and do not affect a translation into a different language."⁶ Very few if any of the errors--deliberate or accidental--have much significance.⁷

Determination of the Original Text

To find the "original" text, textual critics examine the manuscript in the light of both external and internal evidence. This evidence can be summarized as follows:⁸

1. The older reading is to be preferred.
2. The more difficult reading is to be preferred.
3. The shorter reading is to be preferred.
4. The reading which best explains the variants is to be preferred.
5. The reading with the widest geographical support is to be preferred.
6. The reading which most conforms to the style and diction of the author is to be preferred.
7. The reading which reflects no doctrinal bias is to be preferred.

Note that these rules are generalizations. Others factors may also be considered, if relevant. All of the evidence must be considered.

Textus Receptus and the Critical Text

During the time when the Latin Vulgate had become the "official Bible," the study of Greek diminished. However, in the 15th century, about fifty years after the printing press was invented, the study of Greek was revived. In a few years Erasmus published a Greek New Testament, using the only Greek texts he had available. This text "which was later the basis for the...Textus Receptus, was not based on early manuscripts, not reliably edited, and consequently not trustworthy."⁹ (This word "trustworthy" is in

⁶ Ladd, George Eldon, The New Testament and Criticism, (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1967) p. 69.

⁷ For a good treatment of various types of errors, see pp. 63-74 (Ladd). Also, Geisler and Nix, pp. 360-370.

⁸ Geisler and Nix, pp. 369-370.

⁹ Ibid., p. 384.

reference to technical details related to the manuscripts, not to the accuracy of the over-all message conveyed in those manuscripts.) The Textus Receptus is presumed to underlie the King James Version.

The two texts considered most important by textual critics are: 1) Codex Vaticanus, a manuscript "hidden" in the Vatican Library four hundred years before scholars were allowed to study it (1889-90). 2) Codex Sinaiticus, a manuscript found in 1859 in a monastery on Mount Sinai. Both of these manuscripts are, of the 4th century and are very important in determining the true text of the New Testament.

Most scholars today are in favor of the Critical text, which is based on the earlier manuscripts. However, there are some who do favor the Majority text (Textus Receptus) and have argued in its favor. We shall look at the three most important arguments.

Proponents of the Critical text show that the *oldest* manuscripts do not support the Majority text. The Critical text is based upon about 10% of the manuscripts--which includes the majority of uncials. The other 90% of the manuscripts agree with the Majority text, but most of these are minuscules which are of late origin. On the other hand, proponents of the Majority text say the oldest manuscripts come mainly from Egypt, where "the climate favors the preservation of ancient texts in a way that the climate of the rest of the Mediterranean world does not." ¹⁰ Therefore, they say, one would naturally not find many old manuscripts that *didn't* agree with the text prevalent in Egypt. (Note: Though some of the most complete ancient manuscripts may have been found in Egypt, portions of ancient New Testament manuscripts, both Uncials and Papyri, have been found in many locations.)

Another argument against the Majority text is that it is a revised and hence, secondary, form of the Greek text. Those favoring the Majority text argue: 1) its origination cannot be explained, 2) the text is "relatively, uniform in its general characteristics with comparatively low amounts of variants between its major representatives," ¹¹ and, 3) its dominance cannot be explained.

Finally, it is said that the readings of the Majority texts are repeatedly inferior to those of the early manuscripts. This claim is answered by Hodges, who says:

...when the whole problem of textual criticism is reduced to a series of arguments about the relative merits of this reading over against that reading, we have reached an area where personal opinion--and even personal bias--can easily determine one's decision. ¹²

Thus it is with most of the arguments. It seems to be one "fact" against another. However after trying to examine the facts for validity, sorting out the dogma, etc., the author has come to the conclusion that in general, the Critical text is probably the best. It has definitely proved correct in many areas. However, one must be careful about saying that some specific text is true unless there is great evidence for it, because textual criticism is subjective in many areas.

¹⁰ Hodges, Zane C., "The Greek Text of the King James Version," Bibliotheca Sacra, CXXV, (October 1968) p. 337.

¹¹ Ibid., p. 341.

¹² Ibid., p. 342-343.

