

Can We Trust Our Bibles?

M. W. Bassford, 3-13-11

Our recent in-depth study of the eldership has had a lot of consequences. Most of those consequences have been good. First and foremost, it got the congregation studying the Bible and meditating on the Bible in a way that I haven't seen since I've been here. It seemed that for about a month there, every time I was with another Christian, they wanted to talk with me about what they had found on the subject, or they were curious about what others had been coming up with. Brethren, that's awesome. It's one of my dreams for this church, in fact, that whenever we meet, in whatever circumstances, we aren't talking about the weather or the economy or the Cubs and Sox. We're talking about God's word, because that's what should be on the lips of God's people. This has been an important step in that direction.

However, in something of a paradox, this increased study has also led some to increased questions about our faith. As far as I know, we don't have any Greek scholars in the congregation. We accept what our English Bibles say as God's word, and we rely on that to lead us to heaven. However, as we've seen, the eldership question wasn't the kind of question where the best answer was immediately evident in any of our English translations. We had to go back to the Greek to sort things out, and if we'd only relied on the English, we may well have reached a different conclusion.

At this point, then, it's logical to wonder just how widespread a phenomenon that is. There are lots of areas in Scripture where we do form conclusions based on the English text. If we make a big study of the Greek, not just in this isolated instance, but repeatedly, how many other new conclusions would we come to? The Greek changed our minds about the eldership last month. Next month, is it going to change our minds about salvation? Thankfully, though the truth on these matters isn't simple, it is reassuring. Let's answer the question, then, of whether we can trust our Bibles.

Lost in Translation.

First of all, we must accept that no matter what version of the Bible we use, there are always going to be some things that are lost in translation. I believe that several of our modern translations are very good. Their goal is to capture the meaning of the Bible as closely as possible, and to that end, the translators spent years of painstaking scholarship and research in the translation process. It may even be that these modern translations are as good as they can possibly be. However, that doesn't mean that they're perfect, and no translation, of the Bible or anything else, can be perfect. I've done some translation work before, and it's not possible to capture all the nuances of one language in another.

Let me give you some examples of things that translations just can't catch. Look, for instance, at the text of Joshua 5:9. To us, this makes no sense. God is talking about how He rolled the reproach of Israel away, so now the name of this place is Gilgal? However, this starts making a whole lot more sense when we recognize that the Hebrew verb "to roll" is *galal*. "Gilgal", then, means something like "rolling". The name of the town is a play on words that, every time it came up, reminded the Israelites of what God had done there to roll away their reproach.

The whole Bible, but especially the Old Testament, is full of these kinds of untranslatable wordplays that we simply miss. Some of them can get fairly elaborate. Consider, for example, Ezekiel's words in Ezekiel 6:4. To us, this seems like a fairly standard warning of divine punishment upon idolatrous Judah. However, there's far more to the content here than just that. The word that's translated as "idols" here is actually the Hebrew *gilluwל*, which is yet another word derived from the verb "to roll" that we looked at just a minute ago. *Gilluwל* actually means something like "little round things that you roll around". So... what's the connection between that and "idol"? In our sanitized society, we don't easily make this connection, but it starts making more sense once we consider the fauna of Palestine. That's right. The point that Ezekiel is making is "your idols are like the little balls of excrement that dung beetles roll around", and he uses this wordplay to make this point dozens of times in his writings. Not only does this illustrate God's contempt for idolatry, but it shows that the inspired writers had a much earthier sense of humor than we often recognize.

At other times, the differences between the languages of the Bible and modern English force the translators to pick an approach and go with it. We see this happening, among other places, in John 15:26. To our ears, this reads unremarkably, but in reality, the fact that the Holy Spirit is assigned the pronoun "He" is a judgment call. In Greek, the word for "spirit" is *pneuma*, like our word "pneumonia". Greek is a gendered language, like French or Spanish or German, and *pneuma* happens to be neuter gender. That means that in Greek, the pronoun that accompanies *pneuma* is always "it". That doesn't mean, though, that we should necessarily think of the Holy Spirit as a heavenly It. This is a linguistic gender thing, not an actual gender thing, so even if the Holy Spirit were a He, *pneuma* would still be paired with "it". What it does mean is that there is no Scriptural indication as to whether "He" or "It" is the preferable translation. This could make a big difference in our view of the Holy Spirit, depending on which alternative is chosen. Translators, though, have just about universally made the judgment call to use "He" with "Holy Spirit" instead of "It". They couldn't very well spend the New Testament writing "He/It", so they chose clarity over precision and picked one of the two alternatives.

