

## Are New Bible Translations Necessary

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One of the most significant developments within the Christian Church today, especially as it has come to affect the person in the pew, has been the emergence of new translations of the Bible. Some individuals have welcomed the new versions with open arms; others have found them threatening to their faith. Lying at the heart of the Christian's faith is the commitment to the Bible as the Word of God. But today one almost needs to ask, "Which Bible?" In this article, we will address some of the most frequently asked questions regarding Bible translations.

Before we discuss the basic questions often asked, we must begin by making clear some very fundamental facts concerning the Bible and its translations:

- a)** The Bible was originally written in a language other than English. Although this may seem trite to some, it is surprising how many people forget (or perhaps have never known) that Moses and Jesus and Paul did not speak English. Rather, they spoke the languages of their time and culture. Primarily, the Old Testament was written in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. Many of the examples we cite will be taken from the Greek as used in the New Testament.
- b)** None of the original manuscripts of the biblical writers are known to exist today. When scholars go to translate the New Testament, for example, into a given language, they need to rely on a Greek Text assembled from *copies* of the original writings. Some of these copies are only portions of individual Bible books; others are collections of several New Testament books. Some of the copies (manuscripts) are fairly close to the time of the original writings; others are rather far removed.
- c)** Every Bible in any language other than the original, is merely a translation. This is true regardless of how old or how recent it may be, or how widely it has been accepted.

Translations are merely the work of *fallible* men attempting to place the message of an *infallible* God into the language of a given people.

**d)** Every translation of the Bible (whether into English or Spanish or any other language) involves, by the very nature of the translation, some interpretation on the part of the translators, and thus may not express the message of the original in a complete and total sense. Often there are shades of meaning in the text being translated that just simply cannot be expressed in the same way in another language.

With these fundamental facts as a background, we are now ready to address the common questions often asked regarding the emergence of the new translations.

## 1. WHAT IS A BIBLE TRANSLATION?

To “translate” is simply to attempt to say in one language, that which was said in another. In reference to the Scriptures, it is the attempt to take the Word of God, as written in the Hebrew and Greek languages, and convey that Word clearly and faithfully in the language common to the people for whom the translation is being made. This very act is necessary because relatively few Christians know anything about the ancient languages, and even fewer of us are skilled enough in them to be able to accurately convey their meaning in our language. Translation is an extremely difficult and meticulous science, requiring great linguistic skills and a thorough knowledge of the cultures and mind-sets of the biblical writers. Unless one is a rare individual who has a working knowledge of Greek and Hebrew and can *freely* move between his native tongue and the biblical languages, he is fully dependent upon a translation.

As the process of translation occurs, various judgments must be made concerning how to best represent the original meaning in the current language. Anyone who speaks more than one language knows firsthand the difficulty in conveying fully into one language the meaning of a statement made in another. This is complicated by the fact that sometimes English has no direct equivalent for a Hebrew or Greek word. Or, perhaps a word in Greek may carry several shades of meaning and the translator must decide which shade to represent in a given setting. (An example of this can be seen in the Greek word *peiramos* which carries both the idea of *temptation* and *testing*— two concepts which are quite different in our way of thinking. When the translator encounters “peiramos” in the Greek, a decision must be made regarding which of these two meanings might have been in the mind of the writer. Which meaning is chosen, is a judgment of interpretation, and may or may not be correct).

Another barrier between us and the original manuscripts of the Bible is the cultural gap. We live in a world which is far removed and vastly different from the world of

both the Old and New Testaments. This gap is one which is keenly felt in the process of translation. For example, people today (unless taught otherwise) will have no idea what the *denarius* (a unit of money), or *mina* (a unit of weight), or *omer* (a unit of dry measure) refers to. Should the translator use these words, or should he replace them with equivalents in his culture?

For reasons just cited, developing a translation is a difficult endeavor. The goal is to faithfully represent in another language, the Bible as it was originally written, giving accurate interpretation of the meaning of the Bible in the other language. Even though the goal is easy enough to explain, the task is not easy.

## 2. WHY ARE THE *NEW* TRANSLATIONS NECESSARY?

Most of us accept what has been explained thus far, but this still does not answer the question as to why a *new* translation of the Bible into English is necessary. The Bible has been translated into our English language many years ago. The King James Version was completed in 1611 and has undergone at least four major revisions since then. Some ask, “is this no longer good enough?”

The question is not so much whether the King James Version is a good translation. Instead, *the need* for a new translation of the Bible into English becomes clear when the following two truths are recognized: First, we must ever remember that *language changes*. Second, there have been *significant advances* made in the area of biblical scholarship.

a) Language changes. No language is static. The English we use today varies greatly from that which was spoken in 17th Century England. For example, some words have changed their meaning. To “let” (see **2 Thessalonians 2:7**, KJV) meant to “hinder,” but now means to “allow” or to “permit.” To “prevent” (see **Matthew 17:25**, KJV) meant to “precede” or to “go before;” now it means to “stop” or to “hinder.” “Conversation” (see **Galatians 1:13**, KJV) was used to indicate one’s manner of life, but now refers to informal dialog between people. One could go on and on giving examples, but the point is clear-over the centuries, words change their meaning.

