Lesson 8 – Translation Part 2 - November 9, 2022

How We Got The English Bible

1. The Wycliffe Bible: There has been some parts of the Bible in English since the early 8th century. The first translation of the complete Bible into English was called the Wycliffe Bible. It was translated in 1380 by or under the direction of John Wycliffe, an Oxford professor who taught that the Bible was the supreme authority and believed that the people should have the scripture in their own language. The Wycliffe translation was not made from the original Greek and Hebrew. It was a translation of the Latin Vulgate which was the translation of the Bible into Latin from the original languages, made by Jerome the secretary to the bishop of Rome in 405 A.D.

2. The Tyndale Bible: The next translation of the scripture into English was translated from the original languages. It was called the Tyndale Bible and was translated by William Tyndale between 1525 and 1535. This was the foundation of many later versions including the King James.

Other English translations of the period, included the Coverdale Bible, named after Myles Coverdale. It was published in 1535 and was the first English translation of the Bible to be printed (not handwritten). The Thomas Matthew Bible was issued in 1537, and the Taverner's Bible, an unpopular revision of Matthew's Bible edited by Richard Taverner was published in (1539).

3. The Great Bible: The next really important translation, also published in 1539, was called The Great Bible. The name came from its size. It's pages were 15 inches long and 9 inches wide. It was initiated by Thomas Cromwell an English Statesman and issued under the authority of King Henry the VIII.

4. The Geneva Bible: Henry the VIII was followed to the throne by his son Edward VI who was followed by Mary Tudor, a Roman Catholic. She was called bloody Mary because she executed three hundred Reformers. She also caused the burning of many Bibles. As a result a large number of reformers took refuge in the free city of Geneva where a group of scholars led by William Whittingham worked for two and a half years to produce The Geneva Bible completed in 1560.

5. The Bishop's Bible: In 1568 The Bishops' Bible was completed. It was a revision of the Great Bible and became the second "authorized" English Bible for the Church of England, the Great Bible being the first. It was the basis for the King James Version.

6. The King James Bible: In 1604 King James I of England called a conference of churchmen and theologians. John Reynolds, a Puritan, proposed that a new translation of the Bible be prepared. King James was pleased with the suggestion expressing his judgment that the Geneva Bible was the worst of the translations.

(Although many scholars consider it the best of the time.) The King appointed fifty‑four scholars from Oxford and Cambridge University and Westminster Abbey to the work. Careful rules were drawn up for the project, including the following:

 (1) The Bishop's Bible was to be the basis for revision, changes only being made as required by the Greek and Hebrew text.

(14) Readings from Tyndale, Matthew's Bible, Coverdale, The Great Bible, and the Geneva Bible were to be followed when they seemed truer to the text than those of the Bishop's Bible.

The translators depended heavily on Tyndale and Coverdale as well as Latin versions. It was completed in 1611. So it's clear that the King James was obviously not the first English translation. And though it is called "the Authorized version", it was as has been seen actually the third such version. And it's not a "pure" translation in that it used previous works as its basis. And while it is a good and beloved translation, there is no valid reason to say that it is superior to other translations which were made with the same care, planning and motivation.

Selecting an English Translation

What is the difference between English translations of the Bible? Why are there so many? Are some better than others? What makes them better? How do you decide which one is right for you? Those are some of the questions we face when choosing a copy of the Scripture for our personal use, and they are all valid questions. Of course we have already answered some of them to a degree. We know that newer translations of the Bible are usually based on more, and older manuscripts, and therefore are a more accurate reflection of the originals. Does that make ALL of the newer translations better or superior than older translations like the King James? And the answer is, “No”. And the reason is because there is another difference in the translations that are available to us, and that difference is in the philosophy of translation. Let me explain what I mean.

We’ve talked about the difficulties involved in translation, and we have seen some of the particular principles involved and problems encountered in translation. One of those principles, you will remember is that you can never completely separate translation from interpretation. Sometimes a passage or a word can have more than one meaning and the translator has to decide which meaning is intended by the author. Sometimes that is easy… Sometimes it is almost impossible to do with certainty. Let me give you an example.

1Thessalonians 4:3-4 “*For this is the will of God, even your sanctification, that ye should abstain from fornication: That every one of you should know how to possess his vessel in sanctification and honour*;” (KJV) The word "*vessel"* in verse :4, *“σκεῦος” (skyewos)*, may mean *"body,"* suggesting that the believer's body is to be *“controlled”*, *"set apart"* to holiness, and to be *"honored".*

But in 1Peter 3:7 that word is used to refer to the wife of a believing husband. And that’s a legitimate use. Strong’s Greek Dictionary says, “…a vessel, implement, equipment or apparatus (literally or figuratively [specifically a wife as contributing to the usefulness of the husband])... Peter writes, “*Likewise, ye husbands, dwell with them according to knowledge, giving honour unto the wife, as unto the weaker vessel*…” So if you are translating this passage, what do you do? To what is Paul using this word as a reference? To a Christian man’s body, or his wife? There are valid arguments on both sides. So I’m going to let you wrestle with that. ☺

I looked up 1Thessalonians 4:4 in 50 different translations. Here’s what I found. In 11 of those fifty, the translators interpreted it to mean *“body”.* Four translations rendered it wife. That’s only 15 B.J., I thought you said you looked at 50 translations. I did and this makes the point of the difficulty involved. Thirty five of the fifty translations, didn’t interpret it. They just translated it *“vessel”* like the King James. 35!Sometimes that’s the best you can do, and some would say that’s all you should do.

