

1. TRANSLATE THE FIRST-CENTURY TEXT

Thus far, we have observed numerous deficiencies through our evaluation of scripture translations. They strike most individuals as surprising, particularly in view of the influential institutions and the many scholars who have lent their names to the translations. For this reason it's difficult to suppress questions about the causes of the deficiencies. Why are translations of the scriptures faulty in so many areas? Why do scripture translators tolerate so many additions to the texts? Why are critical genre codes ignored? Why are others added? Why are key prominence codes ignored? Why are nonprominent codes made prominent? Why do English translations often stray from normal English usage? Why do translators not target well-defined readers? Why are scripture translations not well documented?

I remember well when I first began asking these questions years ago. I felt guilty. It seemed I was seeing something people are not supposed to see. One would assume that such valued and honored documents as the scriptures would receive the best treatment from translators. It's perplexing why scholars of repute would condone translating practices with the scriptures that are not accepted with other pieces of literature. And it's difficult to explain why they would repeat the same dubious translating practices over and over again.

At the beginning of my research as more and more deficiencies came to light, I found it difficult to sidestep the suspicion that some intimidating principle was at work in the nerve centers of Bible translating. It showed itself in the unwillingness of translators to move outside certain unspoken boundaries, and it showed in their refusal to change translating practices that defy the most common principles of translating .

There is only one influence I know that is powerful enough to exert this kind of pressure on people. It's a matter that is extremely unpleasant to discuss and just as unpleasant to write about; it's the problem that causes a lot of good conversations about the scriptures to suddenly turn icy; it's the skeleton in the closet of many scholars and religious authorities. It's the issue that can bully the strongest of men; and it's the issue that constantly stalked Christ and his students. I'm talking about the intimidating influence of *religious tradition*.

Few influences are as powerful in all areas of life as are the honored traditions that have been passed down from generation to generation. People involved in occupations as diverse as politics, medicine, education, the media, and management know how difficult it is to swim against strong currents of tradition. There are no traditions, however, that can come close to matching the might of religious tradition, and there are few tasks as entangled in the tight nets of religious traditions as Bible translating.

Revising instead of translating

The power of tradition is, in fact, so prevalent among scripture translators, that what is usually called scripture translating is in reality little more than the revising of previous translations. Revising means that a translation is merely updated by replacing older words or by slightly altering sentence structures so they correspond more to those used today. The core text of the translation is left unchanged, however, and it continues to be recognizable as the traditional translation.

Revising instead of translating is not a deep dark secret. The publishers of many translations do not at all deny the practice. They actually praise this approach. In the introduction to the New King James Bible is the following statement:

In the Preface to the 1611 edition, the translators of the Authorized King James Version state that it was not their purpose “to make a new translation . . . but to make a good one better.

On the same page was the following quote:

A special feature of the New King James Bible is its conformity to the thought-flow of the 1611 version.

There are other translators, however, who would protest the claim that their translations are only revisions. The preface to the first edition of the *Net Bible* begins with these words:

The Net Bible is a completely new translation of the Bible with 60, 932 translators’ notes! It was completed by more than 25 scholars — experts in the original biblical languages — who worked directly from the best currently available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts.

There is a glaring contradiction in this statement which is supposed to be an assurance of fidelity and direct connectedness to the originals. It’s the word *Bible*. A Bible is itself a classic example of a *translation* of the scriptures. Anyone translating a Bible has to be revising a translation. A Bible is by no means synonymous with the original scriptures. It wasn’t until hundreds of years after the writing of the scriptures that a translation of the scriptures in the form of a Bible appeared on the scene.

This explains why the *Net Bible* evidences most of the very same translating deficiencies as do the other translations. In spite of their statements to the contrary, the translators of the *Net Bible* have made a revision of previous translations and not a translation directly from copies of the original writings.

In *Part II* we observed how both the *Net Bible* and the *New Living Translation*—another translation that would claim to be directly from the originals—simply take over many of the situation codes, genre codes, prominence codes, and reference codes of earlier translations. This practice of revising is the answer to the question why so many translations all repeat the same mistakes. They are simply taking over the traditional practices of previous translations.

Tracking the sources of traditional influences

The fact that most scripture translating is actually the revising of earlier translations can be demonstrated by tracing the origins of faulty translating procedures. The trail always leads to sources that have little to do with the first-century scriptures. The chapter and verse divisions used in practically all Bible translations are examples of this.