Although it can be called a science because it deals with objective facts and well-established principles, textual criticism cannot be considered a pure objective science, for at many points, as in the problem of the ending of Mark, judgments must be made, hypotheses formulated, and various possibilities debated.¹³

Concerning the Textus Receptus, we can say that "The T.R. is not a 'bad' or misleading text, either theologically or practically. Technically, however, it is far from the original text."¹⁴

Despite what conclusion one comes to about the Critical text and the Majority text, we can be happy to say that in spite of differences, "the variant readings which significantly affect the sense of a passage are less than one-half of 1 percent of the New Testament, and none of these affect any basic doctrine of the Christian faith."¹⁵

Although few modern scholars seriously defend the superiority of the Majority text,

it should be pointed out that there is no substantial difference between it and the critical text. Their differences are merely technical, not doctrinal, for the variants are doctrinally inconsequential. Nevertheless, the "critical" readings are often exegetically helpful to Bible students. Thus, for all practical purposes, both texts convey the *content* of the autographs, even though they are separately garnished with their own minor scribal and technical differences.¹⁶

III. TRANSLATING THE SCRIPTURES

Problems of the Translator

Once the text is determined, the next group of problems is in translating the text. The problems a translator has are many. He must adapt the language from one culture to another. Some portions of the text being translated are ambiguous, so the translator has to decide whether he should try to make it less ambiguous or leave it the way it is. He has to determine where to put footnotes, to show a more literal reading, or an equivalent rendition of the word being translated. The translator has to worry about the loss of meaning that so often occurs since there are no exact equivalents between words in different languages. The style he writes in is also important because languages are always changing with time. It is not possible to get "timeless English," but rather the translator's language is only "perfect" for the period he is

¹³ Ladd, p. 74.

¹⁴ Greenlee, p. 72.

¹⁵ Geisler and Nix, p. 375.

¹⁶ Ibid., pp. 392-393. (Emphasis is theirs.)

living in. He has to work with many other problems such as what to do with idioms and figures of speech, grammar and syntax and at times even exegesis.^{17, 18}

Another major problem faced by Bible translators is *how* the Bible is to be translated. There are two basic methods of this: by Formal Equivalence and by Dynamic Equivalence.

Dynamic Equivalence is a counterpart to a Formal Equivalence. A Formal Equivalence seeks to transfer the source language into the receptor language by a one to one transference of letters, grammar, and syntax in so far as possible. It often becomes quite literal. Dynamic Equivalence attempts to transfer meaning for meaning so it is less concerned with formal structure. Instead, there is a conscious effort to produce in the receptor audience the same effect as was originally produced in the source audience.¹⁹

According to the Bible, the very words of Scripture are inspired.²⁰ This raises the question: Can Dynamic Equivalence be legitimately used in translating the Bible and still be considered a true translation? In answering this, different translators have arrived at varying conclusions - at times (not always) influenced by their view on the issue of inspiration. The New American Standard Bible emphasizes Formal Equivalence as much as possible, using Dynamic Equivalence only when the literal reading is "unacceptable" to English readers. In these instances, it places the literal reading in the margin.²¹ Other versions, such as Today's English Version (Good News for Modern Man) emphasize Dynamic Equivalence.²² Still others take more freedom in smoothing out translation difficulties, or inserting opinion or commentary into the text - resulting in a paraphrase, rather than a true translation. In such a case, these two methods of Equivalence may be less-strictly followed.

In the last 25 years, numerous variations of these two main perspectives have been developed. The majority of them will range somewhere on the continuum between these two perspectives.

¹⁷ Williams, Robert J., The Science of Translating the Greek New Testament into English, (A dissertation from Dallas Theological Seminary) November 1968.

¹⁸ Exegesis is the critical examination or exposition of a text. The goal is to determine what the *author* is saying--not what someone else wants to believe he is saying.

¹⁹ Ibid., p. 83, footnote.

²⁰ Technically, the modern concept of "word" did not exist when Scripture was originally written, for at that time, text was comprised of an unbroken string of letters (not "words"). Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that the *message* of Scripture is inspired ("God-breathed"). For further information about this issue, see: Hinks, Dennis, The Word "WORD" and the Issue of Manuscript Variations (<http://www.journal33.org/bible/html/word.htm>, 2004).

²¹ Lockman Foundation, ed., New American Standard Bible, Carol Stream: Creation House, Inc., 1973, pp. vii-viii.

²² Broadman Press, ed., What Bible Can You Trust? (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1974) p. 66.

