

CHURCH HISTORY LITERACY

Lessons 62 & 63

History of the English Bible – Parts 2 & 3

For the last two weeks, we have discussed the history of the English Bible. As Christians, we see and understand the Bible to be God’s divine communication to humanity, revealing truth about the human condition – past, present, and future. We have been spending time focusing on the reasons we can rationally consider the Bible as more than a book, as actually scripture – a holy communication. In order for this faith to be more than a blind acceptance of a tradition or teaching handed to us, we must examine several issues:

1. Who wrote the scriptures?
2. Who decided what writings would constitute the scriptures?
3. Do we have a good grasp of what those original writings were?
4. Do we have an accurate translation of those scriptures into our language?

The lessons on authorship (question 1) were dealt with in the predecessor class to this one, “Biblical Literacy.” Those lessons can be found in written and oral form on the website: [www. Biblical-Literacy.com](http://www.Biblical-Literacy.com). Lessons 11 and 12 in this Church History Literacy class dealt with the issues surrounding question 2 (which writings make the canon?), also accessible on the same website. Last week, we spent time considering some of the elements of question 3 (Lesson 62). This week, our goal is to pick up with the teachings of last week and add question 4 to the mix!

THE ISSUE WITH ORIGINAL WRITINGS

Last week, we noted that skeptics who question the reliability of scripture often point to the statistic that there are over 10,000 variant readings in the over 5,000 different copies of Greek New Testament manuscripts that have survived to date. Skeptics ask, “How could anyone ever claim to know what the original writings actually were in light of these many variations?”

As we already considered, the keys to understanding the real nature of the problem lies in understanding more than surface statistics of differences. For example, the vast majority of the “over 10,000 differences” are either misspellings or the presence/absence of the word “the” (called in Greek, the definite article). Other common obvious errors include recopying the same line over twice. There are also clear examples of copyists skipping lines because they lost their place while copying texts. We readily see this, for instance, in 1 John 2:23. In the New International Version, this verse reads:

No one who denies the Son has the Father; whoever acknowledges the Son has the Father also.

If we read the same passage in the King James Version of 1611, it reads:

Whosoever denieth the Sonne, the same hath not the Father: *but he that acknowledgeth the Sonne, hath the Father also.* (Italics in original)

We read the King James and see the italics for the last phrase in the verse. We also are aware that the King James (and most other translations) put words into italics where the words are necessary for clear English understanding of the passage, even though those words are not in the manuscripts being used for translation. So, we wonder how the King James has added the whole second half of the 1 John 2:23 verse? Or, were the italics an error?

The answers are found in the variations in the Greek manuscripts used. The King James used a text we learned last week is called the “Received Text” (also known by its Latin name, “*textus receptus*”). This Received Text grew out of the Greek editions Erasmus put forth in the early 1500’s. The Received Text was based on a limited number of rather late-dated Greek manuscripts.¹ The italicized portion of 1 John 2:23 is *not* found in the Greek of the Received Text. Why? A glance at the Greek itself makes it evident why the phrase is missing.

To understand better, we need to look at the verse considering the original Greek word order. Verse 23 has the phrase “has the Father” in it twice. A word for word translation keeping the Greek order (which does not make for proper English but is necessary to understand the transcription error) is as follows:

“All who deny the son, not the Father has
The one who acknowledges the Son the Father
has”

The Greek then continues to verse 24. Now, we can see that the first half of verse 23 ends with “the Father has.” In Greek this is “τον πατερα εχει.” What happened was a tired copyist clearly lost his place while making his copy (or while reading the text for others to transcribe). He must have written the first phrase and then his eye assumed he had written the second phrase because the phrases end identically. The net result, however, was to totally leave out the second phrase.

¹ This was discussed in more detail last week. Erasmus’s first edition was limited to a review of 6 Greek manuscripts, the oldest of which dated to the 1100’s. Subsequent editions used more and better manuscripts, but were still extremely limited by today’s standards.

