Explorer I: Exploring Christian Foundations

Study Guide #17: What about Bible Versions?

Introduction

In order to adequately address the question of the different Bible versions available in English today, it's wise to understand the basics of the textual basis for each testament of the Bible. In other words, what original-language texts do translators actually translate the Bible from? The Old Testament is the Hebrew Bible and was originally written in Hebrew, with a small amount written in Aramaic. The New Testament was originally written in Greek, with the possible exception of Matthew. Therefore, most of this Study Guide provides a quick look at this issue before addressing the different Bible versions themselves.

Question #1: What texts do translators of the Old Testament use to create their versions of the Bible?

Answer: Protestant Christian scholars use the Masoretic Text to translate the Old Testament. The Masoretes (or Massoretes) were a group of Jewish scholars who began the systematic comparison of older known Hebrew manuscripts about A.D. 500 and continued their work into the 10th century (900s). The Masoretes were well-known for their *extremely meticulous* rules for copying the Hebrew Scriptures. The oldest available Masoretic Text which contains the entire Hebrew Bible is the Leningrad Codex, dated to A.D. 1008. Roman Catholic scholars translate the Old Testament in most of their Bibles from the Latin Vulgate, a translation from the Hebrew/Aramaic completed by a priest and scholar named Jerome (d. 420) by about 405. Eastern Orthodox scholars translate it from the Septuagint (LXX), the first Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible completed in the 2nd century B.C. [NOTE: The Septuagint was the first Old Testament of the Christians.]

Masorete copyists

Question #2: Which text is the best one for translating the Old Testament?

Answer: It's always better to translate anything from the closest manuscript to the original as possible, which for the Jewish Scriptures is the Hebrew (with small portions in Aramaic). The best complete Hebrew texts of the Old Testament available today are Masoretic Texts. [NOTE: We should add that more than one manuscript was put together by various Masoretes over the 400+ years of their activity. Each of them is called a Masoretic Text.] In addition to a Masoretic Text, scholars have several other manuscript types to compare with the Masoretic Text. These include (1) the Samaritan Pentateuch, probably originating in the 1st and 2nd centuries B.C. (it contains only the 1st 5 books of the Old Testament); (2) the Septuagint (see Question #1); (3) Aramaic Targums, which are Aramaic translations and paraphrases of different Hebrew Bible books; (4) the Syriac Peshitta, Syrian translations probably originating in the 1st century A.D.; and

(5) the Dead Sea Scrolls, Hebrew manuscripts discovered by a Palestinian shepherd in 1947 near the Dead Sea (dating to the 1st and 2nd centuries B.C). Although there are some variant (different) readings among all these groups of manuscripts, very few of the variants are significant. We can be confident that Christians possess essentially the same Hebrew Scriptures (Old Testament) that Jesus accepted in His day (see Explorer I, Study Guide #13).

Question #3: What texts do translators of the New Testament use to create their versions of the Bible?

Answer: Although there are nearly 6,000 Greek manuscripts of portions of the New Testament available today (see Explorer I, Study Guide #6), there are only 3 complete Greek texts of the New Testament that scholars have created by comparing the various manuscripts. The first complete Greek text of the New Testament was first published in 1516 by the famous Dutch Christian scholar Erasmus. He had only a handful or so of Greek manuscripts that were all dated to approximately the 12th century. This text is known as the Textus Receptus, which is Latin for the "Received Text." Adjustments were made so that there are now more than 25 Received Texts in existence. This text became the basis for almost all of the modern translations of the New Testament until the late 19th century, from Martin Luther's German translation to William Tyndale's English translation, as well as for the King James' Version and the New King James' Version. A second text is the Alexandrian Text (or Critical Text), based largely on the earliest available Greek manuscripts, including the Codex Vaticanus (4th century), Codex Sinaiticus (4th century), and the Codex Alexandrinus (5th century). The Critical Text was first created in the late 19th century and uses several principles in an attempt to determine the original wording of the text. Finally, the third text is called the Majority Text, first created in 1982, which is largely based on the readings of the majority (or plurality) of the available Greek manuscripts.