Goals of a Translator

In light of these problems, the goal of a translator is usually very high. Although no translator is capable of completely fulfilling all the goals, he tries to get as close to doing so as is humanly possible. The goal of a translator of the Bible will vary from person to person; however, in general, most would have approximately the same goals. The fourfold aim of the Amplified Bible is:²³

1. It should be true to the original languages.
2. It should be grammatically correct.
3. It should be understandable to the masses.
4. It should give the Lord Jesus Christ his proper place which the Word gives him. No word will be personalized.

Translations emphasizing Formal Equivalence would agree for the most part with this. Ones emphasizing Dynamic Equivalence might try to be more true to the *meaning* of the original language, than to the words themselves.

The merits of any translation can be judged on many criteria, such as accuracy in translation, intelligibility, and readability. Phillips gives three tests he considered a translation must pass, before it can be classified as a good translation:

The first is simply that it must not sound like a translation at all...the second test [is] that a translator does his work with the least possible obtrusion of his own personality. The third...is that of being able to produce in the hearts and minds of his readers an effect equivalent to that produced by the author upon his original readers.²⁴

Certainly a translation should come close to meeting the goals of the translator.

The Issue of Translation vs. Paraphrase

A translation tries to express, as close as possible, the exact meaning of the original language. In contrast, a paraphrase tends to contain more of the viewpoint of its author - including his opinion, in difficult or ambiguous passages. Because of this, a paraphrase tends to be less accurate than a translation, and is not the best choice for a serious study of the Bible. (It may even be based on an already-made *translation*, rather than on copies of the original manuscripts.)

On the other hand, a paraphrase may be easier to read than a translation, because it tends to have more freedom of expression in the English language (often having a greater number of modern colloquial expressions). Because of this, it may be of value, if one is mainly interested in a general survey of Bible content (without too much focus on the specific details).

²³ Ibid., p. 60.

²⁴ Ibid., p. 53.

IV. CHOOSING AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Why So Many Translations?

In many languages, there is only one translation to choose from. In the English language, there are so many options, that it can become quite confusing. More than fifty English translations have been made in just this last century!

There are several reasons for this large number.

Basic Translation Issues

The very nature of translating from one language to another makes it impossible to produce a translation that is totally perfect in every way. The technical issues related to translating - both the manuscript variations, and the issue of formal vs. dynamic equivalence - will result in a variety of potential ways to say what is being translated. We need not fear this fact, though, for most translations, if carefully done, will communicate the same basic message.

Differences in the Translator's Perspective

Different translators have differing theological perspectives, which influence, to a degree, parts of the text. This is not always a serious matter, but it does provide the potential for variation between translations. If a sentence can be translated in two different *legitimate* ways, one's interpretation of that text will determine what he believes the writer is trying to say. A good translation will try to minimize bias, but if either of two English words can be used to translate the same Greek word, the translator will *have* to pick one of them! (In some translations, the alternative word or phrase may be mentioned in a footnote.)

On the other hand, a translator's basic perspective on *the Bible itself* can be a more serious issue. If a translator doesn't believe that the Bible is inspired - the "God-breathed" message from God, totally free from error - he may be less inclined to emphasize accuracy in his translation. If he considers it to be nothing but an "inspiring" compilation of human opinions, he may take the liberties to "correct" anything he thinks should be different.

Financial Issues

There is another, more "pragmatic" reason for many translations: People *buy* Bibles! This can mean profits for a publishing company. Because of this, a publisher will sometimes *pay* scholars to make a translation.

Translations Made for a Specific Purpose

Some translations have a specific purpose, such as targeting a specific reading level or style, or focusing on a specific group of people (such as, "inner city youth" or "people who use English as their secondary language"). Paraphrases may also be geared for specific groups.

Making Your Decision

It is not the purpose of this paper to tell the reader which translation to choose, but to provide some of the background information that will (hopefully) enable him to make a more-informed decision. The reader is encouraged to compare translations and find out something about the translators' perspectives on these issues - especially their perspectives on the nature of the Bible itself.

Keep in mind the differences between translations and paraphrases. A paraphrase may be an acceptable choice, if one's purpose is just to get a general survey of the content of the Bible. Yet since it is not a true translation, it is *not* the best choice for a serious study of the meaning of the text.

If a person is planning to use his Bible with others (such as in a group study), he may wish to consider the translations that others in the group may be using. Yet he should also remember that individual preference *is* a legitimate consideration.

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