INTRODUCTION TO THE BIBLE

Lecture 5

A Bible for us today!

The discovery and preservation of ancient manuscripts is only half the story when it

comes to understanding how we got our English Bible. Most of us who want to read

the Bible today are dependant on translations. Very few if any of us would have the

opportunity or time to sit down and study the Scriptures from their original texts. So we

rely upon translations which have been mass produced and distributed throughout the

world.

In this study we shall consider two particular aspects - the history of the English

translation of the Bible and the modern translations available today. I am often awed at

the incredible sacrifice and dedication of hundreds upon hundreds of men and women

of God down through the ages that has ensured that you and I can just go out and buy

a Bible that we can read and trust! We take so much for granted these days, yet many

gave their lives in the cause of making God's Word available to the masses in

commonly spoken and understood languages. And of course the work of translating the Scriptures never ends. Jesus said that this Gospel must be preached in every nation before the end can come. For the Gospel to be preached in every nation requires, I believe, that the Scriptures be available in the language of every nation. Organisations such as Wycliffe Bible Translators and Bible Societies perform an often unseen yet invaluable ministry in this area.

And then of course language changes. English, for example, is a living language that

undergoes hundreds of changes from decade to decade. Words are often dropping out

of use, changing use or being added. That's why English translations made centuries

ago can prove difficult to understand for a younger modern generation who have

grown up with a different vocabulary and set of idioms and expressions. Modern

revisions and translations are always required. Because the Bible, being the message of God to man, is so important to be understood properly, it should be made available with the best versions possible, which will reproduce in the modern language, the thought of the original. This will therefore, clear the way for a person to find out for himself what the Bible has to say.

**HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE**

The Time period from 600 - 1500 A.D. was an extremely dark time in both the church

and the world. The visible church had become corrupt, traditionalised and structured. It

was characterised by "Papal" power, internal schisms and barbaric crusades. The

church had moved into a "religious system" that primarily catered to the clergy and the

elite. It's hard to comprehend the incredible devilish things that went on. God's glory

was blurred and the truth of the Word of God was altered. The system had become

incurably flawed, and now it was to be condemned. When things were about the darkest, then slowly some light began to dawn on the scene of history. There was a gradual spiritual awakening in people. A glimmer of hope that God was still alive and longing for a deeper personal relationship with His people. There came a growing concern in individuals and in certain movements to somehow get the Word of God out to the people. For now we will look briefly at a few of the pre - Reformation people and movements.

The Albigenses

They were known as the "Cathari" or "Puritans" of that time period, having been

organised in Southern France about 1170. They strongly opposed the Roman Catholic

Church, called for reforms, and circulated the New Testament as widely as possible.

Pope Innocent III called for a crusade against them in 1208, even after many of their

numbers had been burned at the stake. There were many more crusades against them

until they were finally exterminated.

The Waldensians

This group was found around 1170, about the same time as the Albigenses, by a man

named "Peter Waldo." He was a rich merchant in Lyons, Southern France and circulated the Bible through his business. He wrote many tracts against the Catholic church. He deposed of his property, took a vow of poverty and gathered a group of like-minded men to go around preaching. They were known as "the poor men of Lyons," and later as Waldenses . The movement spread rapidly until Pope Lucius III excommunicated them in 1184 and officially condemned them as heretics along with the Albigenses.

In 1229 the Council of Toulouse decreed to forcefully suppress the heresy. The

inquisition came down upon the Waldenses with great force. They were eventually

driven from France where they escaped to caves in the valleys of Northern Italy.

Waldo died about 1217 but his movement has survived until the present day.

Other pre - Reformation people and movements that are worthy of study at a future

time are the Lollards, the Hussites, Jerom Savonarola, Jaques Lefevre.

The First English Translations

The earliest evidence of an English translation of the New Testament is around 1000

AD by a priest who wrote the English between the lines of a Latin text he was copying.

Moving on to the 14th Century we come to a man named John Wycliffe (1320-1384)

"The Morning star of the Reformation" born of Saxon blood in Hipswell, England. He

entered Balliol College as a student and later became master. He was soon esteemed

the ablest member of the faculty. Having become a doctor of theology he was given

appointment by the king to the rectory of Lutterworth.

Soon he began to speak as a religious reformer, preaching in Oxford and London

against the Pope's secular sovereignty and publicising his ideas by tracts and leaflets.

In 1377, the Pope condemned Wycliffe's writings. But Wycliffe had strong support from

the people, the scholars, and the nobles of England. He provided England with a new

and "pure" Gospel, establishing the Bible as the only source of truth and stating that

the clergy were not to rule, but to serve the people. He also denounced the doctrines

of transubstantiation and purgatory and many others. He raised up preachers from the

students at Oxford known as "the Lollards" and spent most of his time writing and translating.

He died in 1384 having "lit a fire which shall never be put out." The Catholic Church

ordered his books burned and his body exhumed and burned. Nevertheless, about 150

copies of Wycliffe's version have survived, but only one is complete.

