A History of Bible Translations

The Old Testament was written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the New Testament in Greek, the languages of the writers and the original readers. All or part of the Bible has been translated into more than two thousand languages and dialects. The process of translation is an ongoing effort to make God's Word available to all people in languages they can understand.

Early Translations

The Samaritan Pentateuch used by the Samaritan community is a form of Hebrew written in a different script (Samaritan characters) from that which the Jewish community later used. The Aramaic translations called Targums have their beginning in the pre-Christian period and are represented in the Qumran finds, but the major Targums came later.

The Old Testament was translated into Greek about 250 B.C. for the royal library of Alexandria. Named for the 70 translators who are said to have made it, the Septuagint, though translated by Jews, has come down to us through Christian channels. Later Greek translations were made in the early period by Aquila, Symmachus, and Theodotion.

The evangelistic thrust of the early church gave impetus for many translations to impart the gospel to peoples in diverse language areas of the Roman Empire. Before A.D. 400 the Bible had been made available in Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Ethiopic, Armenian, and Georgian. The succeeding centuries brought still other translations.

In the West the church primarily used Latin after the end of the second century, and unofficial translations were made. In the fourth century Pope Damasus I invited Jerome to revise current Latin translations based on Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. Jerome completed the new translation after 18 years of work in Bethlehem. Jerome's translation came to be the accepted Bible and by A.D. 1200 was called the Vulgate, the official version for the Roman Catholic Church.

Reformation Translations

The invention of printing in 1443 and the onset of the Protestant Reformation in 1517 stimulated great interest in Bible translation. Most of the modern languages of Europe had printed translations made at that time: German, 1466; Italian, 1471; Spanish, 1478; and French, 1487. Each of these areas has a long history of manuscript translation prior to printing.

English Translations

Efforts to render Scripture into English began with Caedmon's paraphrases into Anglo-Saxon (A.D. 670). Bede (A.D. 735) is said to have translated the Gospel of John, completing it on the last day of his life. However, it was John Wycliffe and his associates (A.D. 1382) who are credited with having first given the English the complete Bible in their own language.

Erasmus printed the Greek New Testament for the first time in 1516. Luther made his German translation in 1522–24, and William Tyndale in 1525 brought out his English New Testament —the first printed one to circulate in England. Making use of Tyndale's material where available, Miles Coverdale introduced his complete Bible in 1535.

From this point the history of the English Reformation and the history of the English Bible go hand in glove with each other. Coverdale's Bible was followed by Matthew's Bible in 1537. Then in 1539 Coverdale, with the approval of King Henry VIII, brought out the Great Bible, named for its large size.

With the coming of Mary Tudor to the throne in 1553, the printing of Bibles was temporarily interrupted, but the exiles in Geneva, led by William Whittingham, produced the Geneva Bible in 1560. This edition proved to be particularly popular, especially with the later Puritans. Matthew Parker, the archbishop of Canterbury, then had the Bishops' Bible prepared, primarily by bishops of the Church of England, which went through 20 editions. Roman Catholics brought out their Rheims New Testament in 1582 and the Old Testament in 1610. The period of Elizabeth was the time of England's greatest literary figures.

With Elizabeth's death and the coming of King James I to the throne, at the Hampton Court Conference in January 1604, the king accepted the proposal for the publication of a new translation. The outcome was the King James Version of 1611, a revision of the Bishops' Bible. The King James Version was heavily criticized in its early days, but in time, with official pressure, it won the field and became the Bible for English-reading people—a position it held for almost four hundred years. The King James Version has undergone numerous modifications, so the currently circulating book differs from that of 1611 in more than 75,000 places.

By 1850 large numbers of people felt the time had come for a revision. A motion made by Bishop Wilberforce in the Convocation of Canterbury carried, setting in operation the making of the Revised Version, the New Testament of which appeared in 1881 and the complete Bible in 1885. The best British scholars of the day participated in the revision, and American scholars were also invited for a limited role. Though launched with great publicity, the revision eventually provoked harsh criticism. In time it became obvious that people still preferred the King James Version. The revised edition was more accurate; however, the style was awkward.

The Americans waited out the 15 years they had promised before they would bring out a rival revision. The American Standard Revised Version was issued in 1901 with American preferences in the text and British in an appendix. It was more accurate than the King James Version, but the revisers made the mistake of using an English style not native to English at any time. Desiring a literal translation, they produced one that is really English in Greek and Hebrew grammar and word order.

English Bible Translations in the 20th Century

At the turn of the century, Adolf Deissmann, using studies of the papyri from Egypt, persuaded scholars that the New Testament was in the common language (Koine Greek) of the first century, giving impetus to an effort to present the Bible in the language of the 20th century. Accompanying this development was the rise of archaeological discoveries that led to new manuscripts of both the Old and New Testaments. The Cairo Genizah collection of Hebrew manuscripts was found at the end of the 1800s and the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947. Perhaps 25 Greek manuscripts of the New Testament could have been used in 1611. Now more than 5,400 are known. More of the uncial manuscripts (309) were available to 20th-century translators. The papyrus manuscripts (115), most found in 20th century, are the oldest existing sources for the New Testament text. Wider knowledge of the nature of the biblical and related languages has been gained, producing more accurate definitions. New scholarly grammars, dictionaries, and anthologies of texts grew from these developments. In addition, because the English language continually changes, what is understandable at one period becomes less so at a later one.

Translation theory became a factor in Bible translation in the last half of the 20th century. Between the extremes of paraphrase and word-for-word literalism is *formal equivalence,* whose objective is to find English equivalents of the words of the text being translated. Supporters of this method suggest that it is necessary in order for the reader to know what Scripture says in language that most closely approximates the words used in the original language. This approach holds that because these are the words of God, they should not be modified in translation more than is necessary. All translations may involve some interpretation, but interpretation is not the work of the translator. Another approach to Bible translation is *dynamic equivalence,* whose priority is to communicate effectively the thoughts of the text being translated rather than a word-for-word correspondence. Supporters of this view suggest that translating meaning for meaning is the best way to communicate with the reader as effectively as the original did.