Sometimes, though, the translators just out-and-out make a bad translation, usually as the result of some kind of doctrinal bias. To my mind, one of the worst cases of this is in 1 John 5:7. As any of you know who have spent a lot of time studying the nature of the Holy Spirit, that nature is awfully hard to pin down. Based on a bunch of passages, I'm pretty sure that the Holy Spirit is the third personality of the Godhead, but there isn't a verse that just comes out and says it. 500 years ago, the translators of the King James, who also believed in the Trinitarian view of God, were facing the same problem. Their solution was this verse, but they didn't arrive at that solution through sound textual scholarship. There are hundreds and hundreds of manuscripts of the Bible that do not include 1 John 5:7. There are only two that do. However, because of their doctrinal bias, the KJV translators elected to follow those two minority manuscripts and reject the majority. This is why if you look at many of the best newer translations, like the New American Standard or the English Standard, this version of 1 John 5 is nowhere to be found. They didn't want to follow the bad translation.

The Septuagint and the New Testament.

The point, then, is that no matter how good the translation, 2+2 is never going to get all the way to 4. It's always going to be stuck at 3.9 or so. I know that this is going to be very disturbing to many of my math-centric brethren, but that's just the way it is. However, this doesn't mean that we should throw up our hands in the air and become atheists. In fact, the Bible could not be clearer that we can use a translation, even an imperfect translation, to learn God's will and proclaim the gospel to others. This becomes evident when we consider the Septuagint and the New Testament.

The Septuagint is the most famous translation of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Koine Greek, which is the language that the New Testament is written in. Tradition says that it dates from a couple of centuries before the birth of Christ. The Septuagint is not a perfect translation. It contains all of the problems we discussed earlier and more. However, the apostles and the Holy Spirit still thought it was good enough to use extensively. If we go through and examine all of the quotations from the Old Testament in the New Testament, it quickly becomes apparent that the gospel writers were quoting from the Septuagint. They didn't use it slavishly, but they used it more than anything else.

Sometimes, this made a dramatic difference. We see a good example of this in Isaiah 7:14. This is the way that most English Bibles will read, but that's because they're heavily influenced by the Septuagint. The earliest complete Hebrew text we have is called the Masoretic Text. It dates from about a thousand years after the death of Christ, but when we compare it to incomplete texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls and elsewhere, it appears to be fairly faithful. In the Masoretic Text, the word translated here as "virgin" is *'alma*, the meaning of which is uncertain and hotly debated. It could mean anything from "girl" to "virgin" to "young woman". In the Septuagint, though, *'alma* is translated as the Greek *parthenos*, which means only "virgin". Let's look at the way this verse is cited in Matthew 1:22-23. Once again, in the Greek, the word is *parthenos*. The Septuagint translators picked an option, and the Holy Spirit endorsed it.

However, as we noted earlier, the Septuagint wasn't a perfect translation, and when it made mistakes, the New Testament writers didn't follow those mistakes. We find a particularly illuminating example of this in Isaiah 28:16. To our ears, this probably sounds a little off, and it sounds off for a reason. Here's the way the verse is cited in Romans 9:33. First, the Romans version is a composite quotation. Paul incorporates "a stone of stumbling and a rock of offense" from Isaiah 8 as part of his version. Second, instead of "act hastily", Paul says "be put to shame", a pretty big difference in meaning. That doesn't follow the Septuagint, the Masoretic Text, or anything else we have. However, it does line up with 1 Peter 2:6. Now, there's no evidence that Peter was copying from Paul, or vice versa. Some commentators have supposed that Peter and Paul were both working from the same early Christian quote book, but there's no evidence for that either. Instead, what appears most probable is that the Holy Spirit nudged both authors back to the original meaning.

Conclusion.

There are many more examples we could study, but this, I think, is enough to give us some idea of what we should do today. First of all, it's perfectly OK for us to use a translation, even one that has some problems with it, and believe that we can use that translation to come to God. We don't see the inspired authors of the New Testament discarding the Septuagint because it didn't get everything exactly right. Instead, they were able to use it despite its shortcomings. Our English translations today are much better than the Septuagint, so we can do the same.

Second, though, even while we use those English translations, we must keep in mind that they are translations and that they aren't always going to be exactly right. Sometimes, we are going to have to go back to the Greek to figure things out. This is not news. Brethren have known this for generations, and known it in areas far more important than the eldership. Consider, for instance, 1 Peter 3:21. If you look up "baptism" in any English dictionary, it will tell you that the word includes sprinkling, pouring, and immersion. However, we all know that's not the final answer. "Baptism" is a transliteration of the Greek *baptisma*, and in the Greek, *baptisma* allows only the meaning of immersion. We already rely on the Greek over the English to learn that we must be immersed to be saved. Most of you knew that long before I arrived on the scene, but you didn't trash your Bibles over it. Let's be willing to turn to the Greek in our search for truth today.