Chapter divisions didn't become a part of scripture translations until the thirteenth century after Christ. Some sources attribute them to a certain Hugo of Saint Cher and others to Stephen Langton of Canterbury. The verse divisions were first introduced by Robert Stephens in a Greek-Latin Testament in 1551. A Latin Vulgate translation from 1555 was probably the first whole Bible translation divided into chapters and verses as we know them today. Translations in other languages—French, Italian, Dutch, English, German—took over the chapter and verse divisions in the sixteenth century as well.

Though the placement of many chapter and verse divisions makes little sense in terms of the actual coding of the text, these same divisions have continued to be repeated in translations for three hundred and fifty years right up to the present day. This is an example of a trail of revising. It stems from additions to the text and not from any writer of scripture.

The chapter and verse divisions are by no means harmless. They create havoc with the prominence codes in the scriptures, because in the minds of many readers the chapters and verses represent real linguistic units. The result is a loss of context and there is no greater loss for a reader. The fact that present-day translations continue to perpetuate the myth of the chapters and verses demonstrates that Bible translators are revising previous translations rather than translating the documents as they were originally written.

This is not to say that there is anything wrong with having a numbering system on a page to make referencing possible, but that system should not interfere in any way with the actual text. It's not as though translators are unaware of this problem. A small minority of translations have tried to minimize the influence of the chapter and verse divisions by putting them in a small font or by placing the numbers to one side. Nevertheless, the four-and-a-half century old chapter and verse divisions continue to exert an influence in the structuring of the text of most Bible translations.

The point of this discussion is not to overemphasize the negative influence of chapter and verse divisions. They are, in fact, less harmful than many of the other additions to the texts of scripture translations. The purpose of this illustration is to demonstrate how flaws in today's scripture translations often stem from practices that have become traditional and are simply being taken over by today's translators. That is not translating. That is revising.

Human traditions and Bible translating

Traditional inclusions in scripture translations usually begin with a prominent person—a teacher, a writer, an authority of some kind—and over time they gain more and more acceptance, eventually developing the inertia of a powerful religious tradition. Such traditions

often become so much a part of the cultural and religious woodwork of a society that they cease to register on the radar of even trained professionals.

But what about the translators and scholars who *are* aware of the traditional practices in scripture translations? Why do they tolerate them? At the beginning of my research I assumed that many translators must not be aware of many of the traditional influences that have come to be tolerated in Bible translations.

As I began to meet Bible translators over the years, however, I discovered as we discussed the translation deficiencies that many of them were indeed aware of them. They knew that many genre codes were not original; they knew that Luke and Acts should not be separated; they knew that many anachronistic words were used in the translations; they knew that the “Bible” was a later creation; they knew that the translations were not done in the language of actual readers.

How do translators explain the acceptance of these problems? I’ve observed that translators often react in one of three ways. First, there are those who simply shrug and fall silent. With them the conversation is over. I never find out what they really think. They say little and send no e-mails. Secondly, there are those who look at me as if I were crazy, brush off the problems, and change the subject. Thirdly, there are those who defend the Bible translations and the traditional influences in them. The ones who do this usually appeal to a three-centuries-long “process of canonization” which, they argue, was a kind of continuation of the writing of scripture in the first century.

These translators are all accepting the decisions concerning the scriptures made at Catholic church councils in the fourth and fifth centuries as indicative of what the scriptures were always supposed to be. Somehow this is enough of a historical reason for them to then accept even later influences in the “development” of the *Bible* form of scripture translation. Thus they approve in their own minds the practice of reproducing the scriptures as they came to be understood after the fifth century, rather than limiting themselves to a first-century perspective of them.

The threat-factor of traditions

The issue of human tradition—particularly as it relates to religion and more specifically to Bible translating—is an extremely threatening topic to most people. In every culture there are traditional beliefs and practices that are part and parcel of the very makeup of people in the society. These traditional beliefs are by no means side issues of life. They touch too many close and intimate relationships. People grow up with them. They associate them with Mom and Dad, with Grandma and Grandpa, with important people in the church, the school, the military, the government, and society. Famous people espouse these cherished beliefs; scholars represent them; history records them; ceremonies and memorials recount them.

Language reflects these traditions as well. Words and concepts become so ingrained and powerful in the vocabulary and perspectives of people that to disbelieve such traditional tenets would be tantamount to being a traitor to one’s own family, country, and culture.