Another Englishman, William Tyndale (1494-1536) was a capstone figure in providing an English translation of the Bible. Tyndale attended Oxford and Cambridge becoming a very proficient Greek scholar. The Greek New Testament of Erasmus and the works of Luther awakened in him the desire to give the Bible to the common people in their own language. He then went to Hamburg and studied Hebrew with some prominent Jews, and then to Germany to confer with Luther. It was in Worms, Germany that Tyndale printed his first New Testament (1525) and it was smuggled into England. He produced several other works while he was in hiding (no one knows where) that greatly affected England. By 1534, believing that the Reformation in England had reached a point that it would be safe for him to come out from hiding, he settled in Belgium and continued his writing. He was soon arrested, imprisoned in the castle of Vilvorde, (near Brussels) Belgium, tried for heresy and treason, and convicted. He was first strangled and then burned at the stake in the prison yard on October 6, 1536.

Also in 1535, an Englishman named Miles Coverdale published the first English

translation of the entire Bible in the city of Zurich. This edition had the support of King

Henry VIII because Coverdale was an ordained priest and translated the Bible in a way

that supported Anglican Catholic doctrine and was therefore favoured over the Latin

Vulgate. In 1539, Coverdale incorporated the best of Tyndale and other translators

and prepared a huge (9 in. x 15 in.) book which earned the name "the Great Bible."

The British government ordered that the book be displayed prominently in every

church throughout England.

English Bible Banned!

In 1553, Queen Mary (Tudor) banned the use of all English Bibles by the people.

Coverdale and most of the Bible translators fled to Geneva, Switzerland, where John

Calvin structured a Protestant stronghold. William Whittingham of Geneva encouraged

many of these scholars to begin work on a new English Bible, which was published in

1560. This was the first Bible that was divided into verses by a printer named Robert

Estienne. It was called the Geneva Bible. This translation was dedicated to Queen

Elizabeth I, who had taken the throne of England in 1558. This translation became the

most popular at the time.

The King James Bible (KJV)

In 1604 James VI, King of Scotland from his youth, became King James I of England,

the first ruler of Britain and Ireland. Because of the growing animosity of James toward

the Puritans, a leading Puritan spokesman, Dr. John Reynolds, proposed that a new

English Bible be issued in honour of the new King. King James appointed 54 learned

scholars in the making of this new translation from the original Greek and Hebrew into

English. For the Old Testament they used the Ben Asher text, and for the New

Testament they used the Greek text of Erasmus and a Greek and Latin text of the 6th

Century found by Theodore Beza. They used Chapters (developed by Archbishop

Stephen Langton in 1551) and Verses (the verse divisions of Robert Estienne).

It was completed and published in 1611 and became known as the "Authorised

Version" because the making of it was authorised by King James. It became the

"Official Bible of England" and the only Bible of the English church. There have been

many revisions of the King James Bible i.e. 1615, 1629, 1638, and 1762. Some of

them include marginal notes containing the chronology of Biblical events laid out by

Archbishop James Ussher (1581-1656), which dates Adam and Eve at 4004 B.C. The

1762 revision is what we now presently know as the King James Version.

Revisions of the King James Bible

The English Revised Version (RV). n 1881 two respected Anglican leaders, Bishop

Harold Browne and Bishop C.J. Ellicot along with an American committee produced a

Revised Version of the New Testament. The RV was received well in Britain and the

U.S. By 1885 the committee introduced the entire Bible, both Old and New Testaments. The RV later lost its reputation in the United States because of its semi British slant.

The American Standard Version (ASV) was published in 1901. Some members of the

American committee produced their own scholarly version of the King James headed

by J. Henry Thayer. Their aim was for a word for word rendering of the Greek and

Hebrew wherever possible. This made it a little harder to read and it lost its King

James, Old English flavour.

The New King James Version (NKJ) In 1979, Thomas Nelson Publishers issued a new

edition of the of the KJV New Testament. The Publisher assembled 119 scholars to

work on this new version. By 1982, the entire NKJV was published and immediately

widely accepted. The New King James version was based on the 1894 version of the

Textus Receptus. It is known for its integrity in preserving the true meaning of the text

and also for easy readable style (or at least much easier than the KJV). It preserves

some of the old archaic expressions.

Translation or Paraphrase?

Mention must be made here of the difference between a translation and a paraphrase.

All translators are faced with the problem of the basic differences of languages. To

translate "literally", word for word, would produce a clumsy rendering, difficult to

understand. On the other hand, to paraphrase, which is to simply try to express the

meaning of the original without trying to convey the force of each individual word,

results in a rendering which expresses what the translator thinks it means rather than

what it actually says. These are two extremes, and every translation falls somewhere

between the two.

Literal translations are more difficult to understand - freer translations may not be so

accurate. The "preface" of a version will often give helpful guidance as to the intention

of the translators.

