Introduction

The Bible is the most influential book in human history. For two millennia, it has been the most read, most studied, most copied, most translated, most published, most purchased, most discussed, most debated, and most revered book of all time. The British and Foreign Bible Society estimates that since the invention of the printing press in the fifteenth century, somewhere between five to seven billion copies of the Bible have been printed.[1]

The Bible is many things. It is a library of great literature, comprised of a wide range of diverse genres: epic poetry, historical narrative, legal statutes, prophetic oracles, wisdom writings, psalms of praise and lament, proverbs and epigrams, philosophical discussion, letters, parables, allegories, apocalyptic imagery, and more. It is a story, the divine narrative of humanity's creation, rebellion, and restoration with their Creator God. It is a drama, the cosmic struggle of God versus Satan, right versus wrong, truth versus error. It is a guidebook, providing essential direction and guidance for human flourishing. For Christian believers, it is the Word of God, a divine self-revelation for the people of God.

Yet despite the great importance of this book, almost all readers access the Bible in translation rather than in its original languages. Even for those with some working knowledge of the Hebrew and Greek, their primary engagement with the text, whether for reading, study, teaching, or preaching, is with a translation in their native language.

When we consider these two facts—the great importance of this book and its access primarily through translation—the importance of Bible translation becomes obvious. This book is meant to provide answers to forty basic questions related to the nature, practice, and history of Bible translation.

While many of the topics and principles we cover relate to translation in general, our primary focus will be on *English Bible translation*. A sixth and final section will focus on issues specific to translations around the world. The forty questions have been divided into six categories: (1) the necessity, goals, and methods of Bible translation; (2) preparation for translation; (3) challenges for translators; (4) the history of (English) Bible translation; (5) contemporary English versions; and (6) international Bible translation.

1. "Best-Selling Book," Guinness World Records, accessed August 15, 2022, https://www.guinnessworldrecords.com/world-records/best-selling-book-of-non-fiction.

PART 1

The Necessity, Goals, and Methods of Bible Translation

QUESTION 1

Why Do We Need Bible Translation?

The "Real" Bible

A colleague of mine who has Swedish ancestry was describing his experience as a boy growing up in a Swedish Baptist church in Minnesota. One of his Sunday school teachers was an old Swede with a deep love for God's Word. As they read together in class, occasionally a difficult issue would come up in the text. The teacher would puzzle over the English for a while and then say, "Let's check the original." He would pull out his Swedish Bible, read the passage, and then say, "Oh, let me explain!" The Swedish Bible was the one he had grown up with, and so, for him, it was the *real Bible*. For people who grow up in a context where the Bible is regularly read and taught, the real Bible is the Bible they know and love. For most English speakers over the last four centuries, this has been the Authorized or King James Version. For many English-speaking millennials today, it might be the New International Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, the English Standard Version, or the New Living Translation.

But, of course, none of these is the real Bible—or, we should say, the *original* Bible. They are all English translations. The original Bible was written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, many centuries ago. The vast majority of people in the world today read the Bible in translation, not in its original languages. So, the simple answer to the question, "Why do we need Bible translation?" is twofold: (1) the Bible is God's Word, his message for Christians today, yet (2) it was not written to us. It was written to people in diverse times and places and circumstances and in *different languages*. This being the case, the importance of Bible translation can hardly be overstated. Providing a translation that gets the meaning right is essential for hearing God speak today.

In translation studies, the language of the original text is called the *source language* or *donor language*. The text being translated from is the *source/donor text*. The language you are translating into is the *receptor* or *target language*, and the result is the *receptor/target text*. For the Bible, the

source language of the Old Testament (OT) is primarily Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic, and the source text is the *Tanakh*, or Hebrew Scriptures, what Christians call the Old Testament. For the New Testament (NT), the source language is Koine Greek, and the source texts are the twenty-seven "books" that make up the NT canon. For Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox believers, there are also the deuterocanonical books, or the Apocrypha (see Question 7), which were written between the OT and the NT. These are mostly in Greek. The main receptor language we will deal with in this book is English. The last section will briefly discuss international Bible translation.

The Hebrew Bible (Old Testament)

Hebrew was the language of the Jewish people for as far back as we can trace their history. The Hebrew of the Old Testament, known as Biblical or Classical Hebrew, is from the Northwest Semitic family of languages, with close relationships to Aramaic, Phoenician, and Ugaritic. Our earliest examples of written Hebrew come from around the tenth century BC. Hebrew was originally written in what is known today as the Paleo-Hebrew script. This was gradually replaced between the fifth and third centuries BC with an alphabet derived from Aramaic. This new alphabet was the standard text of Jesus's day and is used today in modern Hebrew.