Though many of these traditional practices may seem strange, most people have learned to respectfully tolerate them. They know that prodding a cherished tradition can easily lead to anger, an argument, indignation, or a moment of embarrassment. Few are willing to swim against the stream of an established tradition, even those traditions that are clearly absurd.

Certain Christmas traditions are a good example of Christian traditions which are clearly neither Christian nor in anyway related to the birth of Christ. How many, however, are willing to actually follow the dictates of their conscience and break with the offending practices? Even though it's the twenty-first century, anti-traditional behavior can still lead to criticism, strained relationships, and even ostracism from friends or family. In other words, most people have learned that it's best to let a religious tradition go unquestioned.

When it comes to the scriptures, traditional expectations are particularly strong. How many Bible translators would be kept on translating committees if they insisted that traditional words such as *Bible*, *church*, or *gospel* not be used in the translation? How many would be tolerated who argue for a different ordering of the scripture writings?

Regardless of how unpleasant it might be, however, tradition is not an issue that should be ignored by scripture translators—or for that matter by anyone serious about following Christ. Jesus certainly didn't tiptoe around issues of tradition. He constantly confronted Jewish authorities about Jewish traditions that were often directly at odds with the Jewish scriptures.

I've read the translation principles published by many scripture translation committees and it's always been a puzzle to me that nothing is ever said about being careful to avoid the influence of traditions that have no roots in original sources. I have also reviewed the curriculums of schools and institutes that offer training for scripture translators, and find no courses dealing with detecting the invasive character of human traditions. This is difficult to explain, because the nature and consequences of human traditions are a major topic in the scriptures themselves.

Why should it not be important for a scripture translator to have a sharp eye for influences that do not belong in the scriptures? Why shouldn't translators be trained and encouraged to recognize traditional sources that do not have roots in the writings of the authors of scripture?

Many scripture translators seem quite unaware of the degree to which they dip into traditional sources. On the back cover of the *New International Version* is this statement: *The NIV is neither a paraphrase nor a revision of any previous translation, but a new translation made directly from the original languages.*

This is a laudable statement. It literally promises no traditional filters of any kind. It's a clear and powerfully formulated principle that expresses what should be the commitment of any translator of the scriptures. But what happened? On the front cover of the translation the title says *The New Testament*, a term that no writer of scripture ever applied to a writing of scripture. Instead of listening to their own goal of translating only the scriptures, the translators immediately turn to human tradition for the first and most prominent words of the translation. And that was only the beginning of the NIV's practice of passing on traditions rather than genuine translations.

With a start like that, it's no wonder that the NIV ended up conspicuously bearing the traditional look of previous translations with four "Gospels", traditional titles, a book of Acts separated from its first part, a "I John", traditional chapters and verses, and enough anachronistic and archaic English vocabulary to fill pages. The result was clearly a revision of previous translations and by no means a translation directly from the original languages.

Once again we ask, why is this? Even though traditions exert great influence, why is it so difficult for translators to avoid the heavy-handed influence of previous translations? What powerful authority is lurking in the past requiring that all scripture translations strictly adhere to the tight restrictions of the translation known as the *Bible*?

The origins of translations in the form of a Bible

There seems to be an unquestioned assumption on the part of most translators and scholars that the *Bible* form of scripture translation is the only possible equivalent of the original documents. They speak of the *Bible*, entitle their translations *Holy Bible*, and even refer to themselves as *Bible* translators (as though the *Bible* itself were not a translation).

Is there, in fact, any evidence that a scripture translation at some point in history has assumed this degree of authority? Is there a translation in the past that has openly challenged the primacy of the Greek originals? Is there a translation that took the Jewish scriptures and the Christian scriptures and recast and remolded them into a single holy book? Into a *Holy Bible*?

Every historically savvy student who is reading these words right now knows there was just such a translation in the past. And every serious student of western civilization knows that this influential translation of the scriptures completely dominated the European cultures for over 1000 years, and its influence continues right up to the present age.

Only one other translation ever came close to having an influence similar to this dominant translation, and that was an English spawn of it. And once again, any student of the western world reading these words knows exactly what English translation I am referring to. The historical facts are certainly among the clearest in the world of literature.