The translators of the King James saw this as a clear mistake in the Greek texts they were using and supplied the “original” verse as John wrote it over 1400 years earlier. To stay consistent, the translators followed their rules and placed anything not found in the Received Text into italics.

Now one might fairly ask, “Didn’t even Erasmus’s first edition use at least 6 Greek manuscripts? How could that mistake be made in *each one* of the six?” These questions bring up another important aspect of understanding the Greek texts available for study. It is an issue of “family!”

Our understanding of “family” necessitates a statement of something that is so obvious it might slip our minds. When people copied texts, they did not always copy from the original. Somewhere, someone actually copied the original letter John wrote that we call 1 John. It is likely such a copyist made an error or two in the process – maybe a misspelling or a misplaced word. Then one, two, or maybe many others made copies while looking at the same autographed original as a source. They each would have made their own unique errors. After that, however, new copyists would have made their copies from what we might call “first generation” copies. These new copies (which by our jargon would be “second generation copies”) would have automatically contained the errors of the first generation copies.²

Scholars are able to take the 5,000 plus manuscripts and figure out which tree of copies they descended from by seeing the common errors or textual differences among them. Scholars then assign these manuscripts to certain “families” of origin. The term textual scholars frequently use is that these families represent “local texts.” In other words, great Christian centers like Alexandria had their copyists who would produce their scriptures for use in the surrounding churches, and these local productions frequently propagated many of the same differences we see over and over in copies.

Scholars have assigned these texts to Alexandria (the “Alexandrian” or “Neutral” text), to Italy, Gaul, and portions of North Africa (the “Western text”), Caesarea (the “Caesarean” text) and Antioch/Constantinople (the “Byzantine” or “Antiochine” text³).

The Received Text used in the King James version was based on “Byzantine” manuscripts. The errors it had were more fully understood and revealed when

² Unless, of course, the second-generation copyist believed he had spotted a copying error. In that event, he might have guessed how the original read and tried to “fix” what he perceived to be error. Sometimes, these “fixes” actually produced more errors!

³ Various scholars assign this particular text a number of different names.

more texts from other families were discovered and used. The Codexes (a term for ancient books) Sinaiticus and Vaticanus we discussed last week were in the Alexandrian family and their discovery and usage in the 1800's greatly increased the understanding of the original autographed writings.

What is the net effect of these historical developments? Were the early Bibles missing important truths? Was there a time period where God's saving work in Jesus was disguised in poor translations and hidden from humanity? Of course not! The God who *wants* to save humanity and who *wants* to communicate his salvation history to mankind would not fail to protect the integrity of his saving story that is conveyed by scripture. The areas of questions for variant readings in the transcripts have never been over passages that teach the central saving message of the Christian faith.⁴

Even today, there are few passages where scholars seriously dispute what the original scriptures looked like. As an example, we study three of the handful of main passages in question:

1. Acts 6:8. Stephen is described in the King James as "full of faith and power." The Revised Standard Version and the New International Version described him as "full of grace and power." One unfamiliar with our subject of variant readings in different Greek manuscripts might think that difference is one of translation. It is not. The King James used the *Received Text*, which has the word "faith" instead of "grace." This variation comes from the Byzantine family of manuscripts and is found in Codex Mutinensis from the 9th century, and several other late-dated manuscripts. The word "faith" is found in Codexes Sinaiticus, Vaticanus, and many other earlier manuscripts from multiple families. This leads the translators of the versions referenced above to their conclusion that the proper word choice is "faith."
2. John 7:53 – 8:11. This is the story of the woman caught in adultery. This story is missing from the most authoritative early manuscripts, including Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. It is also missing from the commentaries of the early church fathers (even those who went through the gospel verse by verse). The earliest manuscript to include the story dates from the 5th or 6th century (Codex Bezae). It

⁴ Copying and transmission errors occur in most every human production. In the earlier printings of *Webster's New International Dictionary of the English Language* (Springfield, 1934) is an entry: **dord** (dôrd), *n. Physics & Chem.* Density. This was printed in multiple editions over a dozen years. It was also an error! There is no such word as "dord." The text was supposed to read: **d.** or **D.,** *Physics & Chem.* Density. It was supposed to be an abbreviation, not a "dord"!

is also found in several old Latin manuscripts. It is apparent it is an account or rendering of the Western church. It certainly seems to many scholars that the idea of newly incorporating such a long vivid story would be next to impossible if the account were not based on an actual writing. Therefore, most scholars and translators include this passage in rendering John into English, but almost always with a footnote noting its limited sources.

