

THE CONFESSION, INSPIRATION, AND TRANSLATIONS

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Which one is the right Bible? Are all translations inspired? Can I be sure that my English Bible is the Word of God? All of us have, at one point or another, asked all or some of these questions. When the Lord saved me, I was given a nice, parallel Bible. It had all kinds of bells and whistles, but it became confusing to me because I didn't know which column to read. Should I read the column on the right, or the one on the left? Or, should I read one with one eye and the other with the other eye? Besides personal doubts about what version to read, there is also the debate about what Greek text should be used, what method of translation is sound, which version is from God and which is from the Devil. Choosing a Bible can be a very stressful activity!

The Westminster Confession helps us understand and answer quite a few of the questions posed in the preceding paragraph. The divines rightly gave the chapter on the Word of God a place of preeminence by placing it first. Chapter 1 masterfully deals with the doctrines of inspiration and preservation of the Scriptures, and sets forth the need for translations in the common language of the people. An analysis of the entire chapter is beyond the scope of this article.¹ Therefore, we will focus on Paragraph 8 of that first chapter because it encapsulates the issues that are pertinent to this article.

The Inspired Text

The Confession states “The Old Testament in Hebrew (which was the native language of the people of God of old), and the New Testament in Greek (which, at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations), being immediately inspired by God,... are therefore authentic.” This means that inspiration has to do with the biblical text in the original language, not with translations into various languages. No single translation is inspired in the same sense that the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts are. Notice that the Confession speaks of the immediacy of the inspiration of the original text. The word *immediately* in this case means “without intervening medium of agent.”² In other words, *immediately* could be replaced by the word *directly*. God directly inspired the original writings.³

Inspiration, however, is not a mechanical or robotic process. God worked out the lives of the sacred writers in a such a way that when they arrived at the point of writing

¹ For an excellent historical commentary on chapter one of the Confession see B. B. Warfield, *The Westminster Assembly and Its Work*. (Edmonton: Still Waters Revival Books, 1991), 155-336.

² Jess Stein, ed., *The Random House College Dictionary: Revised Edition* (New York: Random House, Inc., 1980), 664.

³ These original writings are commonly called the autographs. The autographs, then, are the actual manuscripts that Paul, John, etc. wrote. These are no longer available.

the Scriptures, they wrote exactly what God wanted without any violence being done to their consciousness or volition. Dr. Warfield writes:

Representations are sometimes made as if, when God wished to produce sacred books which would incorporate His will—a series of letters like those of Paul, for example—He was reduced to the necessity of going down to earth and painfully scrutinizing the men He found there, seeking anxiously for the one who, on the whole, promised best for His purpose; and then violently forcing the material He wished expressed through him, against his natural bent, and with as little loss from his recalcitrant characteristics as possible. Of course, nothing of the sort took place. If God wished to give His people a series of letters like Paul’s He prepared a Paul to write them, and the Paul He brought to the task was a Paul who spontaneously would write such letters.⁴

The Scriptures speak of its writers being moved by the Holy Spirit as a ship is carried along by the wind.⁵ As a ship arrives at its wanted destination by the blowing of the wind, the biblical writers arrived at what they wanted to write by the moving of the Spirit. Thus, the original manuscript of each of the books of the Bible contained the exact words that the Holy Spirit uttered through the writers. However, this is true of the autographs. How about the current Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek texts?

The Confession states that “by His singular care and providence,” God “kept” the original text “pure in all ages.” Although we don’t have the autographs, we do have the correct, inspired text because God preserved for us as he promised he would. Interestingly enough, he chose a way that is contrary