Most of the previous translations referred to in this article were formal equivalence, including the King James, the Revised Version, and the American Standard Revised Version. Several more recent translations fall into each category. Notably, the New English Bible (NEB, 1961) and its revision, the Revised English Bible (REB, 1989); the New International Version (NIV, 1978); the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976); the Jerusalem Bible (JB, 1966) and its thorough revision, the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB, 1985); and the New Living Translation (NLT, 1996) are dynamic equivalence. The New American Standard Bible (NASB, 1971) and its significant revision, the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition (NASU, 1995); the King James II (KJ II, 1971); the New King James Version (NKJV, 1982); and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV, 1989) are formal equivalence.

The first half of the 20th century saw a spate of translations that abandoned the effort to revise the King James Version and attempted to reflect new trends, each from its own viewpoint. They had a limited vogue in some circles while being criticized in others. Some were works of groups, while others were prepared by one person; none seriously threatened the dominance of the King James Version.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV), with its New Testament ready in 1946 and the complete Bible in 1952, bore the brunt of criticism of modern translations because it was the first serious challenge after 1901 to the long dominance of the King James Version. It retained the Old English forms in liturgical and poetic passages, as well as using Old English pronouns when deity is addressed. Eventually, an edition was issued with modifications to make it acceptable for use by Greek Orthodox and Roman Catholics, called the Common Bible.

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) appeared in 1989. Chaired by Bruce Metzger, the translators sought to preserve all that is best in the English Bible and to make the language as accurate and clear as possible. Significantly different from the RSV, the NRSV removed archaic pronouns and is both dignified and lucid.

The British prepared the New English Bible (NEB, 1970), which represents certain trends in British biblical scholarship. The American reader will see differences between British English and American English. A revision, the Revised English Bible (REB, 1989), is strongly oriented to dynamic equivalence in translation and retains many British colloquialisms, as did its predecessor.

Roman Catholics issued the Jerusalem Bible, which is used both in and out of Catholic circles. In 1985 a thorough revision, the New Jerusalem Bible, was published. Even more fluid and readable than its predecessor, it is widely used. Of more widespread influence is the New American Bible (NAB, 1970), which was used in preparing the English version of the liturgy of the Roman church. While making some concessions, its notes support of Catholic doctrine.

The Jewish community produced the New Jewish Publication Society translation Tanakh (1962–82). This translation follows the Masoretic text for the most part, is very readable, and is among the best translations of the Hebrew Bible.

The Living Bible (1971, LB), by Kenneth N. Taylor, is a paraphrase of the Bible, based on the American Standard Version (ASV, 1901). Extremely popular in its early years but of uneven quality, it has been much criticized. Dr. Taylor freely admits that it is not a substitute for Bible translations. Its successor, the New Living Translation (NLT, 1996), is a dynamic-equivalence translation from the original languages, with a dual goal of reliability and readability. The NLT, the product of a large group of transdenominational scholars, leans toward inclusive language.

Those who prefer literal translation found their representatives in the New American Standard Bible (NASB), prepared by the Lockman Foundation (1971). An attempt to give the ASV new life, this effort removes many archaisms from the ASV. It reflects different judgments on textual questions from the ASV, and it places words not represented in the original text but added by the translators for clarity in italics, as did the King James Version. The NASB was significantly revised in the New American Standard Bible, Updated Edition (NASU, 1995). Archaic pronouns are removed, and readability is greatly enhanced without sacrificing accuracy. The NASU removes many of the common objections to the NASB and is

without competitors as the most accurate English translation of the Bible. An effort to preserve as much of the old as possible is the New King James Bible (NKJV, 1982). This is a halfway house for those who know something needs to replace the King James Version but are not willing to have a translation that represents the current state of knowledge and that uses current language.

An effort to meet the needs of those who use English as a second language or who have a limited knowledge of English is Today's English Version (TEV), also known as the Good News Bible (GNB, 1976). Recasting of language, consolidation of statements, and paraphrasing are all employed in an effort to make the message simple enough to be grasped by the reader.

The New International Version (NIV) was issued in 1978 by the International Bible Society from a cooperative project in which more than 110 scholars representing 34 religious groups participated. Abandoning any effort to revise the King James Version line of Bibles, the NIV is a new translation aiming at accuracy, clarity, and dignity. It attempts to steer a middle course between literalness and paraphrase while attaining a contemporary style for the English reader but does not always succeed, leaning heavily toward dynamic equivalence and containing many colloquialisms.

The New Testament of a new translation, the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), was published in 2000, and the Old Testament was released in 2004. This translation strives for optimal equivalence, using formal equivalence except when a formal equivalent cannot be easily understood, in those cases leaning toward a dynamic equivalent. Translated from the critical texts of the Old and New Testaments, it is lucid, dignified, faithful to God's Word, and accurate. The HCSB answers many of the common objections to formal-equivalence translations.

The English Standard Version (ESV) is essentially a literal translation published in 2001. It emphasizes word-for-word correspondence but also readability. It is designed for personal reading and in-depth study as well as Scripture memorization and public worship.

Eugene Peterson completed his translation of The Message in 2002. It is a contemporary-language paraphrase designed to express a personal message to readers. It is not designed to replace more literal translations but to aid new believers and others who may need more modern language to enhance their understanding.

Adapted from Jack P. Lewis and Charles W. Draper, "Bible Translations," *Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary* [online, cited 1 September 2010]. Available from the Internet: www.mystudybible.com.

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