3. Mark 16:9-20. This ending to Mark is noted in most every translation, much like the John passage referenced above. The ending is not found in the two earliest codexes, Sinaiticus and Vaticanus. The ending found in the *Received Text* is found in a large number of manuscripts including Codexes Alexandrinus and Ephraemi Rescriptus, both from the 5th Century.

OLD TESTAMENT

We have covered a god bit of information about the text itself, but we have thus far looked solely at the New Testament. The Old Testament discussion differs in a number of ways. We should start by considering the Old Testament at the time of Christ.

When Jesus walked the earth, the Old Testament was not a “book” in the sense that we use the word. It was a collection of scrolls, deemed holy and inspired by God. The scrolls were divided into several different groups. There was “the Law” which was the first five books (also called “the Books of Moses” or the “Pentateuch). The second group was called “the Prophets.” This group included many of the historical writings of Samuel and Kings, as well as the books we generally consider prophets today (save the book of Daniel which was not included in the “Prophets” collection of scrolls). The third group was simply regarded as the “Other Writings.” This group included the Psalms, Job, Proverbs, Ruth, Song of Songs, Ecclesiastes, Lamentations, Daniel, Ezra-Nehemiah, and Chronicles. Sometimes, this third group was included in the generic term “the Law and the Prophets” (See Matt. 7:12; Luke 16:16; and Rom. 3:21). It was also sometimes simply referred to as “Psalms,” the largest of the “Other Writings” (See Luke 24:44).

These scriptures were available at the time of Christ in 3 different language forms. The Original texts were written predominantly in Hebrew, with a portion in Aramaic (a sister language to Hebrew). The texts were certainly available in those original languages. But, there was also a translation of these scriptures into Greek that occurred in Alexandria several hundred years before Christ. The third language set of scriptures applied only to The Law. Scholars call this set “The

Samaritan Pentateuch.” This was the scripture used by the Samaritans, the race despised by the Jews as we are repeatedly reminded reading about them in the gospels.⁵

The early church consistently used the Septuagint as their source for Old Testament scripture. Because Paul himself was comfortable using this Greek text, the church always felt confident that the Greek text was accurate in its portrayal of God’s message to humanity.

Because the early church relied on the Septuagint for their scriptures, the Jews eventually saw their translation into Greek less than desirable and wrote it off as a Christian Bible, seeking to restore full use of the Hebrew/Aramaic text. In the 1500’s as the Reformation Movement and the Humanist Movement set in during the Renaissance and scholars sought to return to the original texts in translating the Bible, scholars went first to the Hebrew/Aramaic texts that could be located. These Hebrew manuscripts were called “Masoretic Texts.”

Masoretic texts took their name from the scholars who would copy these scriptures throughout the Middle Ages. These scholars (“Masoretes”) were Jews who followed very thorough and careful rules in transcribing their Jewish Bible. As Josephus noted in the first century,

"we have ... twenty-two books⁶, which contain the records of all the past times; which are justly believed to be divine; and of them five belong to Moses, which contain his laws and the traditions of the origin of mankind till his death... and how firmly we have given credit to these books of our own nation is evident by what we do; for during so many ages as have already passed, no one has been so bold as either to add any thing to them, to take any thing from them, or to make any change in them; but it is become natural to all Jews immediately, and from their very birth, to esteem these books to contain Divine doctrines, and to persist in them, and, if occasion be willingly to die for them."

(Against Apion, Book 1, Section 8).

