



THE NEXT BIG THING



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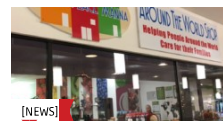
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The Many Languages of the Bible

1 year ago written by [Laura J. Hunt](#)



Sitting in my room in India, I can hear workers outside speaking in Kannada. I just finished discussing biblical Greek, in English, with young people who already speak or understand three to seven other languages. This environment is more like the one our Bibles came out of than the typical American monolingual churches. So how did it happen that our pew backs or sanctuary chairs, altars and bedside tables now hold these collections of 66 ancient texts helpfully gathered together and translated into easy-to-understand English?

We can trace this story through the changing languages of the Israelites. Nehemiah 8 describes them in about the mid-fifth century B.C. when they have returned to Jerusalem from Babylon and are reading the sacred texts that would guide worship in their rebuilt temple. However, their common language had changed from Hebrew to Aramaic, so they needed explanations and translations (Nehemiah 8:8). Some portions of the Old Testament, such as Ezra 4:8–6:18, were even written in Aramaic.

The issue of changing languages in the Mediterranean world also led to the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek in about the third century B.C. As copies of this translation, called the Septuagint, circulated in the ancient world, other devotional literature also written in Greek began to circulate with it. As the Jews and Christians parted ways, the emerging rabbinical schools eliminated the “extra” books from the Hebrew Bible. By contrast, Eusebius, a fourth-century church historian, felt that God had superintended the creation of the Septuagint specifically for Christians.

About one generation later, changing languages in the West led Jerome to translate the Scriptures again, this time into Latin. He included some of the other portions of the Septuagint that followers of Christ were finding helpful for their faith. Thus, these books and sections, called the Apocrypha, remained in all Christian Bibles until the Reformation. Martin Luther adopted and translated into German only the books used in the Jewish Hebrew Bible, giving us the Old Testament we use today.

In assembling the New Testament, four questions guided the choice of texts. First, New Testament texts were expected to be connected with one of the early apostles. Second, early church leaders discussed the orthodoxy of New Testament texts. James was not immediately included because he seems to contradict Paul in his focus on behavior as important to faith. Today, we understand that Paul invites people to faith regardless of behavior, but both writers suggest that faith will result in changed behaviors.

Third, books were included in the New Testament if they seemed to be applicable to everyone. Finally, writings were strongly considered for inclusion if people were already experiencing them as Scripture. (Two books that were discussed but eventually left out were “The Teaching of the Twelve” or “The Didache” and “The Shepherd of Hermas.”)

But how do our Bibles come to be in English rather than in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek? This is where the

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work of today's scholars begins.

First, the ancient biblical manuscripts – including the quotations of the Scriptures by the church fathers; the earliest translations of the Bible into Aramaic, Coptic, Latin and other languages; and the early church lectionaries that quote parts of the biblical text – must all be assembled and evaluated. One papyrologist, in a discussion on the benefits of natural versus artificial light, talks about an ancient text in St. Petersburg whose ink “as the sun rose in the sky, ... slowly faded as though the writing were magic runes.” I am personally thankful for people so intrigued by these ancient texts that they dedicate their lives to painstaking analysis.

However, the work is not without controversy. At the time of the King James Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls had not yet been found. For each passage that had variations in the manuscripts, the wording that occurred the most frequently was chosen as the best. As time went on, however, scholars realized that some scrolls were more reliable than others. Also, some of the most unreliable manuscripts had been copied more times than the others. Thus, as scholars began to weigh different lines of textual transmission and included the Dead Sea Scrolls in their work, their best reconstruction of an original text shifted. Such shifts do not impact any major Christian doctrines, but today some internet sites will extoll the virtues of the KJV or the evils of the NIV, not understanding the updates.

Once Old and New Testament original-language texts have been decided on, the work of translation begins. The earliest English translation was made in the 1380s by John Wycliffe, but he was translating from the Latin Vulgate. In the 16th century, William Tyndale was martyred for his English translation based on the Hebrew and Greek. Ironically, the King James Bible, published in 1611, was based on his work.

Today, our many translations make it easy to forget the difficulties in the process that created them. In Hebrew, to be “hot of the nose” means to be angry, and to be “long of the nose” means to be patient or longsuffering (Genesis 30:2; Proverbs 16:32). These expressions are invisible in English translations, though, because they wouldn’t make sense to us. Also, as English changes, new translations become necessary. The King James Version’s rendering of 1 Peter 3:1 suggested that wives would be able to convert their husbands by their “conversation,” a word which in 1611 meant behavior!

What translation should we use today though? First, use the translation that you will want to read. Besides your favorite, you might choose a second translation for comparison. Differences in the translations will show you where the original languages are open to various interpretations and keep you from basing a whole sermon or teaching on an uncertain translation.

The story of the Bible’s creation is long, with some twists and turns in the road. But Free Methodists rely on John Wesley’s approach to knowing God: our reading of the Bible is informed by our experience, reason and tradition. These are the guardrails of our faith.

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