



ONE WORD, A THOUSAND MEANINGS: THE BIBLE IN TRANSLATION

Quayle Bible Collection
Open Saturdays & Sundays
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A Translator is a Traitor!

For Jews and Christians, the Bible is a major aspect of their religious understanding; however, they often disagree on how it should be read and in what language. As both groups traveled through the world, especially Europe, Africa, and the Americas, there was a push for the text to be translated into new languages. Maybe the most famous Christian example of this is the translation of the Bible by Martin Luther and his split from the Catholic Church in 1517, creating the Protestant movement. However, with new languages and new contexts, do meanings change? Do denominations hold one translation in higher esteem than others? Many Orthodox Jews believe that reading the text in the original Hebrew is truly the only way, and as a result, the Torah and various prayers are only read and chanted in Hebrew in many Jewish Temples today. But for Christians, the Bible is already split into multiple languages, and there is more of an emphasis on finding applicable meaning in the text. When the Bible was translated into Latin, the Church treated that singular language as if it was similar to the Hebrew used in Temples. The language itself was seen as sacred and thus the text and prayers could only be read in that language. And yet, Protestant translators like Luther, Beza, Wycliff, and Tremellius accused the Church of not presenting the original meaning to the people and the Church accused them of betraying the text by translating it and changing meanings. Ironically enough, as Luther's translation and the King James translation will be held in similar light as the Latin with Protestants resisting new translations for changing the meaning. These issues show that throughout the history of the Bible, there has been a conflict between upholding the tradition of sacred language and focusing on meaning through a modern translation.

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Translation Issues

The north wall contains additional examinations of the difficulties of translating. The Bible, the language it was written, and the oldest versions are often an afterthought to the average reader. The posters on the north wall are meant to highlight many of the classic texts and translation issues in hopes to spark interest in visitors to the Quayle and to state that there is so much more history to the text that is the Bible.

Original Languages: Hebrew

The Hebrew that you see before you is not the original alphabet. Instead what you see is the Aramaic alphabet. Hebrew was originally pictographic and evolved to become more stylistic, such as the page of the Dead Sea Scrolls that is pictured in the poster on the north wall. Hebrew is a Semitic language and like many other Semitic languages is based on a consonantal, trilateral root. This means that almost every word in Hebrew relates to an original three letter verb that has only been modified to form nouns, adjectives, or other forms. Hebrew has no present or past tense; Hebrew only has perfect and imperfect which is often described as completed and incomplete action. It is often suggested that one word in Hebrew can have at least ten meanings. All this is to say that most Semitic languages are hard to translate into Indo-European languages. Although this is the original language of the Old Testament, many of the early Bible translations did not translate from the Hebrew, and many Catholic translations still use the Latin as their base.

Original Languages: Greek and Aramaic (Syriac?)

As said in the case label, the first translation of the Bible into Greek was during the 2nd Century BCE when the Hebrew text

was translated into Greek. The Septuagint, as it is called, caused a huge controversy because the priests believed that the theology inherent in Greek was different than that in the Semitic Hebrew or Aramaic. This would aid in the divisions of Jewish sects of the time of Jesus. Many groups debated the concept of the soul, bodily resurrection, and angels, most of which were Greek. However, Hebrew was dying by the time the Septuagint was written and was effectively replaced by Greek and Aramaic when Christianity came along. The early Christians wrote primarily in Greek, with some texts in Coptic and Syriac/Aramaic. Some of the early debates between Jews and Christians were also enmeshed in Jewish debates of how much Greek culture and language influenced the understanding of the text. The Pharisee, who would be the authors of the Talmud, felt that translating the text into Greek would add polytheistic and non-Jewish ideas into the text. When the Catholic Church split between East and West, the theological implications of Greek and Latin were at the heart of the debate. While Greek and Syriac translations of the Bible still survive in Orthodox churches, the West primarily forgot the Greek text until Protestants tried to resurrect it to translate the text from an original.