Here are some examples:

Revised Standard Version "Is not a new translation in the language of today. It

is not a paraphrase which aims at striking idioms. It is a revision which seeks to

preserve all that is best in the English Bible as it has been known and used

through the years". We have resisted the temptation to use phrases that are

merely current usage and have sought to put the message in simple enduring

words that are worthy to stand in the great Tyndale-King James tradition. We

are glad to say with the King James translators: "Truly good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new translation nor yet to make a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better".

New American Standard Version "It is released with strong confidence that

those who seek a knowledge of the Scriptures will find herein a source of

genuine satisfaction for a clear and accurate rendering of divinely revealed truth".

The Living Bible "To paraphrase is to say something in different words than the

author used. It is a restatement of an author's thoughts, using different words

than he did. This book is a paraphrase of the Old and New Testaments. Its

purpose is to say as exactly as possible what the writers of Scripture meant,

and to say it simply, expanding where necessary for a clear understanding by a

modern reader. There are dangers in paraphrase as well as advantages. For

wherever the authors exact words are not translated from the original

languages, there is a possibility that the translator may be giving the English

reader something that the original writer did not mean to say. This is because a

paraphrase is guided, not only by the translators skill in simplifying but also by

the clarity of his understanding of what the author meant and by his theology".

Some Modern Translations

The Revised Standard Version (RSV)

In 1929, the ICRE (International Council of Religious Education) which is part of

the WCC (World Council of Churches) began work on a revision of the ASV.

They decided on an entirely new translation, based on the latest scholarly

Greek texts. The New Testament was published in 1946, and the Old

Testament in 1952. The RSV had its praises and its criticisms (theologically

liberal at some points).

The New English Bible (NEB).

A completely new translation from the Hebrew and Greek. Many scholars from

Great Britain headed up by C. H. Dodd worked on this project. The New

Testament was released in 1961, exactly 350 years after the first publishing of

the KJV and the complete version in 1970. The NEB was immediately loved in

Britain having been written in a very modern yet dignified way. It was criticised

for being a little too sophisticated and therefore less popular in the United States.

Some scholars say there are many theological problems with the Greek renderings

of the NEB and can be misleading to the person who doesn't know any Greek.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB)

This is the American Standard version of 1901 with the English a little more

modernised and some criticisms corrected. The emphasis of the writers were

stated as three goals: accuracy of translation, clarity of English, and adequacy

of notes. They mainly used Nestle Greek text based on Westcott and Hort, and

the Hebrew text taken from Kittel. They made it a point to transliterate (write in

English letters) the Hebrew and Greek names, and they capitalised the

personal pronouns referring to God. It also included lots of marginal notes that

are very helpful to the reader. The NASB was complete and released in 1971

and well received. Some scholars say that the NASB is the best literal work

done by a committee and an exceptionally valuable word for word study Bible.

The New International Version (NIV)

In 1965, several (100) scholars representing several denominations with ample

financial support devoted their time and efforts wholeheartedly to the

establishing of a critical text made from the originals that would be known by its

accuracy, clarity, and literary quality, and secondly, to translating a number of

Old and New Testament passages with a "dynamic equivalent" principle in

mind. This principle would allow for the choosing of words or phrases that the

original had on its first readers, which made it easier to grasp in our changing

culture. It was complete, both Old and New Testament, by 1978 and is similar

in some sorts to the RSV. The NIV is a prime example of contemporary

evangelical scholarship.

The Good News Bible (TEV)

This version known as TEV "Today's English Version," was sponsored by the

American Bible Society. This translation was complete and available by 1976.

The main writer, Robert Bratcher used a critical text of the Bible and made a

paraphrase that is considered an excellent tool for learning the simple

panorama of the Biblical events, but departs radically from the exact meaning

of the original in many places. Passages such as Daniel 9 are an excellent

example of the danger of paraphrases, where the translator allows his personal

theology to colour his rendering of the text.

The Living Bible (TLB)

Another paraphrase known as the Living Bible was published by Kenneth

Taylor, an editor at a Chicago publishing house, in an effort to make the Bible

more understandable to his children. His version gained exceptional popularity

and he founded his own publishing company (Tyndale House). The Living Bible

was complete and available by 1972. This paraphrase is of great benefit for

clarity and simplicity, but readers should be cautioned that paraphrases can be

misleading.

My personal recommendation is that it is well worth having two or even three

translations of the Bible in your library, including at least one paraphrase. I love the

poetic power of the KJV and its doctrinal purity and clarity. But there are times I find it

difficult to understand its old English. I also have confidence in the NIV translation for

its linguistic simplicity yet high accuracy. As far as paraphrases go, I like the Living

Bible as it offers a good alternative reading without injecting too much of the

translator's personal theology or thought. J.B.Philip's paraphrase of the New

Testament is also an enjoyable alternative, if not exactly accurate. One new

paraphrase gaining popularity at the moment is The Message, which has so far been

published in New Testament, Psalms and Proverbs. Although its rendering of proverbs is most thought provoking and entertaining, I was disappointed with its highly subjective translation of critical New Testament passages.