



Quaker Universalist Voice

What Does the “Real” Bible Say?

by J.M. Spears

The day that I finished the translation of the Book of Joana (Jonah), I handed it to a friend who read it and then said, “I like it. It’s very interesting. But, what does the real Bible say?” This is what it says,” I said, as calmly as possible. “No, I mean the real Bible!” my friend repeated.

What is the real Bible? Is the real Bible the now lost word-of-mouth stories that were told over generations before being written down in the ancient, and now unfamiliar, languages of Hebrew and Greek? Or, is the real Bible the lost original manuscripts? Or, is the real Bible a combination of all the oldest manuscripts that we have preserved? Or, is the real Bible the King James Version. Or, is the real Bible your favorite modern English translation? The search for the real Bible is difficult.

All Bible translators hope that their translation communicates in the modern language exactly what the ancient Hebrew and Greek writers wanted to communicate. But, that goal is never reached. Perfect accuracy is not possible for human translators.

Accuracy is the constant goal of all translators. But, accuracy is never fully attained for several reasons:

1. **Translators transfer a text from an ancient culture to a contemporary language and culture.** People who travel to another nation, using another language, have experienced in a small way what it can mean to move from one culture and language to another. Even communicating about common subjects like food, clothes, and weather is not simple. The problem of biblical translation is magnified by its subject (theology), which is harder to discuss than food, clothes, and weather. It is further magnified by the fact that the Bible translator is traveling from ancient to modern both in terms of time and culture.
2. **Translators bring their personal experience to their work. Each person has a different set of experiences.** Unique combinations of experiences produce a unique perspective. Each person experiences life differently due to differences in such factors as race, sex, nationality, culture, geographic location, and economic experience. From these experiences come a specific understanding of life and God. It is human and natural for each person to have a unique perspective.
3. **Translators have none of the original manuscripts of any part of the Bible.** We have only copies of copies of uncounted copies of original manuscripts of the many parts of the Bible. The lost original manuscripts were the written records of what earlier had passed along by word-of-mouth, sometimes for

generations. We cannot say that we have the exact words, in any language, of those people we have named as authors of the Bible.

4. **Early editors made changes in the text of the Bible.** When the Bible was first put in writing, it went through several “editions,” with an editor of each edition making the changes deemed necessary to communicate properly the message to the people of that time. They saw this editorial work to be highly responsible, but this editorial tradition leaves us uncertain about the original texts.
5. **Mistakes were made in the text of the Bible by scribes who copied the manuscripts.** They copied the original, but now lost, texts of the Bible. Other scribes then copied the copies of copies of copies on into the modern times of type-setters and printers. All scribes made mistakes, which introduced unintentional changes to the texts. People who made the first several copies of manuscripts, by hand, were free to change words or phrases when considered necessary.
6. **Before being copied, the lost original manuscripts of the Bible were themselves the result of translations from other languages.** Jesus, for example, almost certainly spoke Aramaic as a first language. All of the authors of the New Testament used and referred to a translation of the Old Testament in Greek, not in the Hebrew that was its original language. The New Testament was almost completely written in market place Greek, known as Koine Greek, a different and rich trade and street language of the day.
7. **The Biblical writers were writing theology, not history and geography.** This is a little understood reason the Bible is not read as the authors intended. The Bible is theology, not history and geography. The authors of the Bible use the language of history and geography as tools to tell their story of God acting in their lives, in order to communicate theological truth, truth about God.

Ideas about God are more difficult to communicate than reports about historical events. This is a very important reason that the longed for, and allusive, accuracy and translations of the Bible is never possible.

Some of the authors of the Bible texts were trying to break away from the limitations of the language. They stretched and grasped for new and more effective language to tell their story of God to their audience. The prologue to the Gospel of John is one example of this kind of stretching. “In the beginning was the word and the word was with God and the word was God...” When we start talking about God and the human experience of God, words are never adequate to fully convey the truth of that experience.

Conclusion: Even though all translators have the goals of accuracy and clear communication, a translation is a human effort, filtered through various degrees of human effort and understanding. No translation has ever been able, or ever will be able, to communicate in a perfect manner in any other language the exact equivalence of the words of the original authors of the Bible. We always read the Bible through a screen of time, language, and culture.

