**Lesson 7 - How We Got The Bible – Translation – Part 1**

November 2, 2022

The fifth step in the progression is translation. Once we have collected the books that were accept as the Word of God, we still have a problem, because unless we are fluent in the Biblical languages they remain a mystery to us. The Bible was written originally in three languages. The Old Testament was written predominately in Hebrew, with a couple of small sections written in Aramaic, which was the principal language at the time of those particular writings. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, the language of the common people in the 1st century. Today we have the Bible in English as well as hundreds of other languages. It is interesting, however, that we have more than one English version of the Bible. How can that be? Isn't there one correct translation? Isn't one of these right, and the rest wrong? There are some who contend that there is. After all, isn't translation just taking words out of one language and exchanging them for equivalent words in another language? It would be nice if that were the case. If it were, translation would be a simple process. But the fact is that translation is a very complicated process. There are a number of variables that must be considered.

I’ve been told that English is one of the most difficult languages to learn. Here are some reasons why.

 1) The bandage was wound around the wound.

 2) The farm was used to produce produce.

 3) The soldier decided to desert his dessert in the desert.

 4) Since there is no time like the present, he thought it was time to present the present.

 5) To help with planting the crops and clothing the family, the farmer taught his sow to sow plants, and his daughter to sew pants.

 6) Upon seeing the tear in the painting I shed a tear.

 7) I had to **subject** the **subject** to a series of tests.

**Someone has put it this way.** And you’ve probably seen this. “Let's face it - English is a crazy language. There is no egg in eggplant nor ham in hamburger; neither apple nor pine in pineapple. English muffins weren't invented in England nor French fries in France. We take English for granted. But if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig. If the plural of tooth is teeth, why isn't the plural of booth beeth? One goose, 2 geese. So one moose, 2 meese? One index, 2 indices? In what language do people recite at a play and play at a recital? Have noses that run and feet that smell? How can a slim chance and a fat chance be the same, while a wise man and a wise guy are opposites? You have to marvel at the unique lunacy of a language in which your house can burn up as it burns down.

Every language has its idiosyncrasies, its peculiarities, and a translator must be familiar with all of them.

**Now one thing we have just seen in this illustration is that:**

**1. Translation can never be separated from interpretation**. For instance, if two words are spelled the same way, you have to determine which meaning the author intends. Also, for any given language there are words that may not have an exact equivalent word in another language. What do you do then? In these cases the translators may try to find a phrase of several words, to adequately communicate the word he is trying to translate. One example is that some languages do not have a word for “God.” So the translator has to manufacture one, or put it into more than one word. In one South American Indian dialect the translators ran into this. They had many false gods but no name in their language for one all-powerful creator God who made all things. So this is what they did. Every time they came to the word *"God"* they had to translate it with the phrase *"he who created the heavens and the earth.”* So **Genesis 1:1** read, "*In the beginning, he who created the heavens and the earth created the heavens and the earth*."

A Biblical illustration of this is found in **2Timothy 3:16**, when it is stated that "*all scripture is given by inspiration of God*." The phrase in English "*given by inspiration of God*" is one word in Greek. (*theopneustos*) There is no English equivalent for it so the translators had to use a phrase. Some newer translations do better by bringing it down to just two words, which are actually closer to the original. "*God breathed".* But there is still not a direct parallel in English. So, in cases like these, which selection of words is best to use in the translation?

**2. Languages differ in nature.** For instance, English is an **analytical** language. That is, the meaning of the sentences is determined by the arrangement of the words within the sentence. If I say, "John hit the ball." it doesn't mean the same as if I say, "**The ball hit John**.” Greek, on the other hand, is an **inflected** language, indicating that the meaning of the sentence is determined by the inflection, (which is prefixes and suffixes) that are added to the words. A word in Greek could have many meanings depending on which inflections are used. So, the arrangement of the words may or may not change the meaning of the sentence.

For instance **John 3:16** “*For God so love the world that He gave His only begotten son, so that whosoever believes in Him, should not perish, but have everlasting life.”*

**Direct Translation *“****Thus for loved God the world that the son the only begotten he gave so that everyone believing in Him not should perish but should have life eternal.”*

**Incorrect Arrangement Of The Correctly Translated Words** *“Thus for the world loved God, so that the only begotten son should perish but that everyone not believing in Him should have life eternal.”*

So not only must the words be translated correctly, but which arrangement of words most accurately communicates what the author intended?That’s part of translation. By the way, **Authorial Intent** is a major part not only of translation, but interpretation as well.And so again, you not only have to accurately interpret the meaning of the words, you must also correctly analyze the arrangement of the words.