⁵ The Samaritans did not believe any other part of what we term “The Old Testament” was divinely inspired and so did not follow it. The Samaritan Pentateuch has continued to be the source of scriptures for a small yet still active Samaritan community even to this day.

⁶ The Jews combined Ezra and Nehemiah into one scroll, the twelve minor prophets into one scroll, Chronicles into one and Kings into one. This reference to “twenty-two” does not mean there are a different number than the Protestant Bible.

Considering how highly the Jews regarded their scriptures, it is not surprising that the Masoretes followed steps and a formula for carefully transcribing the biblical scrolls. They would count the letters in each column and compare the count to the expected number of letters. They would then count to the very middle letter and make sure it was the expected letter. They would compare first and last words in each column. Many other careful checks and balances were in place for the thousand years these scholars maintained their holy words from God.

Most translations of the Old Testament use as their base a Hebrew manuscript of the Masoretes called the Leningrad Codex. This is the oldest full Old Testament in Hebrew. It was copied in 1008 A.D. There is also another Masoretic text that was copied in 925 A.D. called the Aleppo Codex, but it is missing a substantial part of its original text.⁷

Scholars are able to take these three sources of Old Testament scriptures and determine with great clarity what the original text must have read like. The texts certainly brought out the messages of the New Testament writers who used the Old Testament to identify Christ and his mission.

The availability of ancient copies of the Old Testament radically changed in 1947. From 1947 to 1957, 11 caves one mile inland from the Dead Sea were found to contain a number of ancient Hebrew manuscripts. Most of these were placed in jars for storage. Many were in remarkable condition. These caves produced almost 900 manuscripts in about 25,000 different pieces. The manuscripts date from 250 B.C. to the time of the Roman destruction of the Jews in that area in 68 A.D. Since their discovery, scientists and scholars have worked at getting the pieces put together and then understanding the significance of the findings.⁸

Of these manuscripts, about 215 involve scripture. Martin Abegg, Jr., Peter Flint, and Eugene Ulrich finally put them into a composite translation. It is available under the title, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible* (Harper 1999). The differences in the texts available from Qumran compared to what scholars already used from the Masoretic text with edits from the Septuagint and Samaritan Pentateuch are really small, but are highlighted well in this Bible translation. Most modern translations of the Bible take much of the Dead Sea Scrolls into account in their renderings of the Hebrew Old Testament.

⁷ The Greek Septuagint exists in an almost full form in the Sinaiticus, Vaitcanus, and Alexandrinus codexes mentioned earlier. We have fragments of the Septuagint that date before Christ but these fragments are limited in size (and therefore in content!).

⁸ The history of producing these treasured finds for public and scholarly study is quite tortuous.

A good illustration of the “difference” made by the Dead Sea Scrolls is found in the Psalms. 40 of the Dead Sea scrolls have Psalms in them. None of the scrolls are complete, but several come close! We find in the scrolls 126 of the 150 Psalms surviving these 2,000 years.

Psalms 1-89 are the same psalms in almost the same basic order as our English Bible and the Masoretic text from which they come. The rest of the Psalms differ a bit in their ordering. A more significant difference in the Dead Sea Scroll Psalms and our earlier understanding of the texts comes from Psalm 145. Psalm 145 is called an “acrostic” Psalm. By that term, scholars mean that the first line of each verse begins with each successive letter of the alphabet. In English, this would mean verse one starts with “A” followed by “B” at the start of the next verse, etc. There are 22 letters in the Hebrew alphabet, but only 21 verses in the Psalm. The Hebrew letter equivalent of the English “N” belongs in between verse 13 (the “M” verse) and verse 14 (the “S” verse)⁹. This previously missing verse reads, “The LORD is faithful to all his promises and loving toward all he has made.” Most late translations, including the N.I.V., the New Revised Standard Version, the New American Bible, and others now include this verse as “13b.”

