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Paradigm Shift: Translations in Transition: We've Been Here Before

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Consider three thoughts with me. First, we live in a day when the question over which Bible translation one uses categorizes the user. We affix labels to individuals because of their choice of one translation over another. Second, as fundamentalists, we have tenaciously held to the "old faith," and see ourselves as those willing to "do battle royal"¹ for the defense of the faith. My point: many think that things old, things tried and proven through years of use can be regarded as safe, and should be considered worth defending since they were part of the "old faith." Third, the mention of the word "change" seems to generate suspicion in the hearts of most fundamentalists.² If you will now bring all three of these thoughts together you will witness what is often taking place within

¹The reader will recall that the expression "do battle royal" comes from an excerpt from an article by Curtis Lee Laws, editor of the *Watchman-Examiner*, July 1, 1920, 834-835. Returning home from a Baptist anti-modernist rally held in Buffalo in July of 1920, Laws announced: "We suggest that those who still cling to the great fundamentals and who mean to do battle royal for the great fundamentals shall be called Fundamentalists." The movement now had a name and an attitude about the defense of doctrine.

²Whether or not it should be so is beyond the scope of this paper.

fundamentalism today: We see the defense of the KJV tantamount to the defense of the gospel (granted, many of us came to know Christ through the use of the KJV and were disciplined in the faith with it). Should one of our brothers or sisters decide upon another translation, he or she is considered to have departed from the faith once delivered and now faces the unenviable position of being labeled, sometimes even ostracized from former colleagues.

We grapple with this issue in fundamentalism because it seems to some that the very Word of God is being questioned. Is that really the case? Furthermore, we seem to be afraid to outrightly confront this issue once and for all because it *might* tear asunder our movement. Notice the use of the word "might" in the last sentence. We talk and act as if we are embarking on a course/issue never before faced in church history. That is not the case. What we are struggling with in fundamentalism today has similarities to what men struggled over on other occasions in ages past.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate that the struggle over Bible translations has taken place in the past. One such an example can be found in the fourth century when Jerome introduced a new translation into a world reluctant to change. The pastors, particularly Augustine, the father of western theology and the pastor at Hippo, was reluctant to accept this new translation. Augustine spoke out against Jerome's work. Understanding that "we've been here before" in church history could help our movement today. A major paradigm shift occurred sixteen hundred years ago, and we have much to learn from it.

Background: Jerome and Augustine

Jerome was born in A.D. 346/7 of Christian parents, in what was until recently north-western Yugoslavia. He received his secondary and higher education at Rome. From 386 to his death in 420, Jerome resided in Bethlehem. Our concern is the period from roughly 391 to 405. During these years Jerome translated the Bible, particularly the Old Testament from Hebrew into Latin, thus providing the basis of what was to become the standard Bible of the

Western Church until the Reformation. In the Latin west Jerome stands out as the greatest scholar of this period. H.F.D. Sparks writes:

Jerome had an innate flair for languages. . . . By his indefatigable study of Hebrew Jerome turned himself into a near-unique phenomenon at any period in the history of the early Church -- a 'trilingual' (competent in Latin, Greek, and Hebrew). . . . he had also studied Aramaic. . . . he had become a fluent speaker of Syriac. . . . And in addition . . . he had acquired, through his early training in the Latin classics, an exceptionally pure and incisive Latin style. He was thus possessed of every qualification that a successful translator could acquire.³

In the early 380's Jerome was commissioned by Damascus to work on the then popular Latin Bible. What Damascus had in mind seems to have been a revision of the Gospels in the existing Old Latin version(s) and not a fresh translation. It was to be a revision in the light of the Greek. His revision of the gospels was inevitably conservative. Jerome set himself deliberately to keep changes to a minimum and assured Damascus in his preface that he had "used his pen with restraint" -- relatively speaking the changes are few.

Jerome did not set out at the start to produce a new Bible. From the Gospels Jerome went on to revise the Latin Psalter, and then on to revisions of other Old Testament books, all on the basis of the Septuagint. The Septuagint he found increasingly unsatisfactory; and eventually he abandoned both it and his revisions altogether in favor of a completely fresh translation from the Hebrew. The whole process was spread over more than twenty years.⁴ The Bible that was

³H.F.D. Sparks, "Jerome as a Bible Translator," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, vol. I, eds. P.R. Ackroyd and C.F. Evans (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1970), 517.