Hebrew is written and read from right to left, and so Hebrew books open on the right side and read from what in English is back to front. Here is Genesis 1:1 in Hebrew:

בראשית ברא אלהים את השמים ואת הארץ

[the earth] [and] [the heavens] [God] [created] [In the beginning]

The Hebrew alphabet contains twenty-two letters, all of which are consonants. The vowels were understood and pronounced when the text was read, based on the reader's prior knowledge of the spoken language. A vowel system, made up of dots, dashes, and other symbols placed around the consonants, was introduced during the Middle Ages by scholars known as the Masoretes. The text they standardized and edited is known as the Masoretic Text (MT). It is the standard Hebrew Bible today. Here's an example of Genesis 1:1 with its vowel points:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ

Hebrew continued to be spoken by the Jews during the Persian, Greek, and Roman periods, although Aramaic gradually increased in usage among the common people (see discussion below). The Jewish culture of Palestine in

Jesus's day was trilingual, with Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek all widely used.[1] Jesus likely taught mostly in Aramaic; he worshipped in synagogue services that used the Hebrew text; and he would have conversed with governmental officials, merchants, soldiers, and other foreigners mostly in Greek.

An interesting side note is that, following the two failed Jewish revolts against the Romans (AD 66–74; AD 132–135), Hebrew gradually declined in usage and disappeared as a spoken language somewhere between AD 200 and 400. It continued to be used, however, in liturgical and other religious contexts in Judaism. Modern Hebrew is actually the intentional revival of the ancient language, provoked especially by the Zionist movement to establish a Jewish homeland and the need for a common language among Jewish immigrants to Israel. Near the end of the nineteenth century, Eleazer Ben-Yehuda, an activist in the Jewish nationalist movement, began reviving Hebrew as a spoken language. This process utilized and modified biblical Hebrew, as well as Yiddish and other Jewish dialects, and introduced modern vocabulary to create what is today modern Hebrew—a remarkable revival of a "dead" language after almost two millennia!

The Aramaic of Scripture

While most of the Old Testament is in Hebrew, a few sections are in Aramaic, including Ezra 4:8–6:18 and 7:12–26, Daniel 2:4–7:28, and one verse in Jeremiah (10:11). Aramaic is a general term for a group of related dialects that are part of the larger family of Northwest Semitic languages, which includes Hebrew, Phoenician, and Ugaritic. Aramaic has been spoken in various forms for more than three thousand years. The term originally referred to the language of the Arameans, a people group from the region of Syria and Mesopotamia. During the period of the Assyrian Empire (911–605 BC), Aramaic gradually became the *lingua franca*, or common language, for trade and diplomacy. This continued throughout the Babylonian (605–539 BC) and Persian (539–334 BC) periods. Only after the conquests of the Greeks in the fourth century BC (see below) did Greek replace Aramaic as the common trade language of the Eastern Mediterranean.

The Aramaic material in the book of Ezra occurs mostly in governmental correspondence (4:8–6:18; 7:12–26), which would have been written in the common language of diplomacy. In compiling the text, the author(s) probably kept these sources in their original language. The Aramaic in Daniel (Dan. 2:4–7:28) is more puzzling. In Daniel chapter 2, King Nebuchadnezzar has a dream and asks his astrologers (known as "Chaldeans") to interpret the dream. Daniel 2:4 NASB reads, "Then the Chaldeans spoke to the King in Aramaic." Some translators consider the phrase "in Aramaic" to be part of the

1. Latin would also be spoken among Roman officials and soldiers based in Judea and Galilee; but few Jews would have understood Latin.

narrative, identifying the language that the astrologers spoke (NASB; NKJV; NRSV; ESV; NLT; CEB). Others consider it to be an editorial note added to identify the change in language at this point in the text (NIV; CSB; NET). The NIV drops the phrase and notes the change in language in the footnote. The CSB includes a parenthetic note: "The Chaldeans spoke to the king (Aramaic begins here)"; and the NET Bible has "The wise men replied to the king: [What follows is in Aramaic] . . . ". This latter interpretation seems most likely, since the text here switches to Aramaic, not just in the words of the astrologers but in the narrative that follows all the way through to the end of chapter 7 (2:4–7:28).[2] Chapter 8 then returns to Hebrew for the rest of the book.

The reason for this change in language is debated by scholars. Some think it is an intentional literary shift. These chapters relate to the Gentile nations and so are presented in the language they would understand. Others think the switch is not literary or theological but related to the transmission of the text and the sources used by the author or editor when compiling the book of Daniel.

