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THE WRITTEN WORD

Bethany Bible Church, Adult Sunday School Class, September 20, 2009

Bible Translations (up to King James)

The history of the translation of the Bible is no small matter! It's part of the ongoing story of how our Lord's promise has been kept: that "this gospel of the kingdom will be preached to all the nations" (Matthew 24:14).

Did you ever hear about the man who got frustrated with all the different Bible translations that were being used in church? "I'm stickin' with the good-ol' King James", he said. "After all, if it was good enough for Peter and Paul, then it's good enough for me!" The fact is, though, that all those translations aren't really such a bad thing. In fact, the history of Christianity and the history of Bible translation goes hand-in-hand.

The word of God was given to us in three original languages. The first we should know about is the language in which the Old Testament is primarily given to us--that is, Hebrew. But some portions of the Old Testament (that is, citations in Ezra and Daniel of official documents) are in Aramaic--which was a language similar in many ways to Hebrew. It was first introduced to the Jewish people by Assyrian conquerors; but it came to be used in other places around the world. It was the language that the Jewish people of Jesus' day commonly spoke. Finally, the New Testament was written in Greek--in fact, a specific kind of Greek that we, today, call Koine (or "common") Greek. The New Testament was written in the language of everyday business that people would have spoken around the world.

To appreciate the many translations from these three languages that we enjoy today in English; we need to know something of the history of Bible translation all the way up to that most famous English translation of them all--the King James!

I. THERE WERE HINTS OF THE NEED FOR A TRANSLATION OF THE SCRIPTURES FOUND IN THE SCRIPTURES THEMSELVES.

A. The Scriptures translate important words for us--words like "Golgotha" (Mark 15:22), "Rabbi" (John 1:38), "Messiah" (John 1:41), "Siloam" (John 9:7).

B. Some familiar Bible names also get translation-treatment in Scripture--"Immanuel" (1:3), "Cephas" (John 1:42), "Barnabas" (Acts 4:36), "Tabitha" (Acts 9:36), the sorcerer "Bar-Jesus" (Acts 13:6, 8), and "Melchizedek" (Hebrews 7:1-2).

C. Even entire phrases are translated for us. When Mark tells us about how Jesus raised a little girl, he had to translate into Greek what Jesus had said to her in Aramaic so that Mark's non-Jewish readers could understand (Mark 5:41). Think of how three languages had to be used to translate the accusation that was above the cross of our Savior, so all the world would know who Pilate said He was (John 19:19-20). Consider how we would never have understood the significance of the loud cry of our Lord from the cross if it had not been translated for us (Matthew 27:46). And let's not forget Acts 2:8-11--where the Holy Spirit became Translator!

II. THERE WERE TRANSLATIONS OF THE OLD TESTAMENT MADE BEFORE THE NEW TESTAMENT WAS WRITTEN.

A. When Jewish people had become scattered far from their homeland during their time of captivity, many of them had lost a familiarity with their native language. Most spoke Greek, which was as well-known around the world as English is today. So, some two-hundred years or so before Jesus' day--as legend has it--seventy-two scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek in seventy-two days. It came to be called the Septuagint (that is, "Seventy"; sometimes identified by the Roman numeral LXX). It would have been the Bible read by the people of Jesus' day. It had a great impact on the New Testament. (When you read a quote in the New Testament from the Old, it most likely comes from the Septuagint.)

B. Another important translation of the Old Testament--really more of a paraphrase

than a translation--was the Jewish Targums (from the Hebrew word that means “translations”). They were interpretive readings of portions of the Hebrew Scriptures set in Aramaic words, and created after the time of Ezra. Because most Jewish people were speaking Aramaic at the time, it became necessary to “interpret” Scripture for them. The Targums started off as “oral” interpretations; but they eventually became standardized into writing. They also often included some “commentaries” on the text that was being “interpreted”. The Targums were used by Jewish people--and many Christians--all the way up into the middle ages.

III. THERE WERE MANY TRANSLATIONS MADE OF PORTIONS OF THE BIBLE BEFORE IT WAS TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH.

A. For simplicity, there are three ‘basic’ types of versions to know about. The first would be the Syriac versions. They had their beginning in the story told to us in Acts 11:19-26--when the center of Christianity moved from Jerusalem to Syrian Antioch, and where disciples were first called “Christians” (v. 26).

B. The Latin versions had their roots in the fact that Rome had political control of the world. The most important of these would be the Latin Vulgate, given to us by Jerome. It was the Bible of Western civilization for nearly a thousand years.

C. A third would be the Coptic versions. They were the versions of Egyptian Christianity (which probably had its beginnings in Acts 2:10). A lot of ancient Christian literature and New Testament manuscripts resulted from these versions.

IV. THERE WERE MANY ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS THAT PRECEDED THE KING JAMES VERSION--SOME OF WHICH SERVED AS THE BASIS OF IT.

A. The English Bible has its beginnings in John Wycliffe (c. 1330-1384). Often called is “the morning star of the Reformation”, he fought hard to have the Bible put into the language of his people, and translated it for them from the Latin Vulgate. For this, he was tried as a heretic. Though he himself didn’t translate the full Bible into English, it was under his inspiration that it had been done.

B. It was William Tyndale (1494-1536) who first translated the New Testament into English from the original language in 1526. He sought to translate the Old Testament as well while in prison; but was killed by strangulation, and his body burned, before he could complete it. Some scholars estimate that nearly 80% of what we find in the New Testament of English Bibles--even up to the twentieth century--are words and phrases drawn from his translation efforts.

C. The first completed printed Bible in English was one translated by Miles Coverdale (1488-1568). He stuck close to Tyndale’s work; but improved it some.

D. The Matthew’s Bible of 1537--supposedly from Thomas Matthew; most likely a pseudonym for John Rogers--was a friend of Tyndale, and used some of Tyndale’s unpublished notes to translate the Old Testament. He spoke out strongly against ‘popery’ . . . and was burned alive in 1555 by Queen Mary as a result.

E. In 1539, Coverdale published another translation--called The Great Bible because of its size. It was the first English Bible approved for use in churches.

F. The protestant scholars who fled to Switzerland under the threats of Queen Mary came under the influence of John Calvin’s Geneva--and thus produced The Geneva Bible (1559). It was the first “study Bible” in English--equipped with maps and notes. It was also the first Bible to be divided into verses. It was the Bible that the pilgrims brought with them to the New World.

G. The Church of England disliked the success of the Geneva Bible; so it produced a “rival” in The Bishop’s Bible--which was a revision of The Great Bible.

H. King James VI--who also hated the Puritanism of the Geneva Bible’s notes --appointed the translation of a new Bible. Published in 1611 as a revision of the Bishop’s Bible, the King James Bible (or The Authorized Version) became the main Bible of English-speaking people for the next three centuries!