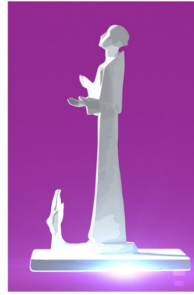


EXPLORING THE BIBLE

a St Francis College short course



Theme 1: A place to start

Question 1e. Why are there so many translations of the Bible?

1. See what you can find about the Dead Sea Scrolls. What interests you about the way they look, and what they contain?
2. Discuss the idea that there may be more to discover about the texts that make up the Bible as we know it.
3. Imagine you are on an editorial committee for a new translation of the Bible. What issues arise for the team when archaeologists discover new, authentic texts?

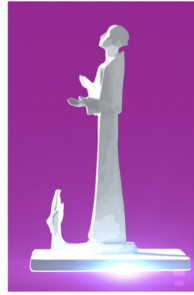
Greg Jenks

First of all there's just the fact that in the last hundred to a hundred and fifty years we've actually discovered a whole lot of ancient manuscripts, particularly for the Greek New Testament, but with the Dead Sea Scrolls discovered in 1948 we actually went back more than a thousand years in terms of the date of our oldest extant text for the Hebrew Bible for the Old Testament. So we actually have access to earlier versions and then there's a whole area of scholarship, (Text-Critical scholarship) designed to work out to the best we can, (even if this is the wrong question to be asking in a sense) 'what did the original look like?' What did the original version of that sentence? And they'll go through phrase by phrase trying to work out exactly what the earliest version of the text might have been.

So for that reason, one of the differences say between the King James Bible and the NRSV is that the NRSV is using manuscript evidence that just was not available round about 1600. So there will be some changes and one of the reasons why people started to stop using the RSV which preceded the NRSV,

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was that it had dropped out some of their favourite verses, like the snake handling section in Mark chapter 16. Well that disappeared. Well if you're in a church that likes to handle snakes your proof text just disappeared!

So textual criticism, discoveries of new ancient versions of the Bible, which all have their mistakes, but they represent evidence for what the text was like at an earlier stage.

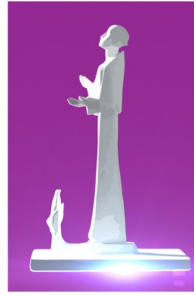
So we have new data. One of the questions that generates is what do we do with that new data, for example, in the Psalms, there are a couple of Psalms, um one in particular I'm thinking of (Psalm 145) is actually a Psalm which is designed in a form so that each verse begins with the appropriate letter of the Hebrew alphabet. It's an acrostic Psalm. And in our terms, round about verse 'P' that verse is missing. But the Qumran, Dead Sea Scroll version of the Psalms, has that missing sentence starting with the appropriate Hebrew letter. Now do you put that into a Bible now? It has never been in a Christian Bible, in all of the last 2000 years, whatever you think the Bible was, that verse was not in it.

Similarly, there's a paragraph in First Samuel around the time when Saul becomes King, a whole paragraph was missing from the Hebrew and from the Greek, but we found it at Qumran. Do you put it back into the Bible? The NRSV says 'yes' and the NIV says 'no'. Although those words are part of the original form of First Samuel or part of the original form of the Psalm, they have never been in anybody's Bible ever, for the last 2000 years, so they leave them out. So again, that's another reason why you get some variation.

The third reason why there's variation is just translation choices, translation styles. Do you go for a very literal, word for word translation? That probably means it won't be very good English, so we tend not to do that. That's the kind of translation a New Testament Greek student does about week 4 where they can work out this word

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means that but they haven't got the confidence to make it a smooth translation.

At the other end of the spectrum you say 'oh, I know what he was trying to say, and if I was trying to say that for my readers I would use these words.' That's called a paraphrase. *The Message*, by Eugene Peterson is perhaps the most successful example of that. So somewhere between the paraphrase, and the fairly wooden, literal translation, (and the King James was pretty close to a wooden literal translation), somewhere on that range, you're going to be able to plot every one of the 35-45 whatever it is, modern translations of the Bible.

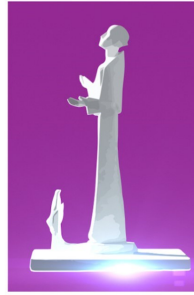
Some of them will tend to be more literal, some of them will tend to try to communicate the meaning but won't worry too much about the precision of the actual words, and some of them of course will be in the middle. They'll be looking for a compromise that preserves some element of literalness and faithfulness to the actual text. If you look at the English translation and for example it uses the word Christian, then you should only find that word in your English Bible the same number of times that 'Christianoī' occurs in the Greek New Testament. If they use 'Christian' when the Greek has 'believers', are they translating or are they paraphrasing?

So apart from theological differences between editorial committees, the biggest difference is partly the choice of text they're going to count as part of their Bible. And then where they've set themselves on the scale between literal to paraphrasing and then somewhere between the two extremes.

Also, the underlying reason is that the Western world is so focussed on the individual and has such a small, such a low sense of the collective identity, that there that there is a market for Bibles that are tailored to particular audiences. They're publication opportunities, they promote the ego of the translation committee or publisher and they make a nice profit for them as well.

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So they're the drivers. And the drivers from the market side is that there are a lot of people who, in the rest of their life, are kind of into conspiracy theories, and that comes across into religion as 'well we've got to get the true version of the Bible that hasn't been tampered with by the Catholics or the Anglicans or the Lutherans or whoever'. There's a market for tribal versions of the Bible, most famously the New International, which is a whole marketing programme designed for a whole marketing segment.

So the underlying reason is not that there are good reasons to have multiple translations but that we are just in a point of time where, unlike when the printing press was first invented, printing was relatively expensive, it was still cheaper than to hand write manuscripts. The economics of Bible printing have totally changed and the market for Bibles has totally changed and the entrepreneur, the religious entrepreneurs have stepped up to meet that market.