

**Bible Translations:
Do We Have the Right Models?**

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A great deal is being written today concerning contemporary Bible translations. Some of what is being written raises valid questions that must be addressed rather than avoided. Unfortunately, all too much of what is appearing in print accomplishes something entirely different. Rather than providing valid information on the issues surrounding Bible translations, many are discussing the issues in highly questionable models that predetermine the answers. In addition to that, there are those who pontificate on the practical issues in such a way that personal dogmas replace right doctrine.

Without attempting to answer all the questions, those of us involved in this discussion would do well to reflect upon two questions. First, where does the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church stand in relation to our practice on this issue? Second, are we using the right models on which to base our present positions on texts and translations?

Regarding the first question, could we not say that by virtue of the priesthood of the believer and the autonomy of the local church that each individual believer and each assembly of believers has a

distinct biblical right before God to determine whether or not to use a particular translation?

The second question will take a bit more to unfold. It will require us to evaluate ourselves in light of an assumption we find in the scriptures; namely that our primary goal is to communicate God's word as accurately and effectively as possible so that souls will be saved and so that believers will be challenged to live their lives in conformance with the teachings of the scriptures. This assumption is the basis or premise of my approach in presenting four models on Bible translations.

Four Biblical Models

As we approach the twenty-first century, we should ask ourselves some very important questions. If we believe that the clear unhindered communication of God's truth is of utmost importance, are we doing anything to hinder the Holy Spirit as He seeks to illumine the hearts and souls of men and women? Moreover, is there any example in the Bible in which this process of communication by the Holy Spirit was hindered? Can we take this example from the scriptures along with the models of how God used his word in the Old Testament and in the first century church and apply them to our own ministries to see if we can aid rather than hinder the Holy Spirit's work in the area of communicating God's word?

This writer argues that the biblical models do provide guidance that will help produce sound practice even for believers today. Let all believers openly and honestly look at how the biblical writers, the teachers in ancient Israel, the apostles, and even Jesus used the scriptures. A consideration of these models would definitely shed light on the discussion of contemporary Bible translations.

Biblical-Principle Model

This model serves as the biblical basis for assessing the rest of the models. The models that I will present are considered in light of

a basic principle presented by the apostle Paul in his first letter to the Corinthians:

So also you, unless you utter by the tongue speech that is clear [understandable], how will it be known what is spoken? For you will be speaking into the air. There are, perhaps, a great many kinds of voices [languages] in the world, and no kind is without meaning. If then I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be to the one who speaks a barbarian, and the one who speaks will be a barbarian to me. . . . Therefore let one who speaks in a tongue [language] pray that he may interpret [give the meaning]. . . . In the church I desire to speak five words with my mind, that I may instruct others also, rather than ten thousand words in a tongue [foreign language].¹

The context helps clarify this passage. The term “tongue” as used here is further clarified by Paul’s quotation of Isaiah 28:11 in 1 Corinthians 14:21. In the Isaiah passage, “strange tongue” is a clear reference to a foreign language; particularly the Assyrian language, because the Assyrian army was to be God’s chastising rod for the Northern Kingdom.

In addition, the geographical and cultural context of Paul’s situation helps to clarify how Paul used the term “tongue” here. Corinth was located on a narrow isthmus that joins the southern part of the Greek peninsula (i.e. Peloponnesus) to the Greek mainland. It was also the hub that connected several major seaports including Lechaeum (northern gulf side next to Corinth) and Cenchraea (southern gulf side next to Corinth). The voyage around the southern tip of the Grecian peninsula was long and dangerous and was noted for its treacherous winds.²

¹1 Cor. 14:9-19 (NASB).

²W. L. Lane notes, “The risks were so great that shipowners preferred to have the cargoes of larger vessels unloaded and transported across the isthmus Light boats could be hauled from one sea to the other on moveable trolleys across the *diolkos*, a paved road joining the Corinthian and Saronic gulfs. Nearly all trade and

It is easy to see how a major communication problem could have existed in the church at Corinth if one considers the significant amount of maritime and overland commerce that must have passed through that city. This would have included merchants, sailors, and their passengers from many different countries.

Regardless of one's view of the meaning of 'tongues' here, most will agree that Paul is addressing a problem associated with communication. This breakdown in communication is due to the confusion of different languages (a tower of Babel in the church?). Also, the interpretation or translation of what was being spoken in the assembly was crucial for all to clearly understand the precise meaning of what was being communicated.