The translation that challenged the Greek originals and replaced them for almost a millennium was the translation commissioned in 380 by Damasas, Bishop of Rome and Pope of the Roman Catholic Church. A monk named Jerome was his translator, and the language of choice was Latin, the language of Rome. The translation became known as the Latin Vulgate, and it not only came to dominate and overshadow the Greek scriptures, but was even officially recognized by the Catholic Church at the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century as the *only* authoritative text of scripture.

The creation of the Latin Vulgate translation ushered in a millennium of utter dominance by one translation. It's difficult to imagine it possible, but for a thousand years with rare exceptions it was forbidden for the scriptures to be translated into any of Europe's "inferior" languages. Millions of people speaking over a hundred languages were allowed no translations of the scriptures. Latin was propagated as the only language fit for the words of

God. Of all the heinous things that took place during the dark ages, probably none was as damaging as the refusal by Roman religious leaders to allow the scriptures to be translated into other languages, thereby making them inaccessible to the common people.

Influence of the Latin Vulgate

The Latin Vulgate was responsible for many of the traditional influences we observe in Bible translations today. It was the translation that powerfully stamped the idea of an “authorized” translation onto the collective consciousness of the western world, and it’s the translation that welded the Jewish scriptures and the Christian scriptures into the single literary unit that became the “Bible”.

Neither of these actions was necessary. There was certainly no need for anyone to “authorize” the Jewish scriptures. They were obviously recognized and secure in the minds of first-century Jews including Jesus and his students. They needed no treatment from Roman officials three hundred years later to substantiate them.

There was also no need for the Jewish scriptures to be placed together in a literary unit with the Christian scriptures. In fact, adhering them together in an artificial unity served to open wide the door to contextual confusion. It increased in particular the danger of mixing the Law of Moses with the message of Christ, an ominous mistake with far reaching consequences. In his letter to the believers in Galatia, Paul warned them sternly about just such a practice.

History has dramatically demonstrated the results of the contextual confusion caused by the one-book form of the scriptures. The Latin Vulgate became a useful tool in the hands of medieval leaders who appealed to the Jewish scriptures to justify illegitimate “Christian” practices and dogmas such as the justification for a hierarchical priesthood, the foundation for theocratic political systems, and the duty to militarily possess and protect the holy land of the Jews.

Latin dominance, illiteracy, and the suppression of Greek sources

It’s important to note that the backward cultural slide into the dark ages of medieval Europe was accompanied by the rise to power of the Latin language. It began when the Romans in their growing pride began to consider Latin superior to all other languages, including Greek. Roman scholars began to teach that Greek was an unworthy language for the scriptures. Many Greek manuscripts were burned. Greek literature became rare in the western world—not only manuscripts of the scriptures but also of the writings of the Greek philosophers, scientists, historians, mathematicians, dramatists, and others. The high scientific and literary attainments of the Greeks eventually became lost. The time came when Latin translations of the scriptures were considered more reliable and accurate than any Greek manuscripts. Latin was propagated as God’s language. Superstition and illiteracy spread over the western world.

As Europe slipped further and further into a dark age, the grandeur of Rome and the myth of Latin superiority loomed ever larger in the minds and hearts of Western Europeans. Long

after Rome had fallen, a caricature of it was founded in the middle of the European continent. It called itself the Holy Roman Empire and just the name of it seemed to fire the imagination of people. It was strongly influenced by the Holy Roman Church whose leaders, scholars, and clergy all made use of the old Latin language. Its exclusive holy book was the *Latin Vulgate*, the forerunner of *The Holy Bible*.

The almost mystical influence and prestige of old Rome and its language, Latin, continue right up to the present day. Latin continues to enjoy a higher reputation than Greek even though few languages have ever represented such a barrier to the reading of the scriptures as has Latin. The overwhelming majority of the people in the world during the domination of the Latin Vulgate could not read Latin. Latin never was a lingua franca (widespread common language) in a true sense. It never became the language of the common people. Even in Italy, the original heartland of Latin, no one was speaking Latin on the streets by 1000 A.D.

The influence of Rome and its language continues to the present day. It can be seen in the fact that few historians take Rome to task over its heavy-handed practice of stonewalling the scriptures for centuries. The Latin Vulgate translation of the scriptures is still treated preferentially in most history books even though it was an enormous barrier to the communication of the teachings of Christ for well over a thousand years.

