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2 Timothy 3:14-17
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Why Are There So Many Danged Bible Translations?

As we continue with our series of questions we'd like to ask God, we come the question: Hey, God – why so many bible translations?

Well ... unlike religions such as Islam, where the Quran is only truly the Quran in the original Arabic, Christianity came to believe that God's word can and should be translated into the common languages of all people.

About 300 years before Jesus' day, Jewish scholars began to translate the Hebrew Scriptures into another language—Greek. This translation became known as the **Greek Septuagint**.

Why was it made? To help the many Jews who by then spoke Greek rather than Hebrew to stay close to their "holy writings."

The *Septuagint* also helped millions of non-Jewish, Greek-speaking people to get to know what the Bible taught. How?

From the middle of the first century, it became the Bible of the Christian Church, whose missionaries went from synagogue to synagogue proving from the scriptures that the Messiah was Jesus.

That was one reason why many Jews soon "lost interest in the Septuagint," according to Bible scholar F. F. Bruce.

As Jesus' disciples progressively received the books of the Christian Greek Scriptures, they put them together with the Septuagint translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and that came to be the complete Bible that we have today.

From the beginning, the New Testament was built on the necessity of translation.

Not only does it command that the gospel be preached to all nations, the New Testament itself models translation to the common tongue.

Every time it quotes the Old Testament, it does so in Greek rather than the original Hebrew.

In several places in the gospels, words of Jesus or others are given in their original Aramaic and then immediately translated into the Greek language that the original readers would have known.

The New Testament is itself an exercise in bringing all things into the common, everyday language of the readers. It is no wonder that that Early Christians took up the cause of translation in earnest.

In the late 3rd century, religious scholar Jerome was commissioned to produce a Latin translation of the Bible, which eventually came known as the **Latin Vulgate**.

But in time, church authorities committed the greatest disservice of all! They declared the Latin *Vulgate* to be the only approved translation of the Bible and continued to do so for centuries!

So, instead of helping ordinary people to understand the Bible, the *Vulgate* made it a closed book because most people knew no Latin at all.

In the meantime, people continued to make other translations of the Bible. Although, few if any, survive to this day.

But it wasn't until the 14th century that renewed efforts were made to give many ordinary people the Scriptures in their native language.

In England in the late 14th century, John Wycliffe began the process of breaking free from the clutches of a dead language (Latin) by translating the Vulgate into English, a language that people in his land could actually understand.

John Wycliffe was in many ways a forerunner to the Protestant Reformation. He taught against the papacy, the idolatry of the mass, relics, and prayers to saints.

To that end, Wycliffe began publishing pamphlets arguing that, rather than pursuing wealth and power, the church should have the poor at heart.

In one tract he described the Pope as "the anti-Christ, the proud, worldly priest of Rome, and the most cursed of clippers and cut-purses".

Well, as you can imagine, that didn't sit well with the pope and so he issued a papal bull [an official letter or document] in which he accused Wycliffe of "vomiting out of the filthy dungeon of his heart most wicked and damnable heresies".

Wycliffe was accused of heresy and put under house arrest and was later forced to retire from his position as Master of Balliol College, Oxford and died in 1384.

45 years later, in 1427, Pope Martin ordered that John Wycliffe's bones be exhumed from their grave, burned and cast into the river Swift.

Talk about holding a grudge!

Soon after that, Johannes Gutenberg's printing methods opened the way for Bible scholars to produce and distribute new versions of the Bible in many different living languages throughout Europe.

Fast forward to the 16th century and Henry VIII was on the throne and the Protestant Reformation was just beginning.

Wycliffe's translation was still banned, and although manuscript copies were available on the black market, they were hard to find and expensive to procure.

Most people still had no inkling of what the Bible really said.

It was during this time that an English man named William Tyndale came to the conviction that the English people, too, needed a Bible in the common tongue of their day.

In 1526, William Tyndale published the first edition of his English New Testament.

The difference between his and Wycliffe's was that he used the ancient Hebrew and Greek and was therefore considered more accurate.

Tyndale was charged with heresy in August 1536 and burnt at the stake a few weeks later.

Then in the 17th century, early in the reign of King James I, he commissioned a new translation. A Protestant bible, if you will.

The work was done by 47 Bible scholars of the Church of England and completed in 1611.

It was officially known as the Authorized Version (AV), but it was also known informally as the King James Bible or King James Version (KJV).

The KJV became the only bible most people read for the next 300 years.

It has only been in the last 60 years that most of the English language translations we have today have sprung up.

As a result, today, many Christians seem confused by the availability of so many different translations of the Bible.

And although most are readily accepted, that was not always the case.

Interestingly, in 1960 the United States Air Force Reserve warned recruits against using the recently published Revised Standard Version because, they claimed, 30 people on its translation committee had been "affiliated with communist fronts".

TS Eliot, meanwhile, railed against the 1961 New English Bible, writing that it "astonishes in its combination of the vulgar, the trivial, and the pedantic".

Although the King James Version remains popular, there are good reasons for the relatively recent proliferation of Bibles.

First, scholars and archaeologists have made amazing discoveries in the past two centuries.

