



“Understanding the Bible”

Section 2: How Did We Get the Bible?

Unit 2.6: Getting Lost & Found In Translation



I) It's All Greek to Me

- Throughout this section we have tried to answer the question, “*How did we get the Bible?*” We have discussed this process of biblical formation from the revelation of God through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, to the duplication, canonization, preservation, and publication of God’s Words through the sacrificial efforts of God’s people. Now as we draw Section Two to a close, there is another important question we need to address that almost every Christian asks when they walk into a modern-day bookstore: “*How did we get so many Bible translations?*” In other words, if Scripture was originally written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, why are there so many English translations of the Bible being sold today? We will answer this question by looking at the process, problems, and purpose of having different translations, as well as provide a guide on how to select the ideal translation of Holy Scripture that will help each of us grow in our daily walk with Jesus Christ.

II) Pinpointing the Translation Process

- As we map out the process of how ancient manuscripts are analyzed to develop a single translation of Scripture in another language, we need to take a closer look at the practice of **textual criticism**. Described as both an art and a science, textual criticism is the reconstruction of the original text of Scripture from thousands of manuscript copies. This practice is a very intense discipline where biblical scholars, known as textual critics, analyze the most reliable manuscript copies available to decide what the original text said before it can be translated today in other languages. Since there are thousands of Greek manuscript copies of the New Testament available, scholars today typically begin by translating from one of three different textual groups. Here is a list of these three groups that have become a critical element of modern Bible translations of the New Testament:
 - Textus Receptus** – The Textus Receptus (Latin for “*Received Text*”) is a Byzantine Greek New Testament completed and printed by reformation scholar Erasmus in the sixteenth century. This document was produced from a small handful of twelfth century Greek manuscripts that Erasmus had available. It was first published in 1516 and many revisions continued to be made throughout the next century. This was the most popular text used for English Bible translations until late in the nineteenth century, and the popular King James version was developed using this text.
 - Critical Text** – The Critical Text is a more recent Greek New Testament developed from Alexandrian manuscripts in 1881 by scholars Brooke Foss Westcott and Fenton J. A. Hort. Westcott and Hort primarily used older fourth century manuscripts including the Codex Vaticanus and Codex Sinaiticus to complete their text. The critical text has been the most popular text used for modern English translations of the Bible including the English Standard Version, the New American Standard Version, and the New International Version.
 - Majority Text** – The Majority Text, also known as the Byzantine and Ecclesiastical Text, utilizes a method of determining the original reading of a Scripture by discovering what reading occurs in a majority of the manuscripts available. This is the most “democratic” method of analyzing manuscripts of Scripture. Basically, each Greek manuscript has one vote, all the variants (disagreements in the text) are voted on by all the manuscripts, and whichever variant has the most votes wins. While this seems like a very accurate way of translating Scripture, the only problem is that the Majority Text method does not take into account two very important factors: (a) The age of the manuscripts, and (b) the location of the manuscripts.

III) Breaking Through the Barriers

- Despite so many reliable resources available, there are still many hurdles that scholars have to cross in order to complete a translation. These issues include: (a) cultural and historical gaps; (b) language inconsistencies; (c) figures of speech; and (d) word order. There are some words and phrases in other languages that just don't translate into English. For instance, the Greek language has numerous words to describe what we simply call "love" in English. Also, **word order** is very important in Greek, so there cannot be a translation in English that keeps the same order of words in a sentence because it would not make logical sense to the English reader. While these differences should not be discouraging, they force translators to adopt a specific philosophical approach to the translation they are developing.

IV) Analyzing Various Approaches

- There are currently four main philosophical approaches to developing an English translation of the Bible. These four approaches include the following: (a) **Formal Equivalence** (word-for-word) – This approach seeks to be as literal to the rendering of the original languages whenever possible; (b) **Dynamic Equivalence** (thought-for-thought) – This approach focuses less on the literal rendering of the text and seeks to communicate the meaning of the text instead; (c) **Middle Road** (a balanced mix) – This approach incorporates a little bit of formal and dynamic equivalence, depending on each passage of Scripture being evaluated; and (d) **Paraphrase** (simplified interpretation) – This approach is less of a translation, and more of a way of expressing the original intent of the author in simplified statements.

V) Tracking Down the Early Texts

- Before we look at which English versions of the Bible are most used today and evaluate which approaches they utilize, we need to remember that there have been several **influential** translations written throughout the world that spread the gospel of Christ long before we held a KJV in our hands. Some of these translations include: (a) **Septuagint** (a Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament written in the third century B.C.); (b) **Latin Vulgate** (a Latin translation of the Bible written by Jerome in 384 A.D.); (c) **German Bible** (written by Martin Luther and completed in 1534); and (d) **Geneva Bible** (An English translation written in 1560 and used until the King James Version of 1611).

VI) A Visual Overview of English Versions

- Although there has been an explosion of English translations on the current market, here are the most popular versions used by evangelical Christians, along with the year of original publication, the translating philosophy, and the reading level of the composition: (a) **King James Version** (1611, formal, twelfth grade reading level); (b) **New International Version** (1978, middle road, sixth grade reading level); (c) **English Standard Version** (2001, formal, eighth grade reading level); (d) **New American Standard Version** (1971, formal, eleventh grade reading level); (e) **New Living Translation** (1996, dynamic, sixth grade reading level); and (f) **The Message** (2002, paraphrase, sixth grade reading level).

VII) Will Only "1611" Get Me to Heaven?

- Many people have assumed over the years that the 1611 **King James Version** is the superior English translation. However, there are many factors that refute this claim that the KJV (or any translation) is superior. These factors include the evolving English language (read James 2:3 in the KJV and consider what "gay clothing" means today), updated geological discoveries (the manuscripts of the critical text are older than the ones used for the KJV), and the fact that the KJV itself was updated many times until 1769. The KJV is a wonderful translation, but only the original Greek and Hebrew texts are superior.

VIII) Finding Your Best Fit

- So, which translation should you choose? This answer is different for each of us and is based primarily on two things: (a) What is your current reading level? and (b) What is your ultimate **purpose**? Whether you are doing a scholarly study or just your daily devotions, there are certain translations that will help meet your goal. Perhaps a parallel Bible that has several translations side-by-side might be ideal. The real question is not *which* translation you should use, but *how many* translations you should use!