This custom of a church member spontaneously sharing a blessing, prayer request, and especially a testimony of how God's word has brought conviction and transformation into a person's life (cf. 1 Cor 14:30) is still seen even today.³

It appears, then, that what Paul is saying is that he desires the process of communication to be as unhindered as possible as God's word is preached and taught in the assembly, and that the best way to do this is in the current vernacular or idiom of the people in his audience. Furthermore, this would seem to imply that the language being used is both chronologically and geographically relevant. The clear intention of Paul under the guidance of the Holy Spirit is to communicate God's truths as clearly, and without as many obstacles, as possible. This principle of unhindered communication will later in this article be seen to be consistent with the practice of the Old Testament believers as well as with Jesus and the apostles

travel from the east and the west moved overland from sea to sea through Corinth . . . The fact that Corinth also controlled the overland route from the Peloponnesus and the main land made it *one of the great crossroads of the ancient world.*" [emphasis mine]. W. L. Lane, "Corinth" in *Major Cities of the Biblical World*, ed. R. K. Harrison (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1985), 83-84.

³For example, this practice is seen in the independent Baptist churches of Romania, in ancient times called Dacia.

Changing-Language Model

All languages undergo change over time. What about the Hebrew language? Did the language of the Old Testament change over time? Were there dialectical differences within ancient Israel? If so, how did this affect the biblical texts which the Israelites inherited?

The Hebrew language has been in use since Moses' time until the present. With respect to the biblical text and its transmission, the evidence indicates that this was done scrupulously and with the greatest care.⁴ Compared to other languages, the changes in the Hebrew language over great spans of time were not as great.⁵

On the other hand, the teachers and custodians of God's word during Old Testament times (i.e. the priests and scribes) updated the biblical texts from time to time in order to make the language of the text conform to the present day speech so that its message could be clearly understood and made relevant to God's people.⁶

⁴Bruce Waltke, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 16; hereafter referred to as *IBHS*. The basis for much of the material in this section is taken from this very conservative work.

⁵As Waltke highlights, "over the course of three millennia the Hebrew language has experienced many changes; indeed, even over a period of several generations a language undergoes modification. The English we speak is not the language of Shakespeare or even of Thomas Jefferson. The Middle English language of Chaucer and, even more so, the Old English of King Alfred the Great (9th century A.D.) are to us virtually foreign languages. The interval between the earliest biblical literature, such as the song of Moses (Exodus 15) or the Song of Deborah (Judges 5), and the latest books of the Bible, such as Esther or Chronicles, is as long as the interval between Alfred the Great and us. In contrast to the history of most languages, the Hebrew language has exhibited a remarkable uniformity over time. A well educated Hebrew speaker [today] can read and understand Hebrew literature from all stages, from the oldest portions of the Hebrew Scriptures to Modern Hebrew" in *IBHS*, 3-4.

⁶According to Waltke, "scribes, aiming to teach the people by disseminating an understandable text, felt free to revise the script, orthography (i.e. spelling), and grammar, according to the literary conventions of their own times" in *IBHS*, 17.

Linguistic Features. Evidence indicates that before 1350 B.C. the Hebrew language possessed certain linguistic features (e.g. old case endings, various prefix conjugations, etc.) which were different from the Hebrew text we have today, as preserved by the Masoretes. In fact, the practice of Israel's teachers followed a convention that was practiced throughout the ancient Near East. Instead of leaving older spellings and grammatical forms in the text, scribes periodically updated their received texts. Clarity of communication between text and reader was, thus, a key consideration.⁷

Hebrew Alphabet. Between the times of Moses and Solomon, the Hebrew alphabet changed from 29 consonants to 22 consonants.⁸ As a result, the spelling of many words was changed at this time. Moreover, following the return of the exiles in the fifth century, the Israelites changed their method of writing. They ceased using Hebrew characters and changed to the Aramaic script.

Hebrew Vowel System. During the period of the monarchy, there was also a change in the vowel system in Israel. This meant that the pronunciation of words underwent change over time.⁹ Also, between the pre-exilic and post-exilic periods, certain additional consonants were inserted into various words ('mothers of reading') to indicate special vowels. This was another contributing factor to the changes in word spelling.¹⁰ The Hebrew text was always somewhat

⁷Ibid.

⁸See Proto-Semitic and Proto-Canaanite alphabets in the chart found in Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1987), 32.

⁹Originally, Proto-Semitic languages had only the vowels 'a' 'i' and 'u'. Later these sounds gradually expanded to include both the long and short forms of the vowels 'e' and 'o'.

¹⁰There was the insertion of what is called *matres lectionis* (i.e. 'mothers of reading') or certain consonants to indicate what the preceding vowel was to be. The external *matres* -y, -w, -h were added during the pre-exilic period (between the ninth and sixth centuries). The internal *matres* -y-, -w- were added during the post-exilic period.

fluid and did not become fixed until the end of the first century A.D. Also, the vowel pointing we find in our modern printed editions of the Hebrew Bible was not perfected until the ninth to the tenth centuries A.D. by the Masoretes.¹¹

Dialectical Differences. There were also dialectical differences within the kingdom of Israel itself. Inscriptional evidence indicates that the dialect in the Northern Kingdom was different from that of the Southern Kingdom. This phenomenon is also reflected within the Bible itself.¹²

Implications. Such changes in the Hebrew language support the notion that although the precise form of the text is somewhat fluid as God superintended the transmission of His word throughout the generations, the precise meaning was always preserved. Moreover, since language is a living entity, a later generation can express the same meaning as an earlier one using different linguistic and textual elements.

