

How the Bible Came to Us - #6

Versions and Revisions: God's Word Translated

1. The history of the Bible is intimately tied into the making of translations. In contrast to Islam in which God's words are "authentic and sacred only in Arabic" and even the prophet's words can be officially quoted only in Arabic, Christians have disseminated their message in many languages. Christians believe that the Bible is inspired—not just a certain set of words in a particular language.

OLD TESTAMENT:

Greek translations:

2. For several hundred years, the "Septuagint" (*LXX*) was the Greek translation used by Jews and Christians. The books of Moses were translated very well. However, later portions of the Scriptures were not translated so well. As we have already noted, Christians and Greek-speaking Jews argued over who would possess and control this Greek translation.
3. When Christians multiplied rapidly and won the battle to control the Septuagint, certain Jewish translators decided to redo the Greek Old Testament translation. The first was Aquila. He produced a slavishly literal translation, essentially "interlinear," about A.D. 122-130. His goal was to render every nuance of Hebrew into Greek. Sometimes, he even spelled Hebrew words using the Greek alphabet. In spite of problems, Aquila's translation rapidly gained popularity among Jewish believers.
4. Christians responded to Aquila's Jewish translation by producing one of their own. Theodotion, of Pontus or possibly Ephesus, made a revision of the Septuagint between A.D. 180 and 192. It followed the Septuagint so closely that some consider it to be just a revision of the Septuagint. Soon, his translation became the most popular one among Christians. In some portions of the Old Testament, his translation was quite superior. In fact, in the book of Daniel, it was so superior to the older Septuagint translation that it became the standard rendering even in Septuagint manuscripts. As a result, the early Septuagint translation of Daniel almost disappeared. Today, we have only two manuscripts available to us of that earlier version of Daniel. In the earlier Septuagint, the book of Job lacked about 1/6 of the material found in the Hebrew text. Theodotion filled in those gaps.
5. Symmachus, who apparently was an Ebionite, (a group of Christians who practiced strict Jewish traditions including vegetarianism) produced his translation of the Old Testament into Greek between A.D. 193 and 211. It seems to have been a very high quality rendering of the Hebrew, and yet, it was in very elegant Greek. Unfortunately, only fragments remain today. Two hundred years later, Jerome, the translator of the Latin Vulgate, stated, "Aquila translates word for word, Symmachus follows the sense, and Theodotion differs slightly from the Septuagint."
6. But the greatest scholar of the Bible in early Christian times was Origen. He was born at Alexandria in Egypt in A.D. 186 and was given the name Adamantios because of his untiring energy. Origen was skillful in both Hebrew and Greek. While reading the different translations and comparing them to the oldest Hebrew available, he noticed significant differences. So he decided that a comparative version should be produced. With the help of others, he produced a Hexapla, or six-version Bible. It was arranged in six parallel columns with the following order:
 - 1) the Hebrew text, as current at the time,
 - 2) the same Hebrew text—spelled with Greek letters,

- 3) the Greek translation by Aquila,
 - 4) the Greek translation by Symmachus,
 - 5) the Septuagint, as revised by himself (Origen's "fifth column"),
 - 6) the Greek translation by Theodotion.
7. Origen's purpose was not to make a new translation or to restore the original text of the Septuagint, but rather, to make the Greek more correctly reflect the Hebrew original. Beyond that, he hoped to stimulate a new group of Christian scholars to study the Hebrew Bible.
 8. Fortunately for us, Origen spelled out how he went about his work.
 - 1) If the manuscripts of the Septuagint differed, he chose a reading which gave the best translation of the Hebrew original.
 - 2) In some cases there were words in the Hebrew that had no clear adequate translation in the Septuagint. In that case, he inserted into the Septuagint text—in the "fifth column" of his Bible—such translation of those words as was found in one of the other three Greek versions, preferably from Theodotion. He marked those insertions with a very special type of asterisk at the beginning and the metobelus at the close of the passage.
 - 3) If a passage was found in the Septuagint which he could not find in the Hebrew, it was marked in Origen's Septuagint at the beginning by an obelus, or a horizontal line, and at the end by metobelus; but the passage was not removed from the text.
 9. The incredible amount of work involved in Origen's Hexapla can be estimated when it is noted that there were 12,000 pages of carefully hand-copied, critically-compared Hebrew and Greek manuscripts involved. When done, using that very careful, meticulous method, each line in the Hexapla contained only one or two Hebrew words. Origen's work was finally finished about A.D. 240. Unfortunately, his masterpiece was destroyed when the Saracen Muslims captured and burned Caesarea around A.D. 630. Fortunately for us, fourteen years earlier, a Syro-hexapla version was made by Paul, the Bishop of Tella in Mesopotamia. He made a Syriac translation of only the fifth column of Origen's Hexapla; but he carefully copied Origen's critical signs so that the Syro-hexapla version is one of our best sources for studying Origen's work. Today, we have only scattered pieces of Origen's work in different libraries of the world. The earliest of those manuscripts date to within about 200 years of Origen's original.
 10. Almost 100 years after Origen's death, Eusebius and Pamphilus decided that they needed to make his work more widely available. Their goal was to copy Origen's fifth column including his critical marks in a separate manuscript with alternate readings from other columns noted in the margins. That was during a time of terrible persecution of Christians and Pamphilus did some of the work while waiting in prison for his martyrdom which came in A.D. 309. When Eusebius finished the work, it became enormously popular in Palestine. The Emperor, Constantine, ordered 50 copies for use in Christian churches around the Mediterranean. But it was not long before the critical marks which Origen had so carefully placed in his fifth column were either carelessly copied or left out entirely. Soon Origen's revised "Septuagint" became the standard Greek Bible of the western Christian world.
 11. Soon after Eusebius began his work, Lucian, who had studied among Christians in the eastern church and later lived in Asia Minor (modern Turkey), began work with a Hebrew scholar to translate the Hebrew Bible once again. Lucian's translation is very useful for us especially in the historical parts of the Old Testament because of its obvious superiority to the version

copied by Eusebius. Lucian himself fell martyr to persecution under Maximus in A.D. 311.