The discovery of Greek writings fuels a renaissance of literacy in Europe

It wasn't until Greek literature once more began to find its way back into Western Europe, that the seeds were planted for an emergence out of the darkness of illiteracy and superstition. Scholars first learned of the Greek teachings through Arabian documents brought to Spain by the Moors. Students made forays into the East to learn Greek and to procure Greek manuscripts which were still available there. This process took place in the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth centuries and historically became known as the *Renaissance*, a rebirth of literacy and learning in Europe.

During this time students and scholars also rediscovered the Greek sources of the Christian scriptures. These discoveries encouraged men who had become increasingly critical of practices of the Roman church to take a different view of the language of the scriptures. Encouraged by the fact that Greek was the source language, they wrenched free of the tight grip of the Latin Vulgate and began to translate the scriptures into the languages of their own countries.

It was not an easy decision. The Latin tradition remained powerful. Translators were banned, beaten, and burned at the stake. The story of the translation of the scriptures into English is a bloody one. John Wycliffe was one of the first to translate the scriptures into English. A century and a half later, William Tyndale made the same effort. Both Wycliffe and Tyndale became targets of the ecclesiastical authorities. Though Wycliffe was hounded over the years and taken to court, he managed to escape execution. Nevertheless, his bones were eventually exhumed after his death and burned. Tyndale was less fortunate. He was arrested and burned at the stake.

Although the Renaissance and Reformation led to great improvements in literacy and caused the influence of Latin to wane, the tradition of the Bible form of scripture translation continued on as strong as ever. Few of the translators of the scriptures in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries viewed the Vulgate itself as a significant part of the problems they were facing. The main objections of the reformers were with practices of the Roman Catholic Church and with the lack of scripture translations in the vernaculars of their countries. Therefore, they did not set out to replace the Vulgate but to translate it. And for the most part, their translations are mirror images of the Vulgate. There are only a few instances in which practices in the Vulgate were actually questioned and then changed in the translations.

In spite of the giant steps made in the production of vernacular translations during the renaissance, the complete primacy of the Greek sources has never been re-established even up to the present day. The influence of the Vulgate continues to dominate the situation codes, the genre codes, the prominence codes, and the language usage of modern translations. Not even the modern editions of the Greek scriptures have escaped the influence of the Latin Vulgate. They follow the ordering of the Vulgate even to the extreme practice of separating First and Second Theophilus.

It is one of the most blatant ruses of history that the Latin language and the Vulgate/Bible form of the scriptures continue to be more highly valued today than do the Greek language and the individual first-century forms of the original scriptures. There is no justification for this. Every source document we have for the teaching of Christ was written in Koine Greek. The dominant language for people living at the time of Christ and in the world of Christ was Greek. Paul and Peter and James and all the other writers of the Christian scriptures wrote in Greek.

There is only one way to explain the fact that a Latin translation continues to determine the genre codes and the prominence codes of modern scripture translations. Once again, it's the power of human tradition. It was powerful at the time of Christ. It is powerful today. And its power extends to present Bible translations that continue to reflect the tradition of the Latin Vulgate.

Scripture translations are of deficient quality today because it's been the practice of translators for many generations to *revise* previous translations rather than to translate the source documents. It's this practice of revising that allows the accumulated miscues of centuries of scripture translating to be transported into modern translations.

Were scripture translators to do real translating—in which the integrity of the author's original text and the integrity of the reader's language are maintained—the resulting documents would never look like one of today's typical Bible translations. It would be impossible. Translators committed to translating first-century documents would see themselves responsible for reflecting the texts of those documents as they were understood in that century. A translation in the form of a *Bible* does not do that. None of the first readers ever read the scriptures in the form of any of today's Bible translations.

Influence of religious tradition on Bible translators in the past century

Some might think that religious tradition is not the problem today that it once was. Most people think of the present day and age as being free and innovative, just the opposite of what stilted tradition is usually perceived to be. To some degree this is true. In the years before the Second World War the power of religious tradition could still be suffocating in many of the old ways. Racial distinctions could be observed in many churches. A “mixed” marriage at that time often meant a marriage between a man and a woman from two different denominations. Catholics were still using Latin in their services. Even revisions of the scriptures like the *Revised Version* (1881) and the *American Standard Version* (1901), which did little more than update the source text of the *King James Bible* of 1611 and freshened up its English text, had to weather storms of criticism.

It was the Second World War that changed many things. For one, it shattered the elitist reputations of many of Europe’s older religious cultures due to the fact that many of their leaders demonstrated a less-than-honorable behavior during the war years. After the war a different wind was blowing in many areas—science, music, arts, social reform, transportation, communications, politics, religion—and one of them was in the world of scripture translating.