⁴The question often asked is: Can the Greek manuscripts that Jerome used in the preparation of the Vulgate be conclusively identified? The answer is, no. What of the Hebrew Old Testament? Jerome found little amiss with the current Hebrew

in use in the fourth century is known to us now as the Old Latin, for it was eventually displaced by Jerome's translation, which came to be called the Vulgate.

Augustine was Jerome's younger contemporary.⁵ Augustine was born in Thagaste in Roman North Africa in A.D. 354. He studied in Carthage and his home city of Thagaste, and he traveled to Rome in 373 where, ten years later, he founded a school of rhetoric. While in Milan, he came under the influence of Ambrose, was saved in 386 and baptized in 387. In 391 he was ordained, and about five years later he became bishop of Hippo in North Africa, in which office he remained until his death in 430.

Jerome was not only Augustine's senior by nine years, as a linguist Jerome also far surpassed Augustine.⁶ Augustine did not possess great linguistic equipment. He knew no Hebrew, and his knowledge of Greek was not extensive. As a biblical scholar he was essentially self-taught, and self-taught within the conventional literary education of his day. His strongest qualifications were his own remarkable intellect, plus a profound acquaintance with the scriptures, much of which he knew by heart. Unlike Jerome, he did not enjoy the life of a scholar, he was foremost a pastor and theologian.

Augustine's theology influenced the whole of western Christianity after him. Augustine is indisputably regarded as the greatest theologian of the Christian West. Augustine was a man of tremendous talent and passionate commitment to unity of doctrine and life.⁷

text of his day. This text, as far as we can see, was substantially the same as our own standard Masoretic text (See H.F.D. Sparks, "Jerome as Biblical Scholar," 529, 532).

⁵For an overview of Augustine's life and influence see R. W. Battenhouse, ed., *A Companion to the Study of St. Augustine* (Ann Arbor, MI: Baker, 1979, reprint). Perhaps the best single work on Augustine is Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1967).

⁶An excellent article dealing with Augustine the linguist is Gerald Bonner, "Augustine as a Biblical Scholar," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible*, 541-563.

⁷Historian Hans von Campenhausen writes: "Augustine is the only church father who even today remains an intellectual power.... Augustine was a genius – the only father of the church who can claim without question this pretentious title of

Augustine's views on translations of the Bible were unfortunate, but not that dissimilar from some today. He considered not only the original autographs but he also insisted that the Septuagint was inspired. He explained the divergences between the Hebrew and Greek texts were willed by the Holy Spirit, with the Greek occasionally correcting the Hebrew.⁸

Augustine deplored the multiplicity of translations circulating in North Africa and recommended the *Itala* (European version of the Old Latin) as being superior to all other versions.⁹ From about A.D. 400 onwards, Augustine used Jerome's Vulgate revision of the text of the gospels in his church at Hippo and long passages from the Vulgate appear in his works after that date. Augustine continued to the end of his life to regard as authoritative this Old Testament text based on the Greek Septuagint translation, and to depreciate Jerome's new translation based on the Hebrew. "Their authority is of the weightiest," he wrote Jerome in 394 or 395.¹⁰

Reception of Jerome's New Translation by the Church

The acceptance of Jerome's work by the Church took time. Only his revision of the gospels was at all widely accepted during his lifetime. It had been officially commissioned, and this conferred on it a certain official status. But his work on the Old Testament was a private venture. This "Hebrew" Old Testament was not well received at first. Complaint was made that it was tainted by "Judaism"¹¹. It was alleged that Jerome, in abandoning the Septuagint as his base, had not only introduced all sorts and kinds of unnecessary changes,

modern personality-rating," in Hans von Campenhausen, *The Fathers of the Latin Church* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1964), 183.

⁸*The City of God*, 18.43 (All primary source quotations will be from the texts as found in the series *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers* edited by Philip Schaff).

⁹Augustine, *On Christian Doctrine* 2.15.

¹⁰Augustine, *Epistle* 28.2.

¹¹See Jerome's *Epistle* 134. 2 in reply to Augustine's *Epistle to Jerome* 82.35.

but had also cast aspersions on the inspiration of the LXX.¹² Augustine, in particular, was concerned about the abandonment of the Septuagint and urged Jerome to think again.

