

The Bible and Translations [Gifford Rhamie. Newbold College]

The Bible is the most translated book in the world and still the no. 1 best seller. This is largely because of the depth of its spirituality told through stories, but more so because of its central character, Jesus Christ – the one who is the cause of the division of history into BC and AD, and the division of the Bible into the Old Testament and New Testament. Because of the booming thousands of translations, Jesus has become accessible to millions of people around the world. Yet, history has taught us that the day translations become censored is the day that Jesus would be put in a box and attempted to be monopolised and “copywrited” by the censoring group. Hence, the gospel must continue to be preached throughout the world to all people groups by all people groups.

To appreciate the translated Bible we have in our hands is to appreciate the long history of sacrifice, serendipity and divine providence afforded on the part of thousands of people throughout the ages. This long history could be best divided into six stages: revelation, inspiration, autograph, transmission, preservation and translation. Let us briefly overview these stages before looking more closely at the final stage of translation.

Revelation

Before the Bible was conceived, God chose to reveal Himself. “God spoke to our forefathers through the prophets... but in these last days He has spoken to us by His Son,” (Heb 1:1, 2). That which we have in the form of the Bible is from the witnesses of His Self-revelation. The revelation was largely spoken before it was written.

Inspiration

The witnesses of God’s self-revelation were inspired by God Himself. This was a process that involved impressing the mind of the Bible writer (witness) to investigate different sources (whether spoken or written - Luke 1:1-4), select and report (2 Tim 3.16, 17) that which was revealed. This is the ‘process’ of *thought inspiration* as opposed to the ‘event’ of *verbal inspiration* (where individuals are allegedly writing down what was dictated to them supposedly from God while in a trance). The SDA church has always believed in *thought inspiration*.

Autograph

The authors of the Bible then wrote that which they were inspired to select. They wrote through the human limitation of language, vocabulary, grammar, education and culture. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew (with a small section of Aramaic) and the New Testament was written in Greek. To date we do not have in our possession the original articles which the different authors wrote. It appears that they were worn out in time. (“See with what large letters I am writing to you with my own hand,” Gal 6:11). However, what we do have are copies of the original.

Transmission

In fact, there are thousands of copies of manuscripts – copies of the original. These are scattered in secure places (universities, libraries, churches) around the world. The manuscripts were carefully and prayerfully written by scribes. Some scribes were so scrupulous in seeing the recording of scripture as sacred that they would ritually wash

their hands and pray before writing the name Jehovah. Once written the copies were circulated around the world and themselves copied at every presentable opportunity. Today we have over 6,000 copies of manuscripts of the different parts of the Bible, not to mention thousand more fragments. This is by far the most amount of copies of any ancient book. The older copies are very close to the actual recording of the autograph – some only 60-70 years apart. No other ancient document enjoys such close proximity with the original authors. This renders the Bible the most secure and reliable piece of literature in the history of this world.

Preservation

The different manuscripts were mainly kept in cool, ancient libraries. In times of persecution, some were hidden, only to be found many centuries later – e.g., the manuscripts found in the Qumran cave beside the Dead Sea, Palestine, in 1947. Here, the now famous Isaiah scroll was found intact in mint condition, despite being over a thousand years old. It was found to be 98% identical to that of an Isaiah scroll one thousand years younger. The differential of 2% is due to grammatical differences such as spellings. This sort of accuracy only serves to enhance the credibility of the Bible as an indisputably authentic book.

Translations

Since the writers of the Bible were thought-inspired, the early Christians felt at liberty to translate it into their own languages. Among the early translations were the Latin (Italy), the Syriac (Syrian), Coptic (Egyptian), and the Ethiopic (Ethiopian) Bibles – all produced by the sixth century A.D. However, this desire to continue to have the Bible read, explained and thereby translated in the local vernacular of (and by) the different people groups was suppressed for several centuries by the then Roman Church. Nations, particularly in the West, were simply not allowed to translate much less read the Bible in their own language. Hence, the Roman Church – the censoring group – monopolised and ‘copywrote’ a particular understanding of the Bible and, by definition, of God.

Yet, one can only suppress the will of a people for so long before a ‘prophet’ arises from among them to uphold justice and give voice to that will. So it was that men such as John Wycliffe, William Tyndale and John Calvin, began to translate the Bible into the English vernacular between the 15th -17th centuries AD. By the 17th century a new wind of change swept over Europe that broke the back and stranglehold of Catholicism. The Reformation coincided with the invention of the printing press, and a new English translation was born. It was commissioned by King James I and first published in 1611 – the King James Version. No other translation (and perhaps, piece of literature) has helped to shape the life and times of an empire like that of the KJV. Four centuries later you will still find its influence in UK underpinning the rule of law, the practice of commerce and idioms of common expressions.

Since the KJV, many New Testament Greek manuscripts have been found particularly in the Middle Eastern region. These are found to pre-date the manuscripts used for the translation of the KJV. Furthermore, there have been huge developments in the English language. Language is never static. It is dynamic – always changing. Therefore, with the discoveries of new manuscripts coupled with the growing desire to have the Bible translated, read and understood in the vernacular, there has been a plethora of English translations. With some of the translations have come some

confusion over which translations are most reliable. In light of this, I wish to suggest some pointers that will help with the choice of translations for personal reading whether and study, whether formal or casual.

1. **Self-disclosure.** Most Bibles declare their hand as to what the translators of their respective volume are trying to achieve with their new translation. You must, then, read the preface of the Bible in order to discover what the translators are trying to do.
2. **Literal translations.** Some translations set out to give a very close reading of the original text of the Bible such as the AV, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NRSV, ASV, NASB. These are known as literal translations. They are particularly useful for personal Bible study and or doctrinal study. The KJV is particular useful for memorisation, as it has uniquely retained the metre and cadence of the poetry within the Bible.
3. **Moderately Dynamic translations.** Some translations set out to give a dynamic reading of the original text of the Bible such as the NIV, NCB, NLB, JB. These are known as dynamic translations, since the translations attempt to retain the original meaning of the text while given it a fresh present-day English idiomatic feel. These are good for personal reflective study, though some caution must be applied when studying for serious doctrinal value.
4. **Dynamic-paraphrase translations.** Some translations set out to give an impressionistic reading of the original text of the Bible such as The Message, The Clear Word, The Living Bible and Phillip's. These are known as paraphrase translations because they attempt to retain the essence of the meaning of the text while paraphrasing the text to give a general feel for what the author is trying to say. This is very good for a casual reading of the text, especially if you want to visualise a particular narrative or have a general grasp of a biblical teaching. However, great caution must be applied if you are using them for doctrinal study, as this is not what this particular set of translations has purposed to accomplish.
5. **Read several translations at a time.** Short of reading the Bible in its original languages – Hebrew and Greek – it is useful to have several translations in view, to juice the essence of the meaning of the text. Those of you who are bilingual would know that there are some sayings that are impossible to translate smoothly into an English equivalent. In your original language, people may laugh (because of rhyme, alliteration etc.), but when translated the same witty phrase may draw only blank faces. So it is with all translations including that of the Bible. However, you might begin to see the sense of what is being communicated in the original by putting several translations together, side by side.

So we must be thankful to the providence of God that we have many translations today. Nevertheless, we must remember that however we read the Word of God it is meant, in the words of my colleague and friend, Jean-Claude Verrecchia, “to shock, to disturb and to shake up” the reader. Or as Heb. 4:13 says, “For the word of God *is* quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the

dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and *is* a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart.”