By the time of Jesus, Aramaic had become the common language of Jews in Israel. Jesus probably spoke and taught mostly in Aramaic. Although the New Testament is written in Greek, occasional Aramaic words and phrases appear, transliterated with Greek letters. Examples include Jesus's words at the raising of Jairus's daughter, *Talitha koum* ("Little girl, arise!"; Mark 5:41), his command at the healing of a deaf man, *Ephphatha* ("Be opened!"; Mark 7:34), and his prayer in the garden of Gethsemane, *Abba* ("Father"; Mark 14:36). The apostle Paul picks up this last usage, occasionally referring to God as *Abba* (Rom. 8:15; Gal. 4:6). Paul also uses the Aramaic expression *Marana tha* ("Our Lord, Come!") in 1 Corinthians 16:22. This was likely a common prayer of the early Aramaic-speaking church in Jerusalem, praying for Christ's soon return.

The Greek New Testament

While the Old Testament is almost all in Hebrew, the New Testament is written entirely in Greek, and more specifically, Hellenistic or Koine Greek. The Greek language has the longest documented history of any Indo-European language, with roots going back to the Mycenaean civilization in the fifteenth century BC. The Greek alphabet was derived from the Phoenician alphabet, which also lies behind the alphabets of Latin, Cyrillic, Coptic, and other languages.

Greek proper can be divided into four main periods: Classical, Koine, Medieval (or Byzantine), and Modern. Classical Greek, which included various dialects (Attic, Ionic, Aeolic, and Doric), was the form of Greek used by

2. Stephen R. Miller further notes that the astrologers would likely have spoken in Akkadian, the common language of the city, rather than in Aramaic (*Daniel*, New American Commentary 18 [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994], 81).

writers from Homer (eighth century BC) to Plato (fourth century BC). Koine, also known as Hellenistic Greek, developed in the decades following the conquests of Alexander the Great in the fourth century BC. Alexander became king of the Greek kingdom of Macedon at the early age of twenty, after his father Phillip II was assassinated. Alexander inherited from his father a brilliant military mind and quickly set out for conquest. Within ten years, he had conquered the mighty Persian Empire and most of the Eastern Mediterranean, including Anatolia (modern Turkey), Syria, Egypt, Mesopotamia, and a vast area reaching as far east as India.

Alexander had been tutored by the renowned Greek philosopher Aristotle, and he had a love for all things Greek, including language, culture, art, and philosophy. Wherever he went, he promoted Greek ways, establishing Greek-style cities, with gymnasiums, public baths, theaters, and stadiums. He aggressively promoted Greek culture, settling Greek colonists in various locations and encouraging his soldiers to intermarry with conquered peoples. As a result, Greek culture spread, and the Greek language became the *lingua franca* of the Eastern Mediterranean. It was a necessary tool of communication for anyone who needed to travel or who wanted to interact with merchants, soldiers, and government officials. *Koinē* in Greek means "common" and refers to the fact that this form of Greek became the common language of subject people groups. It was almost always second-language Greek, meaning that a local population would speak their native tongue and then use Greek for cross-cultural communication in travel, trade, and diplomacy.

The spread of Koine Greek and the translation of the Hebrew Scriptures into Greek (the Septuagint; see Question 23) had a profound impact on early Christianity. It allowed Christian missionaries to speak and write in this common language wherever they traveled and to defend the gospel using a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

In general, the Koine is simpler and less precise than Classical Greek. It also has many different dialects and speech variations. The Greek of the New Testament varies in style and sophistication from author to author. The gospel of Mark and Johannine literature are written in a simpler, Semitic-style Greek. The letter to the Hebrews and Luke's two works, Luke and Acts, are written in a higher literary style. Each author has their own unique style, determined by their background and education.

Summary

Translation is necessary because the Bible was not written in today's languages. The Old Testament was written in Classical Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic. The New Testament was written in Koine Greek, with occasional words or phrases transliterated from Aramaic. Koine, or "common," Greek became the trade and diplomatic language following the conquests of Alexander the Great. Having a common language throughout the Eastern

Mediterranean broke down barriers of communication, creating a favorable context for the expansion of early Christianity.

REFLECTION QUESTIONS

1. What English translation, if any, did you grow up using? How did you view this version (positives and/or negatives)?

2. In what language(s) was the Old Testament originally written? What did you learn in this chapter about this language?

3. In what language was the New Testament originally written? What did you learn here about this language?

4. Who was Alexander the Great, and what did he accomplish?

5. How did the spread of Koine Greek impact the early Christian movement?