Men emerged from the war less willing to think that everything had to be done the way it had always been done. Even in the cloistered halls of the Vatican, a more enlightened Pope called together a council which among other things reduced the influence of the Latin language and put a clear stamp of approval on other languages. Elsewhere, a determined handful of translators dared to produce more modern sounding Bibles. Translations of the New Testament alone, without the Old Testament, appeared on the market. Translations were published in paperback form or looking like school textbooks. One of J. B. Phillip’s editions appeared with a red, white, and blue cover and looked more like a cook book than a Bible translation.

It’s hard to imagine now, but these developments were considered quite extreme at the time, and they were done amid many critical voices—the sort of voices that can still be heard today when a translation strays too far from the standards of the past. Bible translators who were a new breed of linguists published new works in which a different kind of Bible translating was advocated—a translating that was based on linguistic principles and on an understanding of how language actually works among people.

None of these translators, however—F. F. Bruce, J. B. Phillips, Ken Taylor, Robert Bratcher, Olaf Nolie, and others—ventured very far with their translations. None of them remedied the traditional genre codes. Few of them made more than a smattering of the necessary changes to the prominence codes. Even the English used in these translations, as we have seen, continued to be the kind of English that by no means corresponded to the language usage of any actual group of English speakers.

There was even a movement of men and women after the war who became interested in learning more about scripture sources. Universities and graduate schools saw an increase in the number of people registering for courses in Greek and ancient history. Bible study movements sprang up, and people began buying New Testament reference works.

In terms of scripture translating, all of these developments were steps that could have led to the reforms in scripture translating that are much needed. They were steps, however, that soon sank in the quicksand of religious tradition and to the present day have not been continued. Though the new translations were more modern looking, more modern sounding, and incorporated evidence from better Greek texts, they only contained cosmetic changes. The major changes that needed to be made were never approached. Genre codes were left the same. Prominence codes stayed the same. Rhetoric codes were ignored. If anything, the translations eventually came to contain more traditional baggage and not less.

The first waves of innovative translations soon gave way to two highly visible trends in scripture translations: The first was the reappearance of the traditional Bibles. The Old Testament was again included and, as one could have predicted, the leather covers and the gold leaf on the pages reappeared. There are even growing movements afoot today that advocate a return to older versions of the Bible such as the King James Version.

The second trend was first introduced by the Study Bibles which were filled with the commentary of teachers or theologians. Then in the eighties and nineties, powerful religious organizations came back on the scene in a new garb in which prominent teachers, TV personalities, and high-profile authors became the new version of the Bible translator. Soon afterwards, commercial infighting came to dominate the Bible translation scene as a plethora of trendy Bibles and theme-oriented Bibles flooded book stores, displayed next to Christian T-shirts, Christian greeting cards, and Christian knickknacks.

Both of these influential trends—the return to the older version and the appeal of the commercially competitive versions—signaled the end of that small slice of time after the Second World War in which religious traditions were being questioned and pushed back into the shadows.

Today, universities and graduate schools are once again shutting down Greek classes and language requirements are being lessened. The prevailing opinion is that there is little more that can be done in scripture translating to improve an already practically perfect product. Most people are of the opinion that if scripture translating needs to be done anywhere in the world, then only in a jungle somewhere among illiterate natives, but certainly not in any of the major languages of the world, and most certainly not in the English speaking world where the impression is common that there is an almost shameful glut of translations.

The reality, however, is that the quantity of Bible translations today by no means alleviates their deficient quality. A tremendous amount of work needs to be done to convince people of the dire situation with scripture translations and to promote practices of genuine translating in which the source documents are taken seriously and the readers are made an integral part of the work of the translator.

The subtle power of religious traditions

One of the characteristics of religious tradition is that it tends to be invisible to people who have grown up with it. This blindness to traditions no doubt plays a role in the behavior of

many Bible translators who simply assume that the scriptures were always in the form of the Bible. They have no categories in their thinking for anything different. They have never thought it necessary to gain a first-century view of the scriptures with the vigor of true researchers.

The fact that the Bible didn't appear until hundreds of years after the writing of the scriptures doesn't seem to occur to them, or if it does, they simply follow the lead of traditional reasoning that the scriptures were somehow incomplete in the first century and needed the additional centuries to be formed into what they were supposed to be. That's an idea that would come as a surprise to one of the first-century writers of the scriptures. A reader such as Theophilus was told that he could be sure of the credibility of the writings of the eyewitnesses of the Logos.

