BIBLE TRANSLATIONS, PART 1: RELIABLE MANUSCRIPTS



By Paul Miles

Welcome to Part I of a three-part primer on Bible translation! We Christians build our way of life on the Bible, but far too often we know too little about the book itself. The authorship, transmission, and translation of the Bible are topics that have filled volumes, but the purpose of this series is to introduce a few issues, and hopefully encourage you to look further into Bibliology for yourself. Part II of this series will discuss some historical Bible translations, starting with early Greek and Latin translations and working our way up to the King James Version. Part III will cover different translation philosophies and compare and contrast a few English translations that are popular today. For now, we will be considering Bible manuscripts. A manuscript is basically an old hand-written copy of classic literature. We will examine how accurate the Biblical manuscripts are and then take a look at some of the different collections of original language texts.

RELIABILITY OF MANUSCRIPTS

I have known many people who were once strong Christians, knowing the content of their English Bibles and living a life that reflects this knowledge. Unfortunately, many of them (including myself) weren't well informed of the reliability of the manuscripts that our English Bibles are based on. Eventually we came to lose faith in the reliability of Scriptures and ended up completely abandoning the Christian lifestyle. This doesn't need to be. Of all works of antiquity, the Bible has the most reliable manuscripts. Compared to other works of ancient literature, the Bible has more manuscripts, earlier copies, and fewer discrepancies among texts.

The sheer number of Bible manuscripts that are still around today is an embarrassment to other ancient works of literature. In an interview with Lee Strobel, Bible scholar Bruce Metzger compares the Bible to other works of antiquity:

> **Consider Tacitus, the Roman historian who wrote his Annals of Imperial Rome in about A.D. 116. [...] His first six books exist today in only one manuscript, and it was copied about A.D. 850. Books eleven through sixteen are in another manuscript dating from the eleventh century. Books seven through ten are lost. [...]With regard to the first-century historian Josephus, we have nine Greek manuscripts of his work The Jewish War, and these copies were written in the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries. There is a Latin translation from the fourth century and medieval Russian materials from the eleventh or twelfth century.** 2

The New Testament, on the other hand, has well over 5,000 manuscripts that have been catalogued, not counting those that have been discovered but yet to be catalogued, and also not to count the ones that have yet to be discovered. Not only is this greater than the number of manuscripts for any other work of antiquity, but some of them date all the way back to about 200 A.D. Metzger compares these statistics to the ancient work that is in second place, Homer's Iliad:

> **Next to the New Testament, the greatest amount of manuscript testimony is of Homer's Iliad, which was the bible of the ancient Greeks. There are fewer than 650 Greek manuscripts of it today. Some are quite fragmentary. They come down to us from the second and third century A.D. and following. When you consider that Homer composed his epic about 800 B.C., you can see there's a very lengthy gap.** 3

Some would argue that the manuscripts available to us today were written too late, and are therefore unreliable. This is hardly the case as F. F. Bruce points out, "No classical scholar would listen to an argument that the authenticity of Herodotus or Thucydides is in doubt because the earliest manuscripts of their works which are of use to us are over 1,300 years later than the originals." 4 Not only does the Bible have the most manuscripts, but its manuscripts were also produced closer to the original time of writing than other works of antiquity.

With this vast number of manuscripts, one has to wonder if they are all in sync with one another. There are variants, but about 75% of them are spelling differences that do not challenge the meaning of the text. These variants are usually minor changes in spelling, such as putting an extra n in the name, John. Sometimes a fatigued scribe would accidentally write a word that is obviously nonsense in the context. These types of errors can easily be disregarded and replaced with the correct spelling from another manuscript. The second largest group includes changes in the text using synonyms, or switching pronouns and proper nouns, or other minor changes that have no effect on the meaning of the passage. The third group includes variations that affect the meaning of the text, but have no effect on theology. As Josh and Sean MacDowell write:

> **When all variations are considered, roughly one percent involve the meaning of the text. But even this fact can be overstated. For instance, there is disagreement about whether 1 John 1:4 should be translated, "Thus we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete" or "Thus we are writing these things so that your joy may be complete." While this disagreement does involve the meaning of the passage, it in no way jeopardizes a central doctrine of the Christian faith.** 5

The final group of variations is the smallest, and it includes the handful of variations that carry different meanings and have an effect on doctrinal truth. These variants are few and far between, but 100% of any possible variation in theology from manuscript differences can be examined in the light of other clear passages.