This model also demonstrates that the biblical writers, as well as the custodians of the sacred texts (i.e. the scribes), *were concerned to keep the written text current with the language as spoken by God's people*; for although the spelling and pronunciations of Hebrew words changed over time, the actual words themselves did not. In other words, as pointed out above, the meaning of the Hebrew words was very stable over time compared to what has happened to the English language.

¹¹See Thomas O. Lambdin, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), xiv, xxiii-xxiv.

¹²For example, the Song of Solomon exhibits features characteristic of the northern dialect. Also, there is the very clear example of the dialectical differences in Judges 12:6 where Jephthah's men devised a test to identify their enemy (the Ephraimites) based upon a dialectical difference. When an Ephraimite was asked to say, "shibboleth," he would say, "sibboleth" because the Ephraimite dialect did not make a distinction between the Hebrew consonants "sin" and "shin" as did the dialect of the Gileadites.

The practical implication of this model raises a very important question. Should we force people to conform to our personal preference for a long-held tradition, or should we begin to practice this model of how God communicated His truth in the past? Are we being consistent with how God has acted in the past as we face the controversy of Bible versions today?

Audience-Perspective Model

This model is based upon the usage of the Old Testament by Jesus and the apostles as they confronted the Hellenistic culture of their day. Within such a context, how did Jesus and the apostles communicate their message to these people? We know that the *lingua franca* of the day was koine Greek, and that it was in this language that the New Testament was eventually written. We also know that they quoted extensively from the Old Testament, what New Testament writers referred to as “the scriptures.”

Some pertinent questions regarding the practice of Jesus and the apostles are as follows: When the New Testament writers quoted from the Old Testament, did they follow the original Hebrew exclusively? Or when they quoted from the Hebrew Bible, did they give a literal word-for-word translation of the original? If the answer to either of these questions is no, what are the implications for us today?

Regarding the writings of Paul, the evidence shows a great deal of textual diversity. In fact, not only did Paul use the Septuagint (i.e. LXX) more than the Hebrew Bible (MT), but he used it even at times when it departed from the Hebrew text.¹³

There exists textual diversity in the Gospels as well. The Gospel writers record Jesus quoting from a number of texts when quoting from the Old Testament. Craig Evans states that, “Citations of the OT in the Gospels reflect the Hebrew . . . the Greek . . . and the

¹³Moisés Silva, “Old Testament in Paul,” in *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1993), 631.

Aramaic [Targums]. . . . Given the nature and origin of the material, the respective contexts of the Evangelists and the fact that they wrote their Gospels in Greek, such diversity is hardly surprising."¹⁴

The freedom with which Jesus, the Gospel writers, and Paul used various versions (including the LXX and Aramaic Targums) indicates that to some extent this approach was not totally foreign to their audience. In other words, it was a fairly standard practice to quote from different versions. They were not concerned with conformity to one particular Bible version (nor two or even three) when they quoted from the scriptures.

Implications. Based upon the first century practice, it appears that if Jesus and the apostles were ministering in America today, they would have no problem with quoting from the NIV, the NASB or any number of other contemporary English versions. Furthermore, the evidence suggests that their quoting from older English versions would be somewhat unlikely today, since the vernacular of those versions are not current with the twentieth century American audience. To use an antiquated form of the English language would to some extent hinder the communication process, something upon which Jesus and the apostles placed a very high priority. Thus, by virtue of their desire for a message that is understandable and clear, this usage of the Old Testament by Jesus and the apostles supports the notion that they were primarily concerned with accommodating their audience's cultural and linguistic setting with respect to the contemporary idiom, namely koine Greek.

Text-Critical Model

When approaching the question of Bible translations, we must also deal with the question of the texts underlying those translations. Did God preserve His word in only one manuscript or in only one

¹⁴Craig Evans, "Old Testament in the Gospels," in *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1992), 579.

textual tradition?¹⁵ For both the OT and the NT there are many manuscripts as well as several manuscript families.¹⁶

Psalm 145: A Case Study. With all these manuscripts and manuscript traditions, the question arises: What should be our attitude toward this large body of textual evidence for the Bible which has been handed down to us by the communities of faith who lived in different places and at different times? I would suggest that *all of the textual evidence* should be considered, each on its own individual merit in light of the biblical context in which it occurs. The case study that will be used to demonstrate this is Psalm 145.