Another characteristic of religious tradition is that it sinks deep roots into people and powerfully imprints the deeper traits of personal values and language. It is difficult for young men or women to understand the world in a different way than through the eyes of their family, their church, their culture, their country, their university, their teachers, and the institutions that employ them. The values and beliefs imparted through these channels easily become the assumed and cherished understandings that become the building blocks of one's own identity. To question them would be unthinkable. This is why people can grow up in the most extreme and bizarre of religious surroundings and not seem to notice at all the outlandish nature of their beliefs.

It is interesting that people in one religious tradition seldom have trouble seeing the illogic of other traditions, though they are often blind to their own. It takes a person with much courage and a strong desire to come to grips with reality and truth to question one's own traditional world. The stakes are always high for a person to venture outside certain cultural or religious walls. People are seldom willing to jeopardize their position or membership in a group to embrace or even investigate different understandings than those of their family, friends, or employers.

Influences that pressure Bible translators

Bible translators are by no means exempt from traditional influences. They are, in fact, often people who are strongly attached to religious in-groups. It is not normal for religious institutions to allow just anyone to step into the hallowed circle of Bible translators. The Bible is not just any topic in the religious world of Christianity. It ranks at the very top of things religiously venerated in many traditions. The three large Christian traditions—Orthodoxy, Catholicism, Protestantism—have always jealously guarded their Bibles from external or internal influence.

The Orthodox have shown the least interest in scripture translating over the centuries. They consider the oral traditions of their apostles to be superior to the written scriptures and therefore have never emphasized the task of scripture translating. Producing translations that in any way would stray from traditional forms continues to be a sensitive and unresolved institutional issue among the Orthodox. Unofficially, Orthodox people have often used the

King James Version of the Bible and some Orthodox can be observed recommending the *NKJV* on websites.

The Catholics, particularly since Vatican II, have been more open to adjusting the language of their translations, though major changes to them are completely out of the question. The Catholics have entered into some cooperative projects with the United Bible Societies, an international organization that supports and funds Bible translation projects. The only Catholics who are allowed to work in the area of Bible translating, however, are men authorized by the Vatican.

The Protestants were the first strong advocates of vernacular translations after the long centuries of Vulgate domination. This was a major issue of the Reformation. Translation projects were begun in many European countries in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The results in most countries led to the production of “authorized” translations much in the spirit and the form of the Latin Vulgate. *The King James Version* published in 1611 in English, for example, called itself the authorized version and it became almost as dominant in the English-speaking world as the Latin Vulgate was for centuries in Europe. Similar translations gained a similar measure of dominance in Germany, Switzerland, France, and Spain.

Changing any of these authorized translations became a very difficult undertaking. It was over two hundred years before any revision of the King James Version was attempted, and it was a slow and tedious undertaking under the watchful eyes of ecclesiastical leaders who wanted to make sure that the King James Bible received little more than a tweak here and a slight adjustment there. We see here why “Bible translating” into the major languages has always been associated with the work of revising and has little to do with actual translating.

The only Bible translating that was done on a major scale was done behind the scenes by mission agencies in the far corners of the world. Once again, however, no attempts were made by these missionary translators to do anything different than to produce translations that were patterned after the *Bible*.

The Wycliffe Bible Translators, founded in the 1930's by Cameron Townsend, became the most prolific producers of Bible translations in the languages of smaller linguistic groups. Over the years, the Wycliffe staff have created tremendous tools of linguistic analysis and literacy development. Though the translations they produce demonstrate excellent linguistic adaptation to the target languages, they are nevertheless strictly patterned after the situation codes, genre codes, and prominence codes of standard Bible translations.

The point of this brief overview is to show that Bible translators are seldom individuals who live apart from any traditional influence. Instead they are often scholars and students who have been brought up within the hallowed walls of groups and organizations that have deep roots in traditional perspectives. They are members of these institutions, are funded by them, and are expected by them to maintain a set of strict standards. As a result they are constantly under pressure from many sides to preserve the traditional forms of scripture translations.

These pressures come from publishing houses, Bible translation foundations, ecclesiastical organizations, theological institutes, religious periodicals, and other media, and the great

majority of Bible readers who have come to equate the Bible or their own particular form of the Bible as authoritative and for them the only conceivable way that the scripture writings could possibly be presented.