Disagreement between Augustine and Jerome

Understanding Augustine's principles will help one to understand the disagreements that existed between him and Jerome. Augustine was convinced that the translators of the Septuagint had been accorded a peculiar understanding of the text under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, thus divinely preserving the Word of God.

But I beseech you not to devote your labor to the work of translating into Latin the sacred canonical books, . . . For my own part, I cannot sufficiently express my wonder that anything should at this date be found in the Hebrew MSS which escaped so many translators perfectly acquainted with the language. I say nothing of the LXX, regarding whose harmony in mind and spirit, surpassing that which is found in even one man, I dare not in any way pronounce a decided opinion, except that in my judgment, beyond question, very high authority must in this work be conceded them. I am more perplexed by those translators who, though enjoying the advantage of laboring after the LXX had completed their work, and although well acquainted, . . . with Hebrew syntax, have not only failed to agree among themselves, but have left many things which, even after so long a time, still remain to be discovered and brought to light. . . . it is believed that you are as likely to have been mistaken as the others; if they were plain, it is not believed the they [the LXX] could possibly have been mistaken.¹³

¹²See Jerome's apology against Rufinus in his *Apology* 2.24-35.

¹³Augustine, *Epistle to Jerome*, 28. 2.

Augustine also asserted the principle of pastoral expediency. Augustine was convinced that any wide-spread use of Jerome's "Hebrew" version might result in driving a wedge between churches and within congregations -- something he deplored. He offered to Jerome one such illustration. When the progressive-minded bishop of Oea (Tripoli) adopted Jerome's new version of the book of Jonah for reading in church, the reading was not the familiar reading of the scripture that the people had memorized. The people broke into riot on hearing the words: "And the Lord prepared an ivy (*hedera*, Latin) and made it to come up over Jonah" (Jonah 4:6) instead of the familiar gourd (*cucurbita*). The local Jews, on being consulted, declared, either from ignorance or spite, that the Hebrew original could only mean gourd, and the bishop was forced to return to the old translation¹⁴. Such an incident tended to confirm Augustine in his preference for retaining the traditional rendering.

A certain bishop, one of our brethren, having introduced in the church over which he presides the reading of your version, came upon a word in the book of the prophet Jonah, of which you have given a very different rendering from which had been of old familiar to the senses and memory of all the worshipers, and had been chanted for so many generations in the church. Thereupon arose such a tumult in the congregation, especially among the Greeks, correcting what had been read, and denouncing the translation as false, that the bishop was compelled to ask the testimony of the Jewish residents. These, whether from ignorance or from spite, answered that the words in the Hebrew MSS were correctly rendered in the Greek version, and in the Latin one taken from it. What further need I say? The man was compelled to correct your version in that passage as if it had been falsely translated, as he desired not to be left without a congregation, -- a calamity which he narrowly escaped.¹⁵

¹⁴See Augustine, *Epistle* 7. 3-5; cf. *Epistle* 8. 35.

¹⁵Augustine, *Epistle* 71.3-5.

In addition, Augustine was convinced that because the LXX-based Latin text was the accepted and authorized translation, Jerome was wrong to assert his translation over the authority of the church's tradition.

There were other translators who translated these sacred oracles out of the Hebrew tongue into Greek . . . yet the Church has received this Septuagint translation just as if it were the only one; it has been used by the Greek Christian people, most of whom are not even aware that there is any other. From this translation there has also been made a translation into the Latin tongue, which the Latin churches use. (*The City of God*, XVIII, 43)

Augustine's Reluctance

Augustine's reluctance to accept Jerome's new Latin translation may be summarized into four arguments that he posed to Jerome.

1. How could you (Jerome) think/presume to correct the LXX? It is God's Word.
2. The ability of the authors of the LXX has never been questioned. They were accorded a peculiar/unique understanding by the Holy Spirit into the text. Who do you think you are? No one man, however learned in Hebrew, no, not even Jerome, could ever produce a translation to rival the Septuagint.
3. You are questioning church tradition. The church has sanctioned the Old Latin version based on the LXX. With this new translation you are challenging our accepted and endorsed translation that has been in church use for generations.
4. This new version creates public unrest. It is not the translation the congregations have memorized; it is unfamiliar to their ears. In public reading it sounds different from the accepted translation. There is the potential for disorder.