This is not an admission of human defeat or a counsel of despair. It is a freeing perspective from which all Bible translations can be assessed and judged.

The real misunderstanding is in the question, “What does the real Bible say?” Knowledge of the search for the “real Bible” brings a deeper appreciation of how the Bible has come to be. It gives a better understanding of how God, working through human efforts, provides the Biblical message.

Bible Translations and Controversy

By J.M. Spears

The Septuagint is a pre-Christian Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament used by Greek-speaking Jews and later by Greek-speaking Christians. The Hebrew text from which the Greek Septuagint was translated are now lost. Scholars believe that the Septuagint translation was prepared in the middle of the third century BCE (Before the Common Era), because Jews living in the Greek world could no longer understand Hebrew. The Greek Septuagint is the Bible that the New Testament writers used and quoted.

Often, our new testament text will have footnoted references to a passage quoted from the Old Testament. When we find these quotations in the Old Testament, the passages in the New Testament are not the same as they are in the Old Testament. We ask, “Why are they not the same, since they are direct quotations?” The reason is that the New Testament writers were using the Greek Septuagint text, but our modern translations of the Old Testament are made from different and better Hebrew texts than the Greek Septuagint text available to the New Testament writers. Then we may ask, “Which is more accurate?”

Both the Greek texts and Hebrew texts and the translations from them can be helpfully used for our understanding of God even with their differences. We need to know which text the New Testament writers used when doing their writing as well as what the Old Testament translated from Hebrew says.

The Latin Vulgate (common version) Bible is a further translation of the Septuagint Old Testament and Greek New Testament into Latin by Jerome in the fourth century CE (in the Common Era). Jerome prepared this translation because increasing numbers of Romans could not understand either Greek or Hebrew. The Vulgate served the Church as the authorized version of the Bible during the Middle Ages.

Then, Martin Luther and Hans Luft translated the New Testament into German in 1522 and the Old Testament in 1534, because the people of Germany could not understand the Vulgate Bible in Latin.

Today, the Bible is translated into virtually all languages used in the world for the same reason, so people can understand the Bible in their own language. The cost of this translation process from one language to another is always the loss of some accuracy.

There has always been controversy over Bible translations. Opposition to new Bible translations has repeatedly disrupted the Church. William Tyndale was burned at the stake in 1536 for making more accurate English translations of the scriptures from Hebrew and Greek. Later, Tyndale's translation style and accuracy were recognized as being so impressive that when the King James Version was published in 1611, over 80% of it was taken from Tyndale's translation.

Controversy continued. The American Standard Version Bible, published in 1901, was described as the "most perfect English Bible in existence." But, soon after it was published, a new shock swept Bible translators. With the discovery and study of the ancient nonbiblical Greek writings, it was recognized that the Greek language of the New Testament was a popular trade or street Greek language (Koine Greek), and not a form of classical literary Greek, as always presumed before. Therefore, it seemed to many that the New Testament should be translated into a non-literary, vernacular English.

This idea of a Bible translated into street English led to a flood of modern English translations in the first half of the 20th Century, but not without new controversy. The cries of many church people indicated that the widespread desire to use only the "beautiful" literary language of the King James Version of 1611 without regard to its inaccuracies or to the changes in our understanding of the English language of the 16th century and the 17th century.

Today, at the turn-of-the-century, there are repeated requests from people in the churches to go back to using the "classical" language of the King James Version, while still more modern English versions are being produced in an ongoing attempt to communicate the Biblical word to everyone.

Today, the most controversial issue facing translators is the issue of inclusive language and the use of English pronouns. Inclusive language translations of passages about people should include both male and female genders, unless the text requires separate designations.

How inclusive is inclusive? All contemporary Bible translations have some statement in the preface claiming to use inclusive language. Yet, a comparison of their texts shows a wide variety of definitions of "inclusiveness."

The goal of all translations must be accuracy. If accuracy is not always the goal, the translator quickly moves from translating to interpreting and saying what the translator thinks should have been written rather than what was written.

Although it has not received the same publicity or controversy as the issue of inclusive language, the issue of translating the Bible for children, so that they can understand the text in their own language, is another controversial issue with many adults because the vocabulary in familiar passages is not like that in the Bible they read either as children or as adults

The Bible translations here address both the issues of inclusive language and the issue of translation for children.