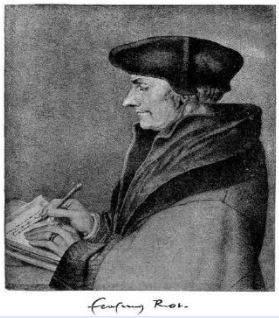
Codex Sinaiticus

Question #4: Which Greek text is the best one for translating the New Testament?

Answer: That depends upon who you ask. Some believers insist that the Textus Receptus is the only reliable Greek text to translate the New Testament from. By the way, it's called that because those who favor it believe that it was the Greek text that God miraculously preserved and handed to the Church, who "received" it. Of course, we believe that God did miraculously preserve His Scriptures. But what He preserved was nearly 6,000 Greek manuscript fragments or larger documents of the New Testament books. All 3 Greek texts were created by scholars by comparing different Greek manuscripts; so it's impossible to say that any of the Greek texts themselves were preserved. There were variants (differences) among the relatively few manuscripts used to create the Textus Receptus, for example. So Erasmus (and others who came later) had to make decisions about which variant was more likely to have been the original. The fact that the Textus Receptus was the first actual Greek text—and that it was available for more than 350 years before the next Greek text was created—probably accounts for the most strident Christians' belief that it is the only reliable text. [NOTE: Since the Majority Text is closer to the Textus Receptus than it is to the Critical Text, the Textus Receptus-only believers are especially critical of the Critical Text.]

Question #5: What specific criticisms are made against the Critical Text?

Answer: There are at least 3 major types of criticisms that a few scholars make about the Critical Text. One is that they believe it relies too heavily on the Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and the Codex Alexandrinus. A second criticism is a belief that any process that attempts to determine the original text by certain textual principles is too subjective to be reliable. Finally, some critics accuse the Codex Sinaiticus (on which the Critical Text is partly based) of being a forgery. Concerning the 1st criticism, all subsequent editions of a Critical Text since the first one in the 1880s have been based on all known Greek manuscripts of the New Testament documents—not just the 3 codexes listed above. As for the 2nd criticism, even those who put together the Textus Receptus had to make decisions as to which variant reading was the original one (see Question #4). Nevertheless, it's true that the Critical Text does more heavily rely on the earlier manuscripts (before the 9th century). But it's reasonable to assume that the fewer times something has been copied, the closer it should be to the original. That cannot be *proven*, but it is a *reasonable* conclusion. Finally, the story that critics like to tell about the Codex Sinaiticus being a forgery has been examined by numerous scholars representing many different theological perspectives. Their conclusion is that it is *not* a forgery, but that it's a genuine 4th-century document.



Erasmus

Question #6: So what *is* the best Greek text from which to translate the New Testament?

Answer: Our personal opinion really doesn't matter. The far larger point is that the greatest *differences* in the readings of the 3 Greek texts measure no more than 10 percent. And that number is misleading because every time a single variant reading is repeated in other manuscripts, it's counted as another variant. This 10 percent (or less) includes (1) different spellings of words; (2) different word order in sentences; and (3) whether the definite article (for the word "the") is present or absent with a noun. [NOTE: It's especially true in Biblical Greek that the meaning of many sentences doesn't change if you change the order in which the words are written.] All this means that at least 90 percent of the Greek texts are identical to each other. Moreover, nearly all scholars who have studied this issue have testified that *none* of the variants impacts a single major teaching of the New Testament. Therefore, those Christians who are fiercely loyal to one Greek text or another should remember these basic facts and not become agitated about this issue.

Question #7: How can we make sense out of all the versions of the Bible available in English today?

Answer: We should note that there are far more versions of the Bible in the English language than in any other human language—between 400 and 500 to date. We consider that a blessing! However, not all Bible versions are created equal. *First*, there is the issue of translation philosophy. There are (a) translations, usually translated from the Biblical languages, and there are (b) paraphrases, which seek to rework the words in order to make it much more readable (called dynamic equivalence). For study purposes, the best translations are usually those which are based on the original Biblical languages *and* seek to translate as

close as possible to a word-for-word equivalency (called formal equivalence). It should also be understood that a *strict* word-for-word translation is impossible because of the nature of languages themselves. A third type of Bible version is that which attempts to split the difference between word-for-word and paraphrased readability.