Not only do the meanings of some words change, but there has been change also in the manner by which the words are joined together to express a complete thought. In other words, the grammatical syntax of the language changes also. This is most easily noticed in the long sentences in the KJV, with frequent use of colons and semicolons. The English of today tends to use shorter and less complicated structures. An example of this can be seen in **1 John 1: 1-3** where the KJV is all one sentence (and thus rather

difficult to carefully follow). The New International Version (NIV) by way of contrast is divided into four sentences (thus simplifying understanding).

Language changes, and thus the writings which we hope will have an effect on this generation, must be rendered in language which is easily understood and commonly spoken. Who of us (even those raised with the KJV) can really understand the following verse (taken from the KJV)? “Ye are not straitened in us, but ye are straitened in your own bowels” (2 Corinthians 6:12). Is not the NIV more clear when it says, “We are not withholding our affection from you, but you are withholding yours from us”? We have lots of hurdles to cross in reaching the world for Christ. Let’s not create another by forcing on the men and women of this generation a Bible which was translated for a people of another culture and in a different idiom of English.

b) Significant advances have been made in the area of biblical scholarship. This is a second reason why new translations are valuable. We do not mean that the individuals who labored to produce the biblical translations of the past were not well trained. Indeed, they often had the best training available in their day. But much more has been learned about the nature of biblical Hebrew and *koine* Greek (the particular form of Greek used in the New Testament). Also through archaeological discoveries and access to remote areas of the world (often the locations of monasteries in which ancient copies of the Bible were made), the scholar of today has available for use many more ancient manuscripts of the Bible than did his predecessors just a century ago.

For the New Testament alone, translators today have over 5300 manuscripts at their fingertips. Only 25 of these texts were at the disposal of the translators of the KJV. Arid in relation to the Old Testament, most everyone has heard of the Dead Sea Scrolls, only discovered in 1948 in caves close to the Dead Sea in Israel. The influence of these manuscripts upon both Old and New Testament scholarship is still being weighed. The discovery was very profound in that the scrolls are almost 1000 years older than previously available manuscripts were (and thus 1000 years closer to the time of the writing of the original manuscripts of the Old Testament). Should not the Bibles we read today, reflect the latest and best information available in Bible translation?

### 3. WHY HAVE SOME VERSES BEEN DELETED AND OTHERS CHANGED?

Anyone who has read one of the newer translations of the Bible could not help but notice some significant changes. Most of the time, these changes are merely that of *rewording* the text to render it more clearly. However, sometimes the change is in the *deletion* of a word or phrase (for example, “through the Spirit” in 1 Peter 1:22), or the *addition* of a word or phrase (for example, “according to God” in 1 Peter 5:2). At

other times, there are significant portions deleted or identified (by footnote or marginal reading) as not being in some of the manuscripts. Notice, for example, **Mark 16:9-10**, **John 5:3b-4**, **John 7:53-8:11**, and **1 John 5:7**.

Why do these additions and deletions occur? As noted earlier, there are thousands of manuscripts available for the New Testament alone. As one examines the various manuscripts, two amazing things emerge: First, no two of the manuscripts are alike in every detail. The differences can be as small as the spelling of a word, or as large as the deletion of an entire passage. This is more true of the New Testament than the Old. The books of the Old Testament were meticulously copied by an order of trained scribes. Care was taken in copying because for centuries they were recognized (canonized) as the sacred texts for the Jewish faith. On the other hand, with the rapid and unorganized spread of the early Church, the writings which eventually became recognized as authoritative for the New Testament, were freely distributed and hastily duplicated by anyone who desired a copy for themselves or their church. This resulted in a vast collection of manuscripts, many of which contain significant variations. Consequently, since the translators of the KJV had only 25 manuscripts to consider (and these were, for the most part, rather recent and basically representing only one area of manuscript tradition), the KJV does not reflect the textual variations which are actually present.

The vast variation among the manuscripts is the first amazing fact. The second fact is even more amazing. If you could examine the variations, you would find that among thousands of different readings, not one of them affects a basic fundamental doctrine. No truth of Christianity nor doctrine of the faith is in doubt because of a variant reading within the many manuscripts. The deity of Christ, His virgin birth, the blood atonement, salvation by grace through faith, etc., are never brought into question by the reading of the manuscripts. Personally, I find this utterly amazing – an indication of God’s watchful care over the transmission of His Word throughout the centuries. Glory be to God!

