

Choosing a translation, #1

Intro: Occasionally people ask me to recommend a translation of the Bible which I am happy to do. In more recent years there has been more focus on the “translation issue” with strong views being presented about modern translations. It might be helpful to be aware of some of the issues involved in this discussion. Since several people have asked me about this issue from time to time I thought it might be a good time to discuss it.

The discussion of which translation is best centers around three important issues. Each of them deserves careful study.

The first falls into the realm of textual criticism, the study of how the scriptures have come to us. Does the translation present only what can be established as the original words of God in the autographs?

The second falls into the realm of linguistics, the study of language itself. Does the translation accurately convey the thought of the original message? Does it do so in language readily understandable by the reader?

The third falls into the realm of theology or interpretation, the study of the meaning of Scripture itself. Does the translation reflect theological bias or prejudice in translating?

When we compare some modern translations with the KJV (or the NKJV) we see some interesting differences.

Confession of the eunuch

36 And as they went on their way, they came unto a certain water: and the eunuch said, See, here is water; what doth hinder me to be baptized? 37 And Philip said, If thou believest with all thine heart, thou mayest. And he answered and said, I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God. 38 And he commanded the chariot to stand still: and they went down both into the water, both Philip and the eunuch; and he baptized him. (Acts 8:36-38, KJV)

36 As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, “Look, here is water. Why shouldn’t I be baptized?” 38 And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. (Acts 8:36-38, NIV)

Trinitarian formula

6 *This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.* 7 *For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.* 8 *And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.* (1 John 5:6-8, KJV)

6 *This is he that came by water and blood, even Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood.* 7 *And it is the*

Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth. 8 For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and the three agree in one. (1 John 5:6-8, ASV)

Stirring of the waters

3 In these lay a great multitude of impotent folk, of blind, halt, withered, waiting for the moving of the water. 4 For an angel went down at a certain season into the pool, and troubled the water: whosoever then first after the troubling of the water stepped in was made whole of whatsoever disease he had. (John 5:3-4, KJV)

3 In these lay a multitude of those who were sick, blind, lame, and withered, [waiting for the moving of the waters; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred up the water; whoever then first, after the stirring up of the water, stepped in was made well from whatever disease with which he was afflicted.] (John 5:3-4, NASV)

In each of the instances above a modern translation has omitted from the text or raised a question about the authenticity of something that is found in the KJV. Why is this?

Should we pronounce anathemas on the new translations for “taking away from the word of God” or should we commend them for refusing to include what cannot be established as the word of God?

Would the modern versions like ASV, NASV, and NIV be a better witness to the original autographs or would the KJV or NKJV?

Of course we want our Bibles to represent exactly what the original documents of Scripture said without addition or subtraction.

The translator’s first task is to ask, “What did the original autographs say?”

The translator’s work is to accurately convey in English what was originally spoken by the Biblical authors in NT Greek and OT Hebrew (and Aramaic). The problem of course is that we do not have the original autographs. What we do have is thousands of manuscripts that can be dated as far back as the early centuries of the church. Presumably we could reconstruct from these copies the original readings of the autographs of the Scripture.

However, these copies, though they substantially agree, are not identical; and this leads us to the science of textual criticism. The work of the textual critic is to study the numerous manuscripts available, try to discern what relationships they might have to one another, and then determine as carefully as possible which manuscripts most likely preserve the original reading.

From this process comes an edited text of the OT and NT in the original language from which the translators can work to produce their English version. It is this process that has led to the differences that we see between the modern versions and the older versions like the KJV of 1611. To understand it, it is necessary to know a little about the history of our English versions.

History of our English translations

When I speak of English translations I have to limit the discussion to “modern” English (and by modern I mean the English language spoken by people from c. 1500. Obviously at least parts of the Scriptures were translated for people speaking Old English (which English speakers today could not read) and Middle English (which we might barely read)

The first English translation of the Scriptures for the common man we owe to the work of John Wycliffe (1330-1384) who along with others translated from the Latin Vulgate a word-for-word English version. (It was presumed that the Latin Vulgate, itself a translation, carried the message of the original autographs though it originated in the 5th century.)

By c. 1450 Gutenberg had invented the printing press and the mass production of Bibles became possible. In fact Gutenberg’s first major work was a Bible in Latin that is usually referred to as the Gutenberg Bible. Again, up to this point, Bible translations had depended upon other translations; but this was about to change.

In 1516 Dutch scholar Desiderius Erasmus published the first edited Greek text for translation. It was from this text that Luther translated the German Bible and William Tyndale translated his English version in 1525, the first English Bible to be printed. However Erasmus’ edition was based on a very limited number of manuscripts of late date.

None of the Greek manuscripts Erasmus used contained the entire NT.

None of them were dated earlier than the tenth century.

The one Greek manuscript of the book of Revelation he used did not contain the final leaf; thus Erasmus used a Latin Bible and translated it back into Greek to complete his edited Greek text.