Psalm 145 is an acrostic (i.e. alphabetical) psalm in which verse 13b, the stanza beginning with the Hebrew letter 'י' (equivalent to our letter 'n'), is missing from the Leningrad Codex and most Hebrew manuscripts. This missing strophe is preserved in one LXX and one Syriac manuscript, as well as in the Qumran Psalms Scrolls. The extant LXX manuscript dates from the early centuries A.D., and the Qumran scrolls date from one to two centuries B.C. On the other hand, the Leningrad Codex dates from the ninth to the tenth centuries A.D. It is also the only complete extant Hebrew manuscript of the Bible and is the OT manuscript which underlies virtually all English as well as foreign translations of the Bible.

Since the Hebrew letter 'י' is missing from the primary Hebrew codex, then verse 13b is missing from nearly all English versions. The NIV, however, includes it, because it follows an 'eclectic' approach to textual criticism. Yet even though verse 13b is missing from most of our English Bibles, it is highly likely that it was

¹⁵For example the Old Testament TR is the Leningrad Codex; the New Testament TR is Erasmus' text and its later editions.

¹⁶In the Old Testament there are manuscripts from Qumran (i.e. Palestinian tradition), the LXX (i.e. Alexandrian or Egyptian tradition), and those of the Masoretes (i.e. Babylonian tradition).

originally a part of Psalm 145¹⁷, for an acrostic is a poetic device which is usually employed by the biblical writer to show completeness. Most of the acrostic psalms contain every letter of the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁸ There are several exceptions to this complete arrangement. These occur, however, in earlier Psalms which predate changes in the Hebrew alphabet.¹⁹ Psalm 145 dates from a much later period as even its number indicates (145 in contrast to 9-10, 25, and 35). By this time the Hebrew alphabet had become standardized.²⁰

Since it is fairly certain that a stanza (verse) is missing from Psalm 145, we can take two different approaches. We can dogmatically assert that the Leningrad Codex is the Old Testament TR and therefore should not be changed to reflect the complete reading. We might further support this by claiming the TR is the special work of direct divine preservation. On the other hand, we could be honest with the evidence and look at several older manuscripts which preserve the missing verse, knowing that a lot can happen in twelve centuries of transmitting a text. We could then be thankful to God for the fact that so little of the Hebrew text was changed over the centuries.

¹⁷See, for instance, Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 21 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 294. Allen contends that, "structural considerations confirm its genuineness."

¹⁸For example, Psalm 37, 111, 112, and 119. The Book of Lamentations exhibits a complete acrostic in which stanzas are grouped according to every letter in the Hebrew alphabet.

¹⁹These changes are satisfactorily explained in Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 19 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1983), 128-131. Craigie is a very conservative biblical scholar and an expert in the Canaanite language (Ugaritic) which is very closely related to Hebrew, especially in its early stages of development. He notes that the psalms which do not contain complete acrostics (Pss. 9-10, 25, and 35) are much older psalms dating from an early period of the Hebrew language when its alphabet was undergoing changes.

²⁰It is also grouped together with the Post-exilic psalms. Though the Psalm is attributed to David, its appearance in this late collection of Psalms indicates it was updated to conform to the new situation (including the alphabet). Its content is directly relevant to the newly established community of Jews who had just returned to Jerusalem from captivity.

Implications. What is the significance of these older manuscripts preserving what appears to be an original verse which has been lost from a later and more complete manuscript on which most Bible versions are based? Four significant implications can be gleaned. First, the evidence is that God has preserved His word in a plurality (or multiplicity) of manuscripts and that one manuscript tradition should not be given absolute priority over another. Second, all textual evidence should be considered in conjunction with internal contextual evidence from the Bible itself, as well as with acceptable principles of textual criticism. Third, this case study would argue for an eclectic approach to Old Testament textual criticism and indirectly for an eclectic approach to New Testament textual criticism as well.

Conclusion

Before we draw any applications from what has been written, let us review the salient principle we discover in each of these models. The biblical-principle model indicates that God desires to communicate His truth in a clear and intelligible fashion. The changing-language model suggests that God has always communicated with His people using the language and cultural idiom of their own time and place. The audience-perspective model demonstrates that Jesus and the apostles quoted freely from different versions of the scriptures that were extant in their day; namely, those with which their audiences were obviously familiar. The text-critical model as just mentioned supports the notion that God has preserved His word in more than one manuscript or manuscript tradition. This would suggest an eclectic approach to textual criticism.

For us today, we could definitely say that we should make every effort to communicate God's word to men and women using the linguistic and cultural conventions to which they have become accustomed. There is absolutely no evidence that God ever tried to make His audience adapt their understanding to a language, dialect, or cultural idiom that was unfamiliar to them. In fact, the very opposite was true.

In light of the preceding discussion, let us honestly consider these models which represent how God has communicated and preserved His word in the past and humbly seek the Lord's guidance on this issue for ourselves and our churches.