POPULAR MANUSCRIPT TEXTS

With all of these catalogued manuscripts, it is hard to give them all a consideration that does them justice. In this primer, we'll take a look at some of the more famous and popular texts of manuscripts as they have been used throughout history. Part II will consider some of the older translations that have also been used like manuscripts to help translators.

The most popular Old Testament text for translators is the Masoretic Text. It takes its name from the Masoretes, who were a group of scribes who dedicated themselves to preserving the Bible. They developed the Hebrew writing system by adding vowel marks and cantillation marks to the alphabet. The oldest and most complete manuscript of the Masoretic Text, along with loads of interesting information about Old Testament manuscripts, is available here. In 1946 some Bedouin shepherds in the dessert came across an interesting manuscript collection that was to become known as The Dead Sea Scrolls. They were probably written sometime in the fourth or fifth century B.C. by a group of Jews called the Essenes. These manuscripts are especially fascinating, because although they were produced centuries after the Masoretic Text, the number of variations in the texts is remarkably low. The Dead Sea Scrolls are also available here.

New Testament texts can generally be divided into two categories: Majority Text and Critical Text. The Majority Text has the most manuscripts and has historically been the basis of most translations. The basic argument behind the Majority Text is that since there are so many, they must be the most reliable. The Textus Receptus (lat. Received Text) is a collection based on the Majority Text that was compiled around the time of the reformation and served as the leading text for translators of that time. It is still in popular use today, though other editors have compiled other Greek New Testaments based on the Majority Texts. A more recent edition that is popular is *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* by Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad. In contrast, the Critical Text uses the oldest manuscripts in an attempt to utilize texts with the least amount of time to be altered. Currently, the most common version is the Westcott and Hort text, which was published in 1881, but the Novum Testamentum Graece is another popular Critical Text that was published around the time the Textus Receptus was being compiled.

There are die-hard Majority Text scholars and equally dedicated Critical Text scholars, but really the differences between the two are minute. As noted earlier, the few areas of theology that could be impacted by variations in manuscripts can be studied in different passages of Scripture. While the discussion of manuscript superiority is interesting, it certainly does not justify division within the Body of Christ.

WRAP-UP

It's clear that there is no other book out there that has manuscripts that can compare to the Bible's. I would like to encourage you to continue your study of Biblical accuracy. The works cited earlier by Lee Strobel and Josh and Sean McDowell are excellent resources6 on Biblical authority that I would recommend to anyone that's interested, but there's no need to stop there. It is possible to dedicate a lifetime to studying manuscripts and still not uncover all that there is to know. For now, we will close this section on manuscripts and pick up next time with a look at how some of the early Greek, Latin and English translations came to be.

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2 Strobel, Lee (2008-09-02). The Case for Christ: A Journalist's Personal Investigation of the Evidence for Jesus (Kindle Locations 933-938). Zondervan. Kindle Edition.
3 Ibid., (944-947).
4 F. F. Bruce, The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable? (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1964), 16, quoted by Josh D McDowell,.; Sean McDowell (2009-01-06). More Than a Carpenter (Kindle Locations 1038-1040). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.
5 McDowell, Josh D.; Sean McDowell (2009-01-06). More Than a Carpenter (Kindle Locations 1109-1113). Tyndale House Publishers. Kindle Edition.
6 While Strobel, McDowell, and McDowell offer valuable resources for apologetics, their message concerning salvation could use improvement.

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