

Lately I have heard several times the bit of “common wisdom” that “the Bible has been translated so many times” that we don't know what it said originally. I dealt with this notion in my very first “Scholar's Corner” column in November of 2002. But perhaps it deserves revisiting from a slightly different angle.

If when people say “translated” they mean rendered into a different language, they need not be concerned because almost any English translation of the Bible has been translated only once: from Hebrew to English for the Old Testament and from Greek to English for the New Testament. Yes, long ago (before the Reformation) people made translations of translations, but nowadays we work from the original Hebrew and Greek of the Bible.

But maybe when people say “translated,” they don't mean translation but instead transcription: copying the words you see before you in your “exemplar” onto a blank page. The science of studying manuscripts to identify mistakes in copying and to try to figure out what the original wording was is called textual criticism.

Great strides have been made in Old and New Testament textual criticism in the last 150 years or so. We have discovered a number of very old manuscripts (both Hebrew and Greek) that have brought us much closer to the time of composition of the biblical books and therefore closer to their original wordings. This means that recent English translations of the Bible that make use of these ancient manuscripts get us far closer to the original words of the Bible than older English translations (like the King James Version) which used younger manuscripts that had been more “corrupted” through scribal errors that had crept into the text in the intervening centuries.

The famous Dead Sea Scrolls, for example, include many Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament -- all of which are roughly 1,000 years older than the medieval manuscripts upon which we had relied. By being 1,000 years older, the Dead Sea manuscripts are also 1,000 years closer to the time of composition of the Old Testament books. We do not have the originals for any biblical book, but

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we are a lot closer to those Hebrew “autographs” than we have been in nearly 2,000 years.

The situation is similar for the New Testament. Since 1868, we have unearthed 94 papyrus

manuscripts of the New Testament in the original Greek. These papyri are significantly older than our other manuscripts, getting us closer to the original wording of the New Testament than we used to be. Fifty-four of the total 94 papyrus manuscripts are from around the year 300 or earlier, with some from the 200s and some even from the 100s and therefore only roughly 100 years distant from the originals. (One papyrus manuscript of John, P52, is dated to 100-120 A.D. and is therefore less than 30 years from the presumed date of composition.) These discoveries of

earlier and better manuscripts of the New Testament have brought us much closer to the autographs than we were before.

So we should not accept as true the “common wisdom” that we don't know what was originally in the Bible (and therefore the Bible is irrelevant, so don't quote it). We know quite well what is in the Bible. We know what the words are. That is not the problem. Understanding what the biblical writers meant and the relevance and implications of their words for today (biblical interpretation) is another matter. Disagreement about the Bible then comes not over what the words are but rather how to interpret and apply the Bible.

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