

Translations – from “How We Got the Bible”

By: Sid Litke, Th.M – March 18th, 2008

Introduction

Some people have the mistaken notion that the Bibles we have today are unreliable because of constant retranslation. But the translations we have today are not the end of a long chain of translation. They are translated directly from Hebrew (O.T.) and Greek (N.T.) manuscripts.

Not:
Hebrew → Greek → Latin → German → English

But:
Hebrew → English
Greek → English

Actually the translation process has, for the most part, produced improved modern Bibles in several ways.

- a) Better original texts from the science of textual criticism: By studying and comparing the many available Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, scholars are able to determine the original as accurately as possible. This has given us better Hebrew and Greek originals from which to translate into English.
- b) Better understanding: Recent scholarship has helped us to better understand various Bible terms in light of Bible culture.
- c) Better Readability: Modern translations put the Bible into a more readable form.

I. Definitions of terms

A. Translation – A translation is a rendering of the Bible in a language different than the one in which it was written. A translation is intended to be as literal as possible and still be easily read.

1. Versions – Versions are the various translations of the Bible within one modern language.

Example: English Versions

King James Version, New International Version, NET Bible etc.

2. Version Revisions – Some modern versions could also be called “revisions” because they are largely based on a previous version, which has been updated.

E. Comments

1. Since neither translations nor paraphrases are exactly literal, there will always be a degree of “interpretation” in them. That is, to put the Greek or Hebrew words and phrases into readable English, the translator has to decide to some degree what each term means. Paraphrases have more “interpretation” than translations. That makes paraphrases easier reading because it seems everything is explained. But for that reason, they also will be less reliable, because you only know what the person doing the paraphrase thought a particular verse or phrase means. So it is best to stick with translations for most study and reading. Modern translations are very readable and yet they allow the reader to draw more of his own conclusions when the meaning is vague. Paraphrases are valuable for younger readers and perhaps for reading through large portions at a time for getting the “big picture”.
2. Versions and paraphrases themselves are not “inspired” by God. Some ultra-conservative Christian groups wrongly suggest that the King James Version has special authority as a version over all the others. It is true that the KJV has had the greatest impact of any translation and for the longest time (1611 through the present). But there is no special divine authority attached to it over others.
3. It is also true that some versions have misleading portions because they were done by a cult (New World Translation – Jehovah’s Witnesses). Other versions have certain renderings that are controversial because they were done by scholars that do not have an evangelical perspective (Revised Standard Version – a more liberal biblical scholarship – endorsed by the National Council of Churches; Douay Version and the New American Bible – Catholic scholars, etc.).
4. Ultimately, the reliability of a particular version depends not on some special authority from God but upon the accuracy, knowledge, and spiritual integrity of the scholars doing the translation.

II. History of Translations

A. Ancient Translations

1. Septuagint – The Septuagint is a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament made in the 2nd or 3rd Century B.C. Its purpose was to provide Greek speaking Jews with Scriptures in the common language. Jesus and the apostles used and quoted the Septuagint. In the 1st-3rd centuries A.D. various revisions were made to the Septuagint to correct and improve it.
2. Early Bibles – As Christianity spread to various areas and language groups ([Act 2:9-11](#)) Christians needed Bibles in their languages.

- a. Syriac (Aramaic) Translations – Aramaic is a language similar to Hebrew that replaced the older traditional Hebrew. The Jews of Jesus’ time probably spoke Aramaic. So Jews in nearby Syria needed the Aramaic scriptures. As Christianity spread through central Asia, India and even China, the Syriac translation was used.
- b. Egyptian (Coptic), Ethiopic, Gothic (Germanic), Armeneah, Georgia (in Russia), Arabic Translations, etc. – As Christianity spread to these areas in the first 500 to 700 years, various translations were made and revised.
- c. Comment: At first the Old and New Testaments were not all bound together. It took a while to even gather and recognize which books were accepted as inspired in both Testaments (see Canonization). Eventually, however, complete Bibles were available in the language discussed above.

3. Latin Versions – Greek was the major language in Rome until the third century A.D., but Latin, the “military” language, was emerging as the common language in many areas in the Roman Empire. After some early Latin translation efforts, St. Jerome, in A.D. 382, was commissioned by the bishop of Rome to translate the scriptures. His translations became the unofficial standard text of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages.

At the Council of Trent (1546-63), the Roman Catholic Church officially made it the standard text. Its quality is best in the Old Testament (excluding the Apocrypha which Jerome did not like).

B. English Translations

1. Between A.D. 450 and 1100, several partial translations were made into English.
2. John Wycliffe is called the “Morningstar of the Reformation” for his opposition to the papacy and his commitment to the authority of scripture. He began the first complete translation of the Scriptures into English. The New Testament was published in 1380 and the Old Testament in 1388 (completed by others after his death in 1384).
3. William Tyndale (c.1492-1536) produced the first printed portions of the English Bible. Miles Coverdale (1488-1569) produced the first complete printed English Bible. They used the printing press invented in 1450 by Johannes Gutenberg.
4. King James I of England appointed 54 biblical scholars to produce a new translation of the Bible in 1604. Six groups worked separately and then met together to critique each other’s work. In 1611 the work was complete, giving the English-speaking world the standard Bible used for over 3 centuries.

C. Translations for the world

The Bible is still being translated constantly around the world. Wycliffe Bible Translators is a mission agency devoted specifically to that task. New Tribes Mission is also involved in doing much pioneer Bible translation work. A 2003 study by Wycliffe counted 6,809 existing languages in the world. Here are some of their key statistics:

405	Have complete or adequate Bibles
1034	Have complete or adequate New Testament
883	Have only partial portions translated
1500+	Have translation projects in process by various organizations
3000+	May need translation

From: <https://bible.org/seriespage/translations>

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