**3. It is often difficult to separate translation from culture**. One of the great mistakes people make in studying and interpreting scripture, is that they try to make it contemporary. That is they try to make a two or three thousand year old text relevant to a 21st century audience by interpreting it in a contemporary setting. The problem is that most of the time you can’t accurately understand or communicate the meaning that the author was trying to convey to his original audience that way.

That’s also one of the problems I have with a lot of the Hollywood adaptations of Bible stories. They are indeed adaptations. That is they try to adapt the Bible to a contemporary audience. And I hear this in modern preaching all the time. But it’s the wrong approach because in order to get the correct interpretation of the text, you don’t bring the setting into the present, but you have to put yourself in the setting of the text. That’s why it’s wrong to ask a Bible class for instance, “What does that mean to you?” Why is it wrong, because it doesn’t matter what it means to you. It only matters what it means. Which is whatever the author intended it to mean to the people to whom he wrote it.

There are huge gaps between the original audience and a contemporary audience. There is **a** **time gap,** a **language gap,** a **geographical gap**, and others. And one of the others is the **cultural gap**. And not only does it affect the interpretation of the text, but also the translation of the text. Let me show you what I mean.

Our culture, as did, and really as a result of, the ancient Greeks, speak of the **“heart”** as the center of the being.

We say, “I love you with all my (what?) **“heart.”** Or. “It is my heart’s desire”. So, when the New Testament was written in the Greek language, the writers of Scripture said, "*confess with the mouth the Lord Jesus and believe in the* ***heart*** *that God has raised him from the dead*." **But**, not all cultures consider the heart the center of the being. Some cultures all the way back to the Babylonians believe the liver as the center of the being. When I was in seminary, a visiting missionary and linguist told of an African tribe that believed the throat was the center of the being. So imagine that you are translating the scripture into one of those languages and you come to this passage. “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart…*” What do you? To say, "*Love the Lord your God with all your* *liver (or throat)*”, may sound silly to us, but no less so than to say “*Love the Lord your God with all your heart…*” sounds to them. As a matter of fact, if you translated it “*heart*” they wouldn’t understand the meaning. But if you translate it according to their culture they would. Now we may talk more about this later, because it raises some important questions regarding the philosophy of translation. Is it better to translate the exact word, even though it might be difficult to understand? Or is it better to translate the thought, in order to try to facilitate understanding? That is a huge debate. How would you translate a passage like "*though your sins be as scarlet they shall be as white as snow*" For a people group who lives in a desert region and has never seen snow? Do you see the problems that arise with translation?

**4. The use of idioms**. An idiom is a word or phrase that in a particular culture or context says one thing and means something entirely different. English, (**like every language**), is loaded with idioms. There are in the neighborhood of 25,000 American English Idioms. And you without realizing it, probably use at least dozens of them everyday maybe hundreds. **(Sample)**

ants in your pants

barking up the wrong tree –

bats in the belfry - indicates that someone is behaving in an eccentric or less than sane manner

elephant in the room - something that everyone in the room is aware of that probably needs to be addressed

get your ducks in a row - make proper plans; get things in order

gets my goat - something that really bothers or annoys someone

plenty of fish in the sea - there are plenty of other dating prospects out there

smell a rat - to get a sense that there is a problem with something

down to the wire - completing or finishing something with no extra time remaining

drop the ball - to make a basic mistake

ahead of the game - to have an advantage over others

in the ballpark - close to a suitable amount or suggestion

the ball is in your court - it's your turn to act or respond

green thumb - to be good at gardening; having good skills or luck with growing flowers or vegetables