First Translations: Latin

The declaration of a universal or Catholic Church was an attempt to “one” Christianity that had one set of dogma that could not be disputed. However, the Bishop in Rome and the Patriarch of Constantinople used two different languages for the Bible and for church. The West favored Latin and almost immediately after the first canon appeared, Jerome translated the text into Latin. One of the major theological differences between the two churches that arise is the significance of Mary as “theotokos” or divine mother in Greek. The Vulgate would also see the addition of major theological words like Lucifer, Annunciation, the Passion of Christ, the Beatitudes, among others. The resistance of the

Church to accept other translations would lead to the Protestants rebelling against to the Church and the Latin text in 1517. After so many Protestants began leaving, the Church authorized various translations, such as the Douay-Rheims English translation. However, the Latin remained the sacred text. When Vatican II in the 1960s removed Latin as a requirement for services, some churches resisted this and still keep Latin as the language of Catholicism.

First Translations: Arabic and Ge'ez

Most American Christians will not think of these two languages as early translations of the text, and while the Quayle Collection does not have old copies of these texts, these are two early translations that we possess. Ethiopia has one of the longest histories with Judaism and Christianity than any other nation in the world so it is only logical for there to be an early Ethiopic translation. In fact, several texts, such as the Book of Enoch, were known to modern scholars first in Ge'ez before finding earlier editions, such as the text in Aramaic. The same can be said with Arabic. With the migration of people outside of Israel to Arabic speaking areas, Jews and Christians early on wrote in Arabic. As Arabic spread throughout the Middle East with the rise of Islam, Arab Christians who were reading Coptic or Syriac began using Arabic Bibles and continue to do so in present times. Being Semitic languages, Arabic and Ge'ez are easier to translate from the Hebrew with several equivalent words, such as Shalom becoming Salam. However, like Hebrew into Greek, translating the Greek into Semitic could lead to theological differences.

Standalone Case: Oldest “Complete” Bibles

The oldest surviving “complete” Bibles are the Codex Sinaiticus and the Aleppo Codex. Both of these texts were heavily damaged and are missing pages. The Aleppo is one of the Masoretic Texts that was originally written by the

Masoretes who helped establish the Hebrew text as we know it, especially by adding the vowel system. There are differences with this text and the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Codex Sinaiticus is believed to be the result of the Council of Nicaea of 325 CE. It was “lost” until an Italian man visited St. Catherine’s Monastery in the 1700s and spread word of the beautiful codices found there.

European Translations: Spanish and Ladino

The politics of translation are extremely apparent in the Spanish texts. Much like many the translations for Europe, the Spanish translations were not performed under Catholic authority. Casiodoro de Reina faced the Inquisition and exile for his translation of the Bible. At times, he would serve as a minister to Spanish Protestants in Exile. The Ladino text is much more complicated. Under Muslim rule, Jews lived somewhat peaceful from the 700s until they were exiled by Christians in 1492 CE. With this amount of time, they developed their own dialect and culture; however, expulsion led them to flee to Amsterdam and parts of North Africa. The text before you is a second edition, but the first edition was heavily influential on Casiodoro de Reina, and the Duke it was dedicated to probably would not have endorsed it since he was Catholic.

European Translations: German

The German translation of the Bible illustrate the power that a biblical translation has on language. Much like what the King James Bible does for English and the Qur’an does for Arabic, the Luther translation of the Bible will help establish a standard for the German language. Germany was not a unified country until 1879 and while many dialects still exist, there was much more variance in the language until Luther helps codify it. Like the other European translations, the German is primarily done by Protestants. Most of Luther’s argument against the Church in 1517 CE is based on biblical

translations and access to them. Luther believed that much of the tradition of the Church strayed from the text since no one could read it in their own language. Luther was only able to make this argument after the rise literacy in Greek during the Early Modern period.

European Translations: Italian and French

Much like Luther, Jean Calvin believed it was important for Christians to read the biblical text. However, he places a higher importance on the text for how Christians view their daily life. As a result, Calvin had a team of translators, including his brother, working on the text. Calvin was influential in France, Switzerland, and northern Italy. Diodati who translated the Bible into Italian was a Calvinist who was born in Geneva. However, unlike Germany, France and Italy would remain largely Catholic. Even after the Enlightenment and the rise of Secularism across Europe, French and Italian identity is tied to Catholicism. The languages also were not influenced by the Protestant Bibles in the same way German and English was.