But does not the Bible itself warn against adding to or deleting from the words of Scripture (see **Revelation 22:18-29**)? It most certainly does! We must realize however that the standard by which we judge the Word of God is not any particular *translation* of the Bible. Rather, our standard must be *the original text* of Scripture as best assembled from the manuscripts available. One cannot take the KJV (or any other translation) and use it as the measuring rod for infallibility. It is just as likely that the KJV *contains* words and sentences which are not in the original, as it is that one of the newer translations *omits* certain sections. Our commitment to the Word

of God should be such that we want the Bible to reflect any change which is evident in the older manuscripts. It should at least be mentioned in a footnote or in the margin.

#### 4. WHY ARE THERE SO MANY TRANSLATIONS?

The number of new translations since the turn of the Century has been staggering. However, this is not the first era in which numerous translations have appeared. Prior to the acceptance of the KJV (which took more than fifty years), there were no fewer than eight other translations offered to the churches. The current variety of translations is a result of several factors:

a) Certain translations reflect different basic and accepted texts of the original languages. For example, since there is such a variation among the Greek manuscripts, several renditions of the Greek New Testament are available. The *Textus Receptus* is the text on which the KJV and the New King James Version (NKJV) are based. There is also the *United Bible Society Text* which attempts to render the readings of the *oldest* manuscripts, even if certain readings are only rarely found in manuscripts. There is also the *Majority Text* which attempts to render only those readings supported by the *majority* of manuscripts, regardless of their age. Similar differences occur with the Old Testament as well. Consequently, a translation will differ depending upon which basic text is used for translation.

b) The variety of current versions also reflects a difference in translation philosophy. Should a translation be as literal as possible? By “literal” we mean, should it attempt to stick as closely as possible to the word order and **syntax of the** original language? Of course, an exact word-for-word translation cannot be done, for the biblical languages are highly inflected. “Inflected” means that the role of a particular word in a sentence is governed by the word’s prefixes and suffixes, not by its location in the sentence (as in English). Some of the new translations attempt to be as literal as possible (for example, the Revised Standard Version [RSV] and the New American Standard Bible [NASB]). This sounds like a good approach, but the result is often a translation in “choppy” English which does not reflect the usual way sentences are spoken in our language.

Another philosophy of translation is often referred to as the *dynamic equivalence* method. In this approach, the concern is not to adhere as closely as possible to word order, but rather to render the *meaning* of the sentence as clearly as possible in the modern language. The particular use of words is not ignored, but the emphasis

is placed more directly on the best way to express in the translation the *concept* being conveyed in the Scripture. This too sounds good, but the extreme of this becomes nothing more than a paraphrase. A “paraphrase” is a very free rendition in which the translator inserts much of his own understanding. Examples of Bible paraphrases include the **Living Bible** (LB), the **Phillips Translation** (PH), and the **Today’s English Version** (TEV).

Perhaps the best approach in translation is one which attempts to combine both of the above, seeking to relate the meaning clearly, but also attempting to be as literal as possible without butchering the English language. Presently, the NIV accomplishes this goal most successfully.

The fact of the matter is, no one translation, regardless of how well it is done, can capture the full meaning of the Scripture as it was originally given. (The Amplified Bible is an attempt to do this very thing, but as a result, it becomes very cumbersome and difficult to read). Something is always lost in the translation process, especially when there exists not only a language barrier, but also a cultural obstacle. For this reason, although you may prefer one translation over another, you should frequently confer with other translations in your study, and not insist that everyone use the same translation that you prefer.

## 5. HOW CAN I KNOW WHICH TRANSLATION IS THE BEST?

This is a difficult question to answer. One must ask, “Best for what?” The **Living Bible** cannot be surpassed for gaining an overall understanding of a large section of the Bible. It can be used to read books quickly, in one sitting, in order to get the gist of the entire passage. For public reading and exposition, the **New International Version** is a choice, because of its clarity, accuracy, and excellent English. When doing critical, exegetical work on a passage, it is hard to beat the literal nature of the **New American Standard Bible**. And if it is beauty and poetry and cadence that you prefer, then the time-honored **King James Version** is the best.

When selecting a version of the Bible, next to the translation’s accuracy, the most important aspect to consider is how well it conveys God’s message *to* you. For some, the choice may be the KJV (especially persons who have been raised with it). For others, the choice could quite likely be one of the newer translations. Whatever you do, don’t allow some fanatical, fundamentalist preacher to convince you that the *only* acceptable translation (or the most accurate one) is the KJV. That simply is not true.

While it is good to enjoy the use of a wide variety of translations, most of us will prefer to settle upon the use of one version for our primary study. Doing this makes memorization much more easy. Those of us who hold a high commitment to the Bible as the Word of God should be in the forefront in our open-armed welcome of translations which convey the Gospel in clear, contemporary English. It is our heart's concern that our world may hear and believe that Jesus is the Christ, and in believing, they may find the joy of salvation. New translations of the Bible can be a great aid in reaching this goal.