

INTRODUCTION

Can Bible translations be improved? Most people would probably agree that it's possible. Few would think them to be perfect. But can they be improved in ten different ways? There was a time when I wouldn't have believed it either.

Many years ago at the University of Vienna in Austria, I gave a talk to a small group of students. It was entitled "The Myths About Bible Translations." It was the first time I had ever brought up the topic publicly and I felt some uneasiness about possibly casting doubts into young and eager minds. I thought it was important, however, that they not see Bible translations as objects of veneration but value the scriptures for their content, their solid roots in history, and their testimony to the actual teachings of Christ. I knew that myths they were harboring about the Bible were corroding its links to the real world for them.

At the time, my list of myths about Bible translations was short, but that changed. It expanded over the years. An example of one of the most common myths on my list was this: *All Bible translations are essentially faithful to the original documents.* I find that most people believe this. I believed it as well. I once figured that there may be small words and phrases here or there in most Bible translations that could be made more accurate, but for the most part I couldn't imagine the translations being anything but reliable.

My opinion changed, however, when I began to observe words, phrases, and whole sentences in the Bible translations that were impossible to trace to an author of scripture. For a time, I convinced myself that they must be justified in ways unbeknownst to me. But within a few years, the examples became so numerous and I had probed and poked them so much that I could no longer attribute them to deeper linguistic mysteries. It looked more and more to me like there were real problems in the translations. Friends and colleagues who heard me mention them were surprised. I was surprised as well. How could there possibly be any problems in a Bible translation?

In the following years, I began to ask pointed questions about problems in Bible translations, addressing them to people who were supposed to be experts. The replies I heard often made me shake my head, and raised still more questions. In a quest for greater understanding, I delved into linguistics, Koine Greek, translating theory, manuscript analysis, and all those

matters that belong to the little known occupation of scripture translating. And I set out to meet as many Bible translators as I could.

The world of Bible translating that I encountered was a complete surprise—though I’m not sure exactly what I had envisioned. Holy men gathered in a cloister? Scribes surrounded by thick books? Scholars pouring over manuscripts in an ancient library?

I did meet Bible translators who were scholars, but they went to work in a skyscraper on Broadway in New York City. And I did meet Bible translators cloistered together with an unusual library in their midst. But they were young people in their twenties and thirties, living in a block of cheap rent houses and sparsely furnished dorm rooms. They were studying linguistics at an institute in a Texas suburb, preparing for translating projects in faraway places like Ouagadougou in Burkina Faso or the jungles of Papua New Guinea.

The Bible translators in the skyscraper had upscale offices, the best equipment, and presided over a multimillion dollar enterprise. The Bible translators in the rentals were finishing up tests, gathering together books, stuffing them in old cars, and setting out to try to raise enough money to get them and their families through another harrowing year of interacting with tribes in distant jungles.

Though these two situations demonstrate the extremes of people involved in Bible translating, there is one thing I noticed that bound together the organization in the skyscraper and the organization sending young people into the jungles: Their members were all human beings just like anyone else. I didn’t spy any halos over them; I didn’t run across any sandaled ascetics; I met no one with a reputation of infallibility. They were all people with strengths and weaknesses. They’d all grown up and been educated in particular families, schools, universities, and religious institutions. They all had their own biases, preferences, and blind spots just like anyone else.

I was reminded of an important lesson about Bible translations at these places (and it’s a good lesson for anyone to learn): Regardless of how elevated Bible translations might be in a person’s estimation, no translation should ever be put on a pedestal along with the original scriptures. A Bible translation is exactly that: a *translation*. And like all translations, it’s produced by normal human beings. Bible translators do not become Apostles when they set about to do the work of translating, and Bible translations never become equals to the original documents of scripture.

What this means is that it’s okay to ask questions about Bible translations. It’s not a sin. It’s perfectly fine to evaluate the credibility of a scripture translation. People should even feel responsible to check if translators have done their jobs according to the highest standards.

I say this because in my years of prodding and testing Bible translations, I’ve found that the world of scripture translating has a dark and dangerous side. Yes, I actually did say the words *dark* and *dangerous*. Historically, it’s amazing the number of people who once set out to produce better translations of the scriptures and in a very short time found themselves banned, beaten, or burned. The very first translators of the scriptures into English—John Wycliffe and William Tyndale—suffered such fates.

That was over five hundred years ago. Today is a different age. Or is it? Though I've yet to be threatened with incineration, I have often felt the sharp sting of religious indignation from listeners when presenting evidences of deficiencies in modern translations of the scriptures.

Deficiencies in Bible translations? I know it's a difficult pill to swallow. I've been informed a number of times by someone behind a pointing finger that God would never allow it to happen.

Deficient scripture translating, however, has not only occurred, but the evidence indicates that over the centuries it's been a constant problem. For over one thousand years, for example, the Latin Vulgate translation was taught to be the only acceptable form of the scriptures. Powerful and repressive representatives of the Vulgate forbid that the scriptures be translated into any other language. For one thousand years, with few exceptions, there were no translations made in Spanish, French, English, Polish, Russian, or any of the thousands of other languages in the world! For one thousand years, in many countries, only the privileged few who knew Latin had access to the scriptures, and it was in a translation that was by no means an exemplary representation of the writings of scripture.

Throughout those many centuries, efforts were made by courageous individuals to do better translating and to make translations of the scriptures available in other languages. Most of these efforts were persistently and brutally combated. The argument of the pious persecutors was always the same: Latin is God's language; the Latin translation is sufficient for everyone; it's not God's will to have His words in barbaric languages.

The teachings of the scriptures themselves, however, and the facts of history demonstrate quite dramatically that the scriptures are not free from hostile takeovers. If they are not valued with watchful commitment and courage, then they can quickly become shrouded in the traditions of men. It happened at the time of Christ; it has happened throughout history; it's happening today as well.

People should know the facts about scripture translations. They should not be judged according to their fancy covers, their sales numbers, their prominent advocates, or their advertising. Instead, they should be tested rigorously for accuracy, and they should be expected to be contextually, historically, linguistically, and culturally sound. The fact is, however, that when most Bible translations are put under the bright lights of a thorough evaluation, they come up lacking in significant areas. It's the purpose of this book to draw attention to many of these deficiencies and to propose measures to eliminate them.

For some readers, this book may prove to be a challenge to read because it deals with a wide range of language-related topics. As a result, some of the vocabulary may be unfamiliar. I've not tried to write exclusively for scholars, so every effort has been made to proceed at a tolerable pace and to define terms and explain concepts as the need arises. Nevertheless, there may be times when it's necessary to return to a previous section of text for another reading. As an aid in this regard, the page numbers of related sections are sprinkled throughout the text.

The two chapters of *Part I—How Writings Convey Meanings* and *How Readers Recognize Meaning*—are important introductions to many of the words and principles that are often

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mentioned in the chapters that follow. It's important for a reader to understand this close-up look into the workings of language before venturing into the rest of the book.

The three chapters of Part II include selections from an evaluation of five New Testament translations. Texts from these translations are compared with the Greek source texts, and the discrepancies are noted and discussed.

Finally, each of the ten chapters of Part III details an important way in which New Testament translations need to be improved.

Though Part II and Part III of the book refer to vocabulary established in Part I, it may nevertheless be helpful to read ahead or read various chapters in a random fashion. Taking a look at the front, the back, the top, and the bottom of any matter can often provide orientation, bring up important questions, raise interest, and ultimately increase understanding.

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