The most famous of the Dead Sea Scrolls is undoubtedly the “*Great Isaiah Scroll*”. This scroll represents Isaiah found in its entirety. The differences between the Isaiah scroll and the Masoretic text we have from over 1,000 years later shows the incredible precision of many of the scribes involved in copying the scriptures through the centuries. The major differences seem to be changes from singular nouns to plural and vice versa. There are a few other instances of verb tense changes and minor word order issues. But by and large, the Isaiah scroll from the Dead Sea finds is dead on consistent with the Masoretic texts.

Our review now brings us through to the fourth question of how we know the translators are examining correct texts. Now, we turn to how the translators choose to render those texts into English.

ENGLISH SCRIPTURES

Prior classes have discussed the earliest efforts to translate the scriptures into English. John Wyclif and his cohorts translated the Latin Vulgate into English in the late 1300’s (see Lesson 48). Tyndale followed Wyclif’s efforts in the early 1500’s. Tyndale went a different direction by translating from Hebrew and Greek texts into English. This effort eventually cost Tyndale his life. The Geneva Bible was a translation from Greek and Hebrew into English published in the mid to late 1500’s. While the Geneva Bible had great popularity (being the Bible of

⁹ In Hebrew, the alphabet has the letters “M”, “N”, “S” in succession.

Shakespeare and the Pilgrims!), it was deemed offensive to King James of England. The notes that accompanied the Geneva Bible were considered by James to be “Anti-monarchy,” and so, King James authorized a translation from Hebrew and Greek into English.

KING JAMES VERSION

The King James Version (“KJV”) was first published in 1611 (See lesson 61). The KJV was an effort to translate word for word the original texts into English. The KJV, as noted earlier, relied on the Received Text for its Greek New Testament and had serious limitations as a result. The translation was accurate, but the text being translated had certain limitations as noted earlier in the lesson.

Over time, the English language developed and made the language in the KJV somewhat out of date. For example, the KJV used words like “howbeit” and “behooved” that by the late 1800’s were archaic at best. Phrases like “to you-ward” and “would fain” had lost their contemporary feel and made many question whether the KJV was still a satisfactory translation into English. Of course, the KJV’s usage of “thou,” “thee,” “thine,” *etc.*, was everyday-speak in the early 1600’s but it was fast out of date in everyday conversation in the late 1800’s. The KJV also used words that remained in the English language but had really lost their meaning as used in the KJV. For example, the word “let” in 1611 had the meaning of “hinder.” So, Romans 1:13 read, “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.” Current English usage maintains that sense of “let” only in the game of tennis (a “let serve” is one hindered by the net). Many other words also changed their meaning. By today’s standards, a “ghost” has a different meaning than “spirit.” But in 1611, “ghost” was the common word for “spirit”. The KJV wrote of the “Holy Ghost” rather than the Holy Spirit. These concerns led to another translation in the late 1800’s.

ENGLISH REVISED VERSION AND AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION

By the mid 1800’s, a number of textual discoveries as well as changes in the English language led to an outcry for a “modernizing” or updating of the KJV. In 1870, the Church of England authorized a newer translation with the goal of modernizing not only the English, but also of utilizing the more recent textual discoveries. Both English and American scholars worked on the translation. It was produced in England in 1881-1885 and was called the English Revised Version (“ERV”) or simply Revised Version (“RV”). The American counterpart was published in 1901 and was called the American Standard Version (“ASV”).

These versions both sought to apply a word-by-word translation of the texts and were fairly successful at doing so. One major criticism of the works was that very fact. Some scholars considered the works too limited in their attempts at English, failing to reflect the beauty of the English language and too strictly translating passages that might have a meaning beyond the literal words (for example, idiomatic expressions).

The American counterpart changed a number of expressions into more colloquial American English. It took the Hebrew name for God (“YHWH”) and translated it “Jehovah.” This would become the text used for decades by the Jehovah’s witnesses for this very reason. The ASV also took away “Ghost” and substituted “Spirit” for the Holy Spirit.