Native American Translations

Before any King James or Geneva Bible was printed in the United States, the oldest Bible printed in America was John Eliot's Algonquin text. Much like many of the other texts that came later, Eliot translated the Bible from English and not from Greek and Hebrew. Unlike Eliot's text, later Bibles would use the syllabary of Indigenous languages. Many of these were developed after colonization and some were not even developed by Indigenous people, but by missionaries. The Cherokee syllabary seen here was developed in 1821 by Sequoyah. He used the biblical text for reference and developed many of the characters based on Greek and Hebrew. However, the sounds that are made have no relation to the original languages of the Bible. The earliest

translation of a Cherokee Bible was only four years later in 1825. The Ojibwe syllabary was also developed using the Bible; however, it was used by a missionary to attempt to convert and colonize Indigenous people.

Early English Translations

Although the King James Bible would eventually hold the place as one of the most influential Bible translations in the world, it evolved out of several translations that would come before it. Many of which would add their contribution to the English language and theology as a whole. The Bible translated by John Wycliffe represents one of the first attempts to translate the Bible into English from the Latin Vulgate (1388). Although he was condemned for this, he died before the Church could punish him. They exhumed his body and burned it anyway. Even though he wrote in Middle English, several words of the English language first appeared in his text, such as female, communication, and interpretation. William Tyndale would be the first translator to go back to the Hebrew and Greek. He's also the first to use the word Jehovah, which will change the way many Christians think of the name of God. He would also be influential on Judaism by translating *Pesach* as *Passover*. Myles Coverdale would produce the first complete English Bible after Wycliffe. Although he intended to translate the entire text from Greek and Hebrew, his knowledge of Semitics was lacking. As a result, he filled in the gaps with his English translation of Zwingli's Zurich Bible, the Vulgate, and Luther, which was ironic considering that Henry VIII, who his Bible was dedicated to, hated Martin Luther. This lack of original translations would soon lead others to attempt to finish an entire text from the original languages.

Pre-King James English Translations

One of the most prized items in the Quayle Bible Collection is our 1611 King James Bible. The KJV was a product of the

two Bibles in this case. As Calvinism spread across Europe, English Calvinists, who were known as Puritans, emphasized the study of the Bible by all Christians and criticized the ritualistic high-church of the Church of England. Their biblical text translated, published in Geneva, contained copious amounts of notes and was one of the first translations to translate from the Greek and Hebrew. Like the name suggests, the Puritans liked a literal translation of the Bible, which is not easy to do, especially with Hebrew to English and the Psalms. Music often requires a translator to add words for meter as well as to make sense of the often-cryptic poetry. At the time, the Psalms were the primary songs used in churches and in the Bay Psalm Book of the Massachusetts Bay Colony, the Puritans discuss how difficult it is to translate sacred music literal. The Elizabethan Bishop's Bible will be the last major "Church Bible" before the King James. While King James will deal with dissent based on the Puritans, Elizabeth had to deal with the Catholic-Protestant issues left by her father Henry, and her sister, the infamous Bloody Mary who attempted to keep England Catholic and burned Protestants. She also tried to appease the Puritans who knew the Coverdale translated Great Bible was not from the "original tongues." There was an attempt to rectify this, but it came with a few mistakes and mistranslations, as well as the initials of the translators being found in the text. The text also left out all of the marginal notes of the Puritan Geneva Bible. As a result, the King James would go back to the original as well as using the Geneva Bible in an attempt to appease both groups.

For Further Reading

The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions. Bruce Metzger. (2001)

The Art of Bible Translation. Robert Alter. (2020)

The Bible in English. David Daniell. (2003)

The Bible in the Early Church. Justo Gonzalez. (2022)

Martin Luther: The Man Who Rediscovered God and Changed the World. Eric Metaxas. (2017)

The King James Bible: A Short History from Tyndale to Today. David Norton. (2011)

The Great Evil: Christianity, the Bible, and the Native American Genocide. Chris Nunpa. (2020)

Calvin, the Bible, and History. Barbara Pitkin. (2020)

To Visit:

Drop in for a visit between 1:00 pm and 4:00 pm any Saturday or Sunday. To arrange for a visit at another time or for a group tour, please call the number below.

Due to the ongoing pandemic, all visitors must wear masks and social distancing is required, as per the Baker University COVID-19 policy.

You may want to consider visiting other sites in Baldwin City such as the Osborne Chapel, the Holt-Russell Gallery, the Old Castle Museum, or the Lumberyard Arts Center.

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