I'm all ears - the person is prepared and ready to listen to what you have to say

it's like pulling teeth - something that requires a lot of effort

no skin off my nose - something isn't going to affect you, so you don't really care

play it by ear - to move forward without a specific plan; to figure things out along the way

slap on the wrist - a minor caution against doing something rather than an actual punishment

stick your neck out - to take a chance on another person in a way that could impact your reputation

wet behind the ears - doesn't have very much experience; isn't very skilled

bought the farm - to die unexpectedly

go Dutch - to pay your own way when going somewhere with another person or a group of people

jump on the bandwagon - to do something because everyone is doing it

pass the buck - blame someone else for something

riding shotgun - riding in the front passenger seat of a car or truck

shoot the breeze - make small talk; have a casual conversation

spill the beans - to reveal information you were not supposed to share

let the cat out of the bag

touch base - to

Suppose a person learning English but is not familiar with American idioms hears someone talking about "splitting a hair" what would he think? Chances are he would not understand it to mean simply to make a fine distinction, but that's what it means to us. Or if he heard someone say "I'm going to take you to the cleaners", he might think they intended to drive him to the Laundromat. But we would understand it to mean they planned to take everything he had. Our conversation is riddled with idioms and we are so used to them that we don’t even realize how often they are used.

Well, the Biblical languages have idioms as well, and unless you are familiar with them, you will be lost in translation even if you understand the words. Let me give you a couple of biblical examples of an idiom. **Jeremiah 1:17** *“Thou therefore gird up thy loins, and arise, and speak unto them all that I command thee: be not dismayed at their faces, lest I confound thee before them.”* *“To gird up the loins”,* is an idiom, using the custom of societies where long robes were worn, and it refers to the practice pulling up the bottom of the garment and tucking into the girdle or belt, in order to make themselves ready fight or flight, work or play. It’s a very graphic picture of making the serious adjustments needed to spirit into action unencumbered and fully prepared. In the Context of the passage it means to get fully committed and ready to preach God’s words to the inhabitants of the land.

**Acts 26:14** is a part of the testimony of the apostle Paul about his conversion experience. Relating his Damascus road experience Paul says, "*We all fell to the ground, and I heard a voice saying to me in Aramaic, 'Saul, Saul, why do you persecute me? It is hard for you to kick against the goads*.'

“*It is hard for you to kick against the goads*. ”What is the meaning of this statement? Well it is a classic example of an idiom in scripture. A goad was a long wooden rod with a sharp point that was used to prod oxen while plowing and if an ox kicked at the goad it would poke him and hurt, so it didn't help his situation any and it could even cause pain. So to *"kick against the goads"* was a Greek idiom for "useless resistance". If you are a Star Trek fan you'll recognize the statement "**Resistance is Futile**". Which is exactly what Paul is being told. Before his conversion Saul had viciously persecuted Christians pursuing them into foreign cities, capturing them, and bringing them back to Jerusalem for trial and execution. But here we learn that Saul's anger and rage and the intensity of his persecution of the church may well have been a reaction against Spiritual conviction. He was resisting the Holy Spirit and God tells him that, using an idiom. Now without explanation that is difficult for us, but he being a Greek speaking Jew understood it very well.

**5. The evolution of words.** Words tend to change meanings over time. Did you know that? Today we understand the word "*let*" to mean "to allow", but in 1611 when the King James Version of the Scripture was translated, the word "*let,*" meant exactly the opposite. **It meant to hinder.** Let me show you an illustration of that.

Let’s compare **Romans 1:13** in the KJV and the NIV.

**(Rom 1:13 KJV)** *"Now I would not have you ignorant, brethren, that oftentimes I purposed to come unto you, (but was* ***let*** *hitherto,) that I might have some fruit among you also, even as among other Gentiles."*

**(Rom 1:13 NIV)** "I *do not want you to be unaware, brothers, that I have often intended to come to you (but thus far have been* ***prevented****), in order that I may reap some harvest among you as well as among the rest of the Gentiles.*"

The Greek word is *"koluo"* which means (to prevent, to forbid, hinder, keep from). **Now this is not a wrong translation in the King** **James.** It is just that at the time of its translation "*let*,” was a middle English word that meant to hinder, but not anymore. The word evolved over the last 400 years and the meaning changed. There are lots of words like that and care must be taken that the meaning given to the word in translation is the same as the meaning that was attributed to the word at the time it was originally written.

It's easy to see from this that translation is not an easy process and we owe a great debt to those who have paid the price to bring us the Word of God in our own language. Let me say, as well that there is no magic in a translation, accept that it brings the scripture to us in a form that is most understandable. Although there are some good translations and some bad translations, it is often a choice of preferences as to which English version I can best understand.