Jerome's Reaction to Augustine's Criticisms

Augustine's first letter was delayed/lost, so Jerome learned of Augustine's position and concerns about Jerome's new work through others. By the time Augustine's letter(s) reached Jerome he was fuming, and had already responded. Known for his prickly character and temper, Jerome turned his venomous pen directly at Augustine. The translation matter became personal, and Jerome's response betrayed both suspicion and sarcasm.

In one of Jerome's letters he charges that Augustine engineered the issue of challenging Jerome's translation to vaunt his own brilliance and learning, and so become famous at Jerome's expense: "that everybody might know that you challenged me, and I feared to meet you, . . . that I had at last found one who knew how to stop my garrulous tongue."¹⁶ Jerome added that many folks in Palestine insisted that Augustine is nothing but a popularity-hunter and who despised Jerome.

Jerome attempts to close this letter with a note of graciousness and terms of endearment that have a certain sting to them: "Farewell, my very dear friend, my son in years, . . ."¹⁷ There is something frankly pathetic in a fifty-nine year old man's using this form of address to a fifty-year old. But it could serve to put Augustine down as inferior. In a later letter by Jerome he sneeringly writes of Augustine: "You are a Bishop known throughout the world. You had better . . . get all your colleagues in the Episcopate to agree with you. But, of course, I, in my little hut, in the midst of my monks, my fellow-sinners, dare not lay down the law on these great matters."¹⁸

¹⁶Jerome's letter to Augustine A.D. 404 in Augustine, *Epistle* 72.

¹⁷Ibid.

¹⁸Jerome's letter to Augustine A.D. 404 in Augustine, *Epistle* 75.5.

Concluding Observations

These two fourth-century greats found themselves at odds with each other over the issue of Bible translations. Their disagreements have striking similarities to those heard today. How they wrestled through the issue in their day could help us greatly today. There are at least five observations that would be relevant for us to consider as we confront a similar controversy.

First, although Jerome attacked Augustine personally in his letters, Augustine remained dignified in his reply. He feels, and justly, that Jerome has handled him unfairly; yet he sweeps all that on one side and instead of recriminating, he pays Jerome the most delicate compliments.¹⁹

Second, Augustine wrote Jerome explaining that the issue was never personal: "Nor did I ever dream of it as being 'against you,' for I felt I had written it in the spirit of true friendship, whether as a suggestion or with a view either to your correcting me or I you."²⁰ Lesson for us: let us get this issue off of the *ad hominem* (i.e., lit. "to the man", thus attacking individuals) level. We cannot resolve anything by personal attacks.

Third, in A.D. 405, *Letter 81* arrived from Jerome. Jerome urges Augustine that they "have done with such quarreling"; let there be "sincere brotherliness" between them, and let them in future exchange letters, "not of controversy, but of mutual charity." He concludes the letter by saying, "Let us play together in the field of scripture, without wounding each other." The metaphor, as events prove, could have been more fortunately chosen! Augustine responds that he refuses to look on scriptural discussion as "mere amusement"; the issues are too weighty, and he is more disposed to "exert himself in earnest." He rebukes Jerome by informing him that students of scripture, instead of "amusing themselves on a level plain," are more like "men panting and toiling up a steep incline."

¹⁹See especially Augustine, *Epistle 73.5*.

²⁰Augustine, *Epistle 82.33*.

All this may seem at first deadly over-serious on Augustine's part to Jerome's use of the metaphor "play." Augustine has been forced to reflect on the whole previous exchange between them, and he may well have felt entitled to think that until now Jerome has had things all too easily his own way. Now this crusty old warrior has got to be told, and told straight out. Lesson for us: confrontation, even when it comes to discussing another's motives, is unavoidable if there is ever to be harmony and a working relationship.

Fourth, it is amazing that Augustine should have had in his possession so many of Jerome's works, despite the distance that separated them. He possessed numerous commentaries by Jerome. It's ironic (yet we see the same thing today) that though Augustine disagreed with the translation of the text, he used Jerome's commentaries on the text.

A fifth observation is that Jerome and Augustine exchanged numerous letters, always in full agreement with each other in their opposition to the heresy of Pelagianism. It is an interesting characteristic of the two men that their intense hatred of heresy did more to bring them together than their equally passionate love of the Bible. This can indeed be an example for us in that their differences over translations did not prevent them from agreeing on true doctrine.