12. Scholars have struggled to try to discover the original Septuagint readings primarily because they give us some clues to the original Hebrew manuscripts from which they were translated. The popularity of the work of Origen and Lucian has made that considerably more difficult.

Aramaic:

13. We have spoken briefly about the Aramaic targums. Those are more or less free translations, often accompanied by commentary. They were used in churches among the Palestinian Jews. Because Aramaic is so close to the original Hebrew, they provide us some very important clues.

Arabic:

14. One later translation of the Hebrew Bible done in the 10th century is significant because it was translated into Arabic by Saadia ben Joseph. He produced a very good, idiomatic Arabic translation. That translation was produced at a time when Judaism was again under attack from another rival religious group.

NEW TESTAMENT:

15. Christianity spread so rapidly and so widely in the Mediterranean world and beyond, that three important points need to be made about the translation of the Christian Bible:

- 1) Very often, the New Testament was the very first thing ever written in that new language. Sometimes the alphabet for the new language was apparently invented for the very purpose of translating the Christian New Testament. And so we see that written languages were developing side by side with the translations of the Christian New Testament.

- 2) Because the Christian churches had their main headquarters in Latin-speaking and Greek-speaking areas, and were therefore, closely connected to either Rome or Constantinople, little notice was made, in their official documents, of translations made into other languages outside of the scope of Rome and Constantinople. Very often the translations of the New Testament into such languages as that of Syria, Iran, Egypt, the Slavic lands, and even Central Asia are the very oldest writings available in those languages.

- 3) Perhaps even more importantly, by studying the translations made into those other languages, we get a feel for how they understood the Christian message and the Christian Scriptures.

16. In some cases, some of those ancient translations are so old that they give us insights back to help us understand the Greek original and even the Hebrew original.

Syriac:

17. Syriac is the language of the people in the eastern portions of the Middle East extending even beyond the Euphrates into present-day Iraq. The book of Acts tells us how Paul and Barnabas went to Antioch in Syria and considered that their home church. It was there that Christians were first called "Christians." It was from there that Paul and Barnabas were sent out on their various missionary journeys.

18. But the Bible tells us only about the spread of Christianity to the west. There are very ancient documents claiming that Christianity spread equally well toward the east. It is believed that Thaddeus, one of the disciples, traveled to that area and apparently established the church there. At a time when Christians in the west were being severely persecuted, around the first

quarter of the 3rd century, those churches in the east were growing rapidly.

19. The Syrian church was known for its intensity and its divisiveness. Large portions of that church were very ascetic and Gnostic in their leanings. There were times when if one mentioned Syriac Christianity, people would automatically assume he was ascetic. They believed that being baptized was a commitment to virginity. Maybe that is why the eastern church did not grow so rapidly!
20. There were also theological divisions among them. The Nestorians emphasized the humanity of Jesus while downplaying the divinity of Jesus. By contrast, the Monophysites in the western part of Syria, overemphasized the divinity of Jesus and depreciated His humanity. In the early years among those people, they developed a gospel story which came to be known as the *Diatessaron*. It wove all four of the Gospels together into a single story. Later, they translated the Gospels into Syriac in the following sequence: Matthew, Mark, John, and Luke.
21. But the most important Syriac translation of the entire Bible is the Peshitta. Peshitta probably means something like “straightforward,” “widely-current,” or “standard.” It became the standard Bible for Syriac-speaking Christians. Interestingly enough, the New Testament of the Peshitta had only 22 books—leaving out James, 2 Peter, Jude, 2 John, and 3 John.
22. Furthermore, the Old Testament of the Peshitta may have been translated by former Jews. Thus, we see Aramaic and Hebrew influence in this Semitic translation. And so, in the Syriac, we note a progression from a fairly wooden, very literal translation in the early years to a more flexible, idiomatic translation later.
23. It is important to note when comparing these translations, that Semitic languages are much more limited than Greek in the diversity and subtlety of the ways in which they can use verb tenses. The Greek language has the ability to have dependant clauses in its sentences, thus allowing much more flexibility than the Semitic language which allows only “and” and “but” connections in its sentences. Greek has participles and allows for the use of an independent clause, a main clause, and then participle or prepositional phrases—creating subordinate clauses. Those constructions are not possible in Semitic.

Coptic:

24. Another language which became important in the spread of Christianity was Egyptian Coptic. We have noted that the Greeks ruled Egypt for many years. Alexandria was the second-largest Greek city in the Mediterranean. Coptic was an Egyptian language using a Greek-style alphabet but adding seven additional letters for sounds not used in the Greek language. Several stages can be seen in the development of those Coptic translations. In the Coptic language, there is a very strict word order required by the grammar. Coptic is considerably less flexible than the Greek. Furthermore, Coptic does not have a neuter gender. But an extensive Christian literature developed in the Coptic language.
25. This has been a brief overview of the early languages into which both the Old Testament and the New Testament were translated. How was God working through all of this? Does any of this shake your faith in the Word of God?

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