Second, there is the issue of who did the translation work. Generally, you should choose a Bible that was translated by a larger number of scholars representing different theological perspectives. Avoid those that were created by one or just a handful of scholars, or by a single denomination, because there's a greater chance for theological bias in those versions.

You can usually discover a Bible version's translation philosophy and who the translators were by reading the Preface to the Bible.

Finally, you should consider the purpose for the Bible you are seeking. You might want a version (a) mainly for private, devotional reading, (b) for public teaching and/or preaching, or (c) for deeper personal study. This is one important reason that there's no *one* best translation of the Bible.

Question #8: What are some examples of Bible versions that can be recommended?

Answer: It seems like new English versions are being added all the time, so our recommendations are not fixed in stone. But currently (2022), we recommend several versions for actual study that are closer to a word-for-word. These include the King James' Version (KJV) and the New King James' Version (NKJV), both of which used the Textus Receptus for the New Testament. For those who used the Critical Text for the New Testament, some of the better ones are the Legacy Standard Bible (LSB), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the English Standard Version (ESV). Some of the better translations that seek to split the difference between word-for-word and readability include the New English Translation (NET), the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). But the bottom line is really this: The very best English translation of the Bible is the one that *you* will actually read!

The Bible

Question #9: Why do some modern English translations have missing verses in the New Testament? How can anyone justify deleting texts from the Bible?

Answer: There are a little more than 2 dozen so-called "missing" verses or groups of verses, although many modern translations include them while putting them in brackets or in footnotes. In addition, there are numerous other verses that don't include certain words or phrases that are included in the King James' Version and the New King James' Version. The reason for this is that the Critical Text, on which most English translations base their New Testament, has concluded that they were either probably or definitely not part of the original document. King James'-only believers are especially critical of this reality. But, *first*, the truth is that none of these verses were actually removed from the Bible. They weren't deleted as

such, but they were deemed as probably not in the original text of Scripture. *Second*, all of these verses together constitute only a tiny percentage of the entire New Testament and do *not* impact a single doctrine of the Bible. Thus, there's no conspiracy to remove passages from the Bible going on here.

Question #10: Can you give an example of a disputed New Testament passage?

Answer: Yes. One of the best known of these disputed passages is the ending of Mark (16:9-20) which is part of the King James' Version, New King James' Version, and the World English Bible. Nearly all versions include it, although most place it in brackets or in a footnote to designate it as probably not in the original gospel of Mark. This is not the proverbial "hill" that anyone should "die" for, but we believe the evidence favors the exclusion of Mark 16:9-20 from the original. [NOTE: A very few Greek manuscripts have inserted what scholars call the Short Ending to Mark.] Our reasons for believing that neither the Long Ending (vv. 9-20) nor the Short Ending are part of the original are outlined below:

Gospel of Mark

- *First*, the Greek word usually translated as **"Now"** in verse 9 is a particle that indicates either a contrast or a continuation of what precedes it. What came before verse 9 is a discussion of several women who came to Jesus' tomb, found it empty, and was told that Jesus had risen. But verse 9 completely ignores this context. Instead, verse 9 introduces Mary Magdalene as if for the first time, even though she is mentioned in verse 1.

- *Second*, verses 9-20 contain several Greek words that don't occur anywhere else in Mark's gospel.

- *Third*, while most Greek manuscripts of Mark contain verses 9-20, remember that most Greek New Testament manuscripts are later ones (from the 9th century onward). Most of the earlier manuscripts don't contain them. Moreover, 2 church leaders—Eusebius (d. 339) and Jerome (d. 420)—denied that those verses were part of the original and testified that nearly all of the New Testament manuscripts they had access to did not contain them.

We also acknowledge that to end Mark's gospel at the end of verse 8 would give it an abrupt ending. Therefore, it seems probable that the original ending of Mark was lost—perhaps accidentally torn off—and later copyists inserted the Long Ending (vv. 9-20) and a few the Short Ending, in order to finish the gospel in a smoother manner. However, even those scholars who believe that the Long Ending (vv. 9-20) was part of Mark's original gospel agree that no doctrine should be understood on the basis of Mark 16:9-20 alone.