Erasmus successors such as Robert Estienne (Stephanus) and Theodore Beza relied heavily on his work; and it was the Beza edition that the KJV translators used for their translation in 1611. After its translation the Elzevir brothers produced a compact Greek text. In their introduction they said, “The text you have has been received by all...” Thus, the text upon which the KJV is based is sometimes called “Textus Receptus” based on the Latin phrase in the Elzevir translation.

The Puritans brought the newly translated KJV version to America and it served as “the Bible” for most Americans, though it was not the original English version by any means. In fact it was the culmination of a long line of major translations made over a century or so (Tyndale’s, Coverdale’s, Matthew’s, Taverner’s, Great Bible, Geneva Bible, Bishop’s Bible, each of these an attempt to improve upon its predecessor). Clearly, the KJV version based on the Erasmian-Beza Greek Text was very popular for a long time, with no new English translations being made for over 270 years.

However, over this same period there were some important developments that were to affect Biblical translations. One of those developments was the advancement of archaeology and the discovery of hundreds of manuscripts much older than those used by Erasmus. Some of most important include:

Codex Vaticanus (Dated 325-350)
Codex Sinaiticus (Dated 350 was discovered in 1859)
Codex Alexandrinus (Dated 400)
Chester Beatty (Dated 200 was purchased in the 1930's)
Bodmer Papyrus II (Dated 150-200 was purchased in 1950's-1960's) and many other papyri.
Such discoveries gave textual scholars a look at many more manuscripts that were centuries older than those used by Erasmus.

What do the manuscripts reveal?

In studying the varying manuscripts, textual scholars have identified a number of broad categories where manuscripts are relatively similar, but not identical. These categories called "text types" are based on geographical centers from where they appear to have emanated. Textual scholars identified three to five text families.

Alexandrian (Manuscripts of this type found in north Africa and Palestine possibly coming from Alexandria)

Western (The western parts of the Roman empire like Rome)

Byzantine (The city of Constantinople or Byzantium)

Features of the various text types

The Alexandrian text type shows existence as early as the late second and early third century. It is represented in two of the oldest complete manuscripts we have of the NT (The Vaticanus and the Sinaiticus). Codex Vaticanus is quoted among the church fathers and even has many similarities to an earlier partial papyrus (p⁷⁵). It shows the least tendency by the copyists to "smooth out" difficulties. It appears to be the most dominant from the second to eighth century. Its demise can be possibly explained by the expansion of Islamic faith in the primary area of its existence.

The Western text type is admittedly very old as indicated by similar readings in the Old Latin versions. However, it often has many more words than the other two manuscript types. For example, the book of Acts is as much as 10-15% larger in the Western text type and has many readings that are not reflected in any version. It exists primarily in areas where Latin was the predominant language. It appears to have phased out by the 5th century.

The Byzantine text type is not as old as the other two. Its earliest representative is dated around the 5th century (Alexandrinus). The early church fathers quotes do not conform to the pattern of the Byzantine text type. It appears to have become dominant in the 9th century, after the demise of the Alexandrian and primarily in the eastern part of the empire where Greek was spoken. Manuscripts from this textual tradition were used by Erasmus in his edited text for the KJV.

These discoveries fostered a new interest in and a need for an updated edition of the Greek text for translation. Such a text in the tradition of Erasmus and his successors was made by Constantin Von Tischendorf (1831) and again later by Cambridge scholars Westcott and Hort in 1881. In last century the Nestle (1936) and the United Bible Societies Greek text (1966) were produced.

What affect does this have on translations?

These new discoveries and their evaluation would result in changes in how scholars answered the question, "What were the original words"? Of course, the availability of many new manuscripts not known to Erasmus resulted in different judgments about original readings.

Changes one may notice in the new versions based on textual criticism

Consequently many newer versions may omit verses found in the KJV that may have inadequate or weaker textual support like we noted at the beginning of the study. It is believed that since these do not appear in the older manuscripts that they were added to the text by copyists for various reasons and should not be considered a part of the original autographs.

However the newer versions also add words that have solid textual evidence that are not found in the KJV (NKJV). "In fact, the most recent edition of a Greek New Testament which is based on the majority of MSS, rather than the most ancient ones (and thus stands firmly behind the King James tradition), when compared to the standard Greek New Testament used in most modern translations, excises over six hundred and fifty words or phrases!" (Daniel Wallace)

Conclusion:

Can we say that the KJV ought to be chosen over all other translations because it is based on the "textus receptus" as its ardent supporters affirm? It doesn't appear to me to be so. The KJV and the NKJV may actually preserve the worst readings of the textual tradition. Does such a thing make the KJV or the NKJV unusable? Not at all; but it does suggest the need to weigh the KJV and the NKJV against more recent discoveries reflected in the other versions.

On the merits of the textual tradition itself (nothing else considered) it would seem preferable to choose a translation that most accurately represents the original wording of Scripture. These would be the 20th century versions based on newer critical texts. (ASV, NASV, RSV, ESV, NIV).

However, before we make our final judgment we should consider the subject in view of the other two factors.