Teaching the Bible through Biblical Languages
By Brad Johnson

I once took a college course entitled "The Bible as Literature." Our primary textbook for the course was The New Oxford Annotated Bible (Revised Standard Version). That Bible remains my Bible today, despite the duct tape holding the covers in place. I often puzzled over footnotes at the bottom of its pages that referred to other languages. A footnote alerts the reader at Mark 1:45 to the following: "Greek *he*." This story relates the healing of a leper and the leper's response. The verse in part reads, "But he went out and began to talk freely about it, and to spread the news, so that Jesus could no longer openly enter a town...." Why the footnote was there and what it represented stood as a mystery to me.

I have since learned that the reference is to the underlying Greek text of the New Testament. In Greek, the first "he" is implied to mean the leper, based on the immediately preceding context, where we meet him. However, in the Greek version, Jesus is not mentioned by name, but rather by the Greek word *auton* (meaning, "he"). A literal translation would read: "...so that *he* could no longer openly enter a town...." To avoid confusion, translators of Mark's Gospel have identified *auton* by naming Jesus. Though this issue is rather minor, it alerts us to the fact that our modern Bibles are in fact translations of ancient languages.

What were these original languages of the Bible? Writers of the Old Testament (or Hebrew Bible) largely composed in Hebrew, the language of ancient Israel. However, portions of Ezra, Daniel, Jeremiah, and Genesis appear in Aramaic, a language similar to Hebrew, but used more commonly after the Israelites returned from Babylon following their period of **exile**. (Aramaic was the language of the Babylonians, and following resettlement in Palestine, the Israelites came to be known as Jews.) Just prior to the development of the New Testament and the time of Jesus, a team of scholars translated the Hebrew Bible into Greek. We know this version today as the **Septuagint**. During this process, translators included with the Hebrew Bible a variety of texts originally written in Greek. Protestant churches refer to these books as the **Apocrypha**, and do not recognize them as fully **canonical**, whereas Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches do recognize them as such, referring to them as **deuterocanonical**.

By contrast, all of the writers of the New Testament works likely composed those works in the ***lingua franca*** of that era: **Koine** Greek. Despite Rome's status as the empire of the day, the common language of the empire remained Greek (the language of Rome was Latin). The Koine form of Greek had evolved from the classical era of Homer to a form that reflected the influence of assimilated cultures. Koine Greek differs from modern Greek somewhat similarly to the ways Shakespearean English differs from modern English.

Because the Bibles we read today are translations, a host of interpretive issues arise. and one such issue is this: what explains differences between modern translations? For example, the underlying Greek of John 2:4 reads *ti emoi kai soi*, or literally "What to me and to you?" Mary, the mother of Jesus, is pointing out to her son, Jesus, that the wedding guests at Cana no longer have wine. She seems to be suggesting that Jesus has the power to do something about it. Jesus, in turn, seems to hesitate, offering the response just shared above.

But how are we to understand in English what seems somewhat ambiguous in Greek? More literal translations (like my RSV) translate the saying as "What have you to do with me?" Although this is close to the original, it makes little sense in the context of the story. The New International Version (a **dynamic equivalent** translation) offers, "Why do you involve me?" However, Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (a **paraphrase**) reads: "Is that any of our business, Mother—yours or mine?" This introduces another interpretive issue: how do scholars go about their task? When choosing how to translate a particularly difficult word or phrase, translators appeal to a variety of tools and methods. One method is to observe the word or phrase in another context. The expression *ti emoi kai soi* occurs several times in the Bible, one of which is 1 Kings 17:18, where a woman with a gravely ill son asks why Elijah had come to her house. By comparing the points of similarity between contexts, scholars can arrive at a more constructive translation.

Another method is to consider the audience for whom a translation is intended. While one scholar might translate the Greek word *metanoeō* as "I repent," another scholar might recognize that "repent" may be an unfamiliar English word to the intended audience, and would perhaps translate the word as "I abandon my old ways." In this way, we can see that not all translations are equal, and the value of a given translation depends largely upon its intended use. For example, in my own study I prefer to use a more literal translation. But, when I am leading a youth Bible study or talking with people who have little experience with the Bible, I sometimes prefer to use a less literal translation.

Other issues relate to degrees of certainty and clarity. While many passages are relatively clear, others are not. One fairly ambiguous circumstance relates to baptism. A common divide among denominations and Christian sects pertains to the manner of baptism: should one be entirely submerged into water, or is it sufficient to simply have water employed as the means of baptism? Passages like Mark 1:8 provide little help. In the Greek, John the Baptist says about himself that, "I baptized you *hydati*." Here, the Greek word *hydati* (a form of *hydōr*, from which we get "hydro," meaning "water") is somewhat unclear. One possible reading is that John baptized by plunging people *into* water. However, another equally valid reading of the grammar suggests that John merely baptized *using* water. Here, the original language is less clear than what modern doctrinal interpretations might suggest.

This raises the question, Are modern translations reliable? The answer is most certainly, Yes! And, with some basic skills, students of the Bible can begin to detect where and why differences exist between various modern translations.

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Glossary

Apocrypha – a term used by Protestant Christians to refer to the fourteen books of the Old Testament added to the Hebrew Bible

canonical – authoritative, standardized

deuterocanonical – a term used by Roman Catholics to refer to the fourteen books of the Old Testament added to the Hebrew Bible (literally, "second canon")

dynamic equivalence – substitution of one thought form for another in translation (e.g., "it rained cats and dogs" becomes "it rained very hard")

exile – forced migration from one's homeland

Koine **–** a Greek word meaning "common"

lingua franca **–** a language used broadly as a common language

paraphrase – a phrasing that preserves the spirit of the text without rigid regard for the form of the text (e.g., "raining cats and dogs" becomes "it rained and rained and rained")

Septuagint – the first translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek; also known by the Roman numeral LXX (70) on the basis of the number of translators purported to have undertaken the task

Further Reading

Jobes, Karen H. and Moisés Silva. *Invitation to the Septuagint*. GrandRapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2000.

Kohlenberger, John R. III. *Interlinear NIV Hebrew-English Old Testament*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 1993.

Mounce, William D. *Interlinear for the Rest of Us: The Reverse Interlinear for New Testament Word Studies*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan, 2006.