The Translators of the *Net Bible*

The most prominent and supposedly free thinking group of Bible translators today are the twenty-five scholars who make up the translating committee of the *Net Bible*. Their description of their own openness is quite extensive in the first edition of the *Net Bible*. They claim to be producing a completely new translation in a modern up-to-date language using a process of translating that is accountable, transparent, and based on feedback. They use all of the newest communication tools, publish their work on the internet, and promise a product that is free for any user and which offers no financial profit for any of the translators or organizers.

Much of what they say is extremely laudable. It almost sounds like they are completely free of any religious tradition. But are they? As we have seen, their translation demonstrates almost all of the problems of any of the other translations. It is completely out of the question that these scholars translated only from the originals as they claim. Too much of what is in their translation is impossible to find in the original texts. Where did it come from? Why is it there?

A closer look reveals that the translators of the *Net Bible* are all members of a particular religious tradition which, like all traditions, has powerful expectations of its leaders and teachers. Among the *Net Bible* translators are pastors, professors, theologians, translators of other translations (!), and representatives of various religious institutions. The fact is that the majority of them are all closely related to a single theological seminary having at one time been either students or professors there.

All of them have to feel the expectations of this theological institution, its supporters, and the many churches, schools, and other organizations which employ them. What would happen should any of them advocate some of the simplest but most necessary adjustments to scripture translations, such as ceasing to place the scriptures in a Bible form of literature, ceasing to use the word *church* as a translation for *ἐκκλησία*, or ceasing to use words such as *gospel* or *preach*?

I chose these particular examples because they are so traditionally “loaded” that speaking critically of them can literally cause a flash of anger and indignation to course through a listener’s body. It’s the same sort of reaction that might be engendered by insulting someone’s mother or by burning the American flag.

Words such as *Bible*, *church*, *gospel*, and *preach* are striking examples of the power of religious tradition to make a word or a practice holy. The plain fact is, however, that these words are most certainly not holy, and there is no linguistic justification for using any of them in scripture translations today. Their present-day usage is clearly anachronistic. Any simple linguistic testing of these terms among actual readers proves it. It’s only for traditional reasons that they receive preferential treatment.

Would any of the *Net Bible* translators actually lose their jobs or be ostracized by their colleagues if they were to engage in actual translating of the scriptures? If they were to insist on using original genre codes? If they were to structure texts according to original prominence codes? If they were to use only English words that are truly equivalents of original language codes? If they were to refuse to use words that were not clearly from the vocabulary of a well-defined group of readers? Even in our free-thinking day and age, I think it would not at all be unlikely for that to happen.

The Bible form of the scriptures has become holy in the eyes of many. It's predecessor, the Latin Vulgate, was also considered holy, and still is in many circles. The power of human tradition should never be underestimated. Men who have spent their lives teaching and promoting the *Bible* are not going to call the Bible form of the scriptures into question, at least not without a lot of convincing information and not without summoning a great amount of courage—the kind of courage that will most likely get them into the same kind of trouble as it did Christ and his students when they challenged the Jewish traditions of their day.

Nevertheless, this kind of courage is needed if the Christian scriptures are going to be translated as closely to the originals as possible. The originals were written in the first century, not the fourth or fifth centuries. The originals were written by the students of Christ, not by any later translators. The originals were in the words of people living in the first century, not in the words of people living in later centuries. The originals were written in Koine Greek, not in Latin. The originals were written as individual documents, not as chapters in a single book. The originals were the eyewitness accounts, not the commentary of later writers.

The originals were the originals! Why would anyone want to translate anything but the originals? Why shouldn't the originals be translated completely and accurately in their own context? This is the challenge of scripture translators today, and the task is a huge one. No one should think that there is little left to do in scripture translating.

What exactly needs to be done?

The first step is to translate the Christian scriptures from the viewpoint of the first century. All the relevant decisions concerning the scriptures were made in the first century. Their writers lived in the first century. Their language codes mean what they meant in the first century.

If translators of the scriptures were to immerse themselves into the first century, they would never have to worry about the effects of human traditions. The voices from the following centuries would then become irrelevant. The first century should be the source for all the situation codes of the scriptures. Were this the case, the influence of centuries of tradition on the scriptures would fall away and give the translations the nearness to their authors that they should have.

In the following chapters we will discuss nine further steps that need to be taken to correct the deficiencies of scripture translations today.