We also saw that there are idioms in every language, which must be interpreted. Idioms usually consist of a phrase used in a cultural context, which say one thing but mean something entirely different. For instance, what do I mean when I say, “That’s a piece of cake”? Well it could mean I’m looking at my dessert. Or I could be talking about a task that can be accomplished very easily.

What if I say, “He had a chip on his shoulder”? Or, “Keep your chin up”? Let me ask you a question. If I’m translating those into another language and I want my readers to understand them, do I translate the words or do I translate the idea? That is the difference in many of the English translations.

There are two different philosophies of translation that are followed. The first is called The Literal, or Formal Equivalence method of translation. This very literal translation is concerned with the original text and the word for word equivalency. The second is called The Dynamic Equivalence method of translation. It is more concerned with the audience, and the effectiveness of communication. This is also sometimes called A Free Translation. Its intent is not just to translate the words, but also to communicate the idea. For instance in the case of the passage I just mentioned. The original audience, to whom 1Thessalonians was written, would have clearly understood whether Paul intended by “*vessel”,* a man’s body or his wife, because it was their language and their culture. So the free translation wants to communicate not just the words but also the idea, as it was originally understood.

Now I hope you see the problems here. If I just translate that passage word for word from Greek, I have the translation right, but the meaning is unclear to my readers. If, on the other hand, I translate the meaning, I have to interpret it, and I (the translator) makes the decision about what that word means. What if I’m wrong in my interpretation??? So what’s better? To translate the exact word and leave the meaning unclear so that the reader doesn’t understand what is being said, or to make an educated interpretation but take a chance on it being wrong and misleading the reader? Well what is better, I believe, is to try to get as close as possible to combining these two so that we have both an accurate translation of the words, and at the same time attempt to communicate the meaning as understood by the original audience.

Now what we find when we begin to examine translations of the Bible are all three of these. There are some that are very literal word for word translations. They are extremely accurate in bringing the Hebrew and Greek words as closely as possible into and English equivalent. The problem is that sometimes they are difficult to read – stiff, “wooden”, and sometimes they are more difficult to understand because they only translate the words, but make no attempt to communicate the meaning that the original audience understood.

There are some translations that communicate what the translators interpreted as the meaning of the text, but they are not always accurate. And then there are some that try to bring the two together, and some do a better job than others. Let me give you some examples.

Take a look at the handout I gave you. You’ll notice that the more literal translations are at the top, with the free translations listed in the middle and the paraphrases listed at the bottom. A paraphrase is like a really really free translation. Sometimes a paraphrase is not a translation at all but just a total interpretation. Usually a paraphrase is really more of a commentary than a translation, and really should never be used as scripture.

But that doesn’t mean they are bad or that you shouldn’t own one. The PME better known as the Phillips translation is very good at communicating difficult passages in an understandable way. So if you come across a passage that you don’t understand, you might use a good paraphrase for help. Just don’t use it as your Bible.

What I want you to see in particular are the translations that are listed beginning with the NIV (1984) and going up. Anyone of those is probably an “OK” choice. *(Although because of problems with revisions of the NIV dating back as far as 1994, it might be better to just avoid it altogether.)*

I started out like many of you using the KJV, but it is just difficult to understand with its Elizabethan English,

and sometimes it’s so wooden, (although I still use it.) For years I used the NIV in my preaching and for even longer in my personal Bible study. But the more I learned about translation and interpretation, the more I realize that I need to move to a slightly more literal translation. So I started using the ESV in my personal study, and I really want to recommend it to you. It still provides more interpretation than the NASB or the KJV, but is still a very literal translation and is easy to read. The bottom line is, it’s important to know what you are looking for in a translation, and there are several good ones out there. I haven’t listed nearly all of the English versions, but I think if you’ll use this list, (Especially the Highlighted Selections), you’ll be all right.

See Chart on following page.

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| Literal Translation | Free Translations | Paraphrase |

ASV—American Standard Version

KJV—King James Version

NKJV—New King James Version

NASB—New American Standard Bible

ESV—English Standard Version

AB—New American Bible

RSV—Revised Standard Version

MLB—Modern Language Bible

NIV—New International Version (1984)

GNB—Good News Bible

NEB—New English Bible

JB—Jerusalem Bible

PME—Phillips Modern English

LB—Living Bible