REVISED STANDARD VERSION

The RSV was published in a New Testament in 1946 and in an Old Testament in 1957. It was an effort to bring the English Bible into “simple, enduring words that are worthy to stand in the great Tyndale-King James tradition.” The translators used a Greek text for the New Testament taking into account all the most recent discovered manuscripts mentioned in the earlier lesson. For the Old Testament, the Masoretic text was still used, but the new insight from some of the Dead Sea scrolls was also considered and used. The RSV returned to the usage of LORD for the name of God rather than “Jehovah” like in the ASV. It did eliminate the formal “thee’s” and “thou’s” when referring to anyone other than God. These dated forms were still used in reference to God as a showing of respect.

The RSV scholars had a number of linguistic and theological disputes that weighed in on their efforts. There were disputes over many passages translated in the RSV. One of the biggest changes was the translation of Isaiah 7:14. In the KJV it read,

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The ERV translated the passage:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

The ARV translated the passage:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Now, along came the RSV and it translated the passage:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.

This was a huge change. All prior English versions recognized this prophesy of Isaiah as one of the virgin birth. The RSV, however, choose to translate the Hebrew word *almah* as “young woman” rather than “virgin.” This created quite an uproar and stir among many Christians (In fact, this was considered by many as a communist plot to undermine the country and as such became fodder for Senator McCarthy). The Hebrew word can truly be translated as young woman or virgin. The Jews who translated the Bible into Greek BEFORE Christ chose the Greek word that was clearly a virgin, indicating their understanding of the meaning. The RSV translators ignored this aspect of textual history.

Additional textual changes by the RSV that caused controversy involved moving the ending of Mark and the story from John of the woman caught in adultery from the text of the gospels and into a footnote (Later editions of the RSV returned those passages to the text and put the textual limitations into the footnote).

Another significant theological change in the RSV involved the translation of the Greek word *hilasterion*. Found in Romans 3:25, Hebrew 2:17, 1 John 2:2, and 1 John 4:10, the word is translated by the RSV as “expiation.” The KJV and ASV translate this word “propitiation.” What is the difference? Expiation refers to Christ bearing the sins of mankind, something no doubt true. But “propitiation” refers to something more. It is a reference to satisfying God’s wrath or judgment over sin. The Greek *hilasterion* means that Jesus has not only assumed man’s sins, but appeased God’s judgment and wrath as well.

NEW AMERICAN STANDARD VERSION

The Lockman Foundation published The New American Standard Version (“NASV”) as a New Testament in 1963 and a full Bible in 1971. The aim was for a literal translation true to the best Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. The translation seeks precision in verb tense as well as work meaning. The translators opted for a word-by-word translation style that at times is a bit stilted and difficult to read. This is probably the most literal of the English versions in use today. It is currently more readily available in its 1995 edition, which is now known simply as the NASV. The NASV faithfully translated *hilasterion* as propitiation, keeping a literal understanding that Jesus actually stood in mankind’s stead not only as a sinner but also as a recipient of God’s wrath.

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

The New International Version (“NIV”) was published in 1973 as a New Testament and in 1978 as a full Bible. Scholars from over 20 denominations worked on the translation, including Lutherans, Anglicans, Methodists, and Baptists. Unlike the KJV and the RSV, the NIV is a protestant Bible. By that we mean that it is not available with the Apocrypha. The NIV translated from the critical Greek and Hebrew texts rather than the *textus receptus* of the KJV. Some scholars argue that the translation sacrifices accuracy to carry out an evangelical agenda. Others argue that it is too liberal and does not hold true to the spirit of the KJV. It strives to give a word-by-word translation, but makes readability in English a higher priority. Therefore, the NIV is what scholars consider a “dynamic equivalency” translation where the ultimate goal is to give an equally meaningful and powerful translation into English, even where that might sacrifice the word for word translation. The NIV attempted to avoid the *hilasterion* debate by using neither “expiation” nor “propitiation.” The NIV simply translates Romans 3:25 as God presenting Jesus as “a sacrifice of atonement.”