Today, we have Hebrew and Greek manuscripts that are much older and closer to the originals than those available to the scholars who originally translated the King James Version.

Second, the English language itself has evolved in the last four hundred years. While the Shakespearean prose of the King James Version may feel more traditional, eloquent, and sacred, it does not represent the way people communicate today (nor in Jesus' day).

And third, numerous English versions exist today simply because different teams of scholars take different approaches to translating the texts.

Translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English is no easy task.

It is time consuming and tedious. Scholars admit that no translation can ever fully convey what the original language intended.

For example, there are some words and expressions in Hebrew and Greek that simply don't have English equivalents.

Therefore, every translation team must be creative in their endeavor to convey the Bible's meaning across cultural and linguistic distance.

That being said, which Bible translation is the best?

Say you have a desire to read the Bible for the first time. So, you go to your local bookstore.

Rather than simply finding a copy of the Bible, you're faced with hundreds of choices. You feel overwhelmed.

You find study Bibles, archaeological Bibles, devotional Bibles, women's Bibles, patriotic Bibles, teen Bibles, and even skater Bibles. *Skater Bibles?! you think.* You finally find the "plain" Bibles and prepare to pick one out.

Then you realize that there are dozens and dozens of different *translations* of the Bible, often known by their abbreviations: King James Version (KJV);

New International Version (NIV); English Standard Version (ESV); New Revised Standard Version (NRSV);

New Living Translation (NLT); The Message (Msg)—the list goes on and on.

How do you choose a Bible?

Well, sorry to tell you, but there *isn't* a Bible translation that we, fallible humans, can point to and confidently identify as "the best."

It is of course possible to translate the Bible well, or to translate it poorly—just as with any other human activity.

But for the most part, the Bible translations readily available to us today don't differ as much in *quality* as they differ in *translation philosophy*.

A translation philosophy isn't a philosophy in the "Socrates, Aristotle, and Confucius" sense of the word.

Rather, the translation philosophy behind a particular Bible translation represents the way that the translators chose to answer the questions that are normally answered when translating any text.

On one side are those who feel a translation should stick just as closely as possible to every word of the original Hebrew and Greek.

They want the translation to be a literal transfer, word for word, of the original words into English.

They feel this will provide the greatest accuracy possible and, after all, this is the aim, isn't it?

Unfortunately, that approach encounters real problems. Some words simply don't have an exact equivalent in English.

The word order and the entire sentence structure just don't match from one language to another.

So, these word-for-word translations can seem wooden and unnatural.

They may be used for study, but they often fail in terms of comprehension and readability.

On the other side are those who feel a translation should transfer the message, that is, the exact thought and emotion of the original text.

To do this, it should use as many words as are necessary to reproduce the idea precisely in English.

You don't really obtain accuracy, they contend, by a word-for-word translation, but you do when you convey the concept, the message, of the original, so that the reader understands it.

In the end, they say, a thought-for-thought translation is actually more accurate as well as more understandable.

To make their point, just imagine translating the following sentences into a different language:

Bob and Jane went into the house and began to argue. "You're driving me crazy," Jane said. "You're beating a dead horse."

Can you imagine the problems?

Now, imagine that the text you're translating isn't a silly couple sentences like the example above, but is instead an intricate poem composed thousands of years ago in a culture that is long gone.

Now add to *that* the understanding that you're translating God's Holy Word, and that a poorly translated word or phrase can make a big impact on a reader's understanding of God and the Bible!

You can see why Bible translation isn't something you can just do with Google Translate; it involves constant judgment calls and tough choices.

And it's natural that different translators are going to make different choices, even if they share the goal of translating the Bible accurately.

In the end, it is up to you which bible to choose.

Imagine there was only one English Bible translation and that it had never occurred to you that there might be another.

The truth is that even if we were stuck with your and my least favorite translation, we'd still have an inestimable treasure. We would still have God's words.

The King James Version translators, in a eerily prophetic preface to the KJV, said the following:

We do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession ... containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God: as the King's speech which he uttered in Parliament, being translated into French, Dutch, Italian, and Latin, is still the King's speech, though it be not interpreted by every translator with the like grace, nor peradventure so fitly for phrase, nor so expressly for sense, everywhere.

The KJV translators had no qualms saying that even relatively poor translations don't just *contain* God's words but *are* God's word.

Regardless of the Bible version you choose, the most important factor is that you use it!

To help you out I have included a Bible Translation Chart and a Translation Continuum. (review handout).

Let me end with a couple of interesting and probably useless facts.

88 percent of Americans have a copy of the Bible in their homes, according to a 2015 report from the Barna Group.

Most homes have more than one copy, and nearly a quarter of people have more than five. Nevertheless, 13 percent of Americans said they bought Bibles within the past year.

There are annual sales of 40 million Bibles — from study Bibles to family Bibles to pocket Bibles. That's not even counting foreign markets.

As journalist Daniel Radosh observed, "The familiar observation that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time obscures a more startling fact: The Bible is the best-selling book of the year, every year."

So ... if you don't have a Bible – go out and get one. And if you have one, then go home and ... read it!

It will do your body (and soul) good.

Amen