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

The English Standard Version (ESV) came out in 2001. It is derived from the Revised Standard Version and uses the latest scholarship on Greek and Hebrew texts. It is an effort to improve on perceived shortcomings of the NIV by being more literal. It still works in good translations of idioms (expressions in scripture that are not literal, but colloquial). It changed 5-10 percent of the RSV, but many of those changes were important! It returned “virgin” to the translation of Isaiah 7:14 rather than “young woman.” It also eliminated the “thee’s” and “thou’s” in favor of everyday English usage. The Lutheran Church – Missouri Synod has adopted this version as its official text in its hymnal. It is also the version whose gender usage was affected by the efforts of well-known radio host James Dobson. This version returned to the literal translation of *hilasterion* putting Romans 3:25, for example, as “whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.”¹⁰

¹⁰ Why did the RSV change from “propitiation” to “expiation?” There was a consensus opinion that Paul and others must not have understood an appeasement of God’s wrath as the real purpose behind the sacrifice of Christ. This was considered an archaic “Old Testament mentality” that did not reflect the progressive mentality called for by the New Testament. Modern translations like The Message and the Contemporary English Version have totally removed this theological concept from their translation. The Message translates Romans 3:25 as, “God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin.” Now such is true, no doubt, but it misses the import of satisfying God’s justice.

OTHER VERSIONS

There are many other English versions that have come out over the last 50 years. Some are efforts of committees. Others are efforts of individuals. These translations by and large seek to use the latest textual developments and try to put the text into the most comprehensible English. In their efforts to do so, some continue to try and give word-by-word translations while others tend to give more an idea-by-idea translation. These versions (*i.e.*, The Living Bible) are often sacrificing specific meaning of particular words and phrases to make sense of an overall passage. They are not considered scholarly translations for purposes of careful study. They are designed, rather, to give the reader a feel of the flow of the Biblical message.

POINTS FOR HOME

Is this just a bunch of scholarly stuff we need not concern ourselves with? Absolutely not! Consider that Paul writes to Timothy, “I know whom I have believed, and am convinced that he is able to guard what I have entrusted to him for that day.” That confidence we can share because our knowledge of Jesus comes from the revelation and conviction of his Spirit in our hearts and minds. The Spirit, however, does this through the written word of God. For the orthodox believing world, scripture is the measuring rod for faith and practice. It is the written word that conveys to us the truth of The Word of God. We can be confident of what we read, knowing that God has secured for us those scriptures that teach us of Him and His unbounding love and sacrifice on our behalf. It does not matter which translation you have, the scriptures are simple and clear on the death of Christ for our sins and the redemption that comes through faith.

So, which translation is best? All of them can make us wise to salvation. Consider Romans 10:9 in these translations:

“If you confess with your mouth, ‘Jesus is Lord,’ and believe in your heart that God raised him from the dead, you will be saved.” (NIV)

“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth the Lord Jesus, and shalt believe in thine heart that God hath raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved.” (KJV)

“If thou shalt confess with thy mouth Jesus as Lord, and shalt believe in thy heart that God raised him from the dead, thou shalt be saved” (ESV)

“If you confess with your mouth Jesus as Lord, and believe in your heart that God raised Him from the dead, you will be saved” (NASV).

All of these passages teach the basic truth. But, as we saw earlier with the issue of expiation and propitiation, a good translation makes a big difference when studying certain points of doctrine and theology. Therefore, if we are to study carefully, there is merit in having multiple translations handy. Literal translations are critical, but those that work extra hard to provide clear English are important as well.

We must remember that God has secured scripture for us to point us to God and his revelation and redemption in Christ Jesus. This is the meaning of the saying, “I love the Word the way I love my eyes--not because they are lovely but because they allow me to see that which is lovely.” Scripture teaches us Jesus.

At the end of the day, we should marvel at the great work that has gone into our Bibles. We should thank God that we live in the exciting times where we can read them with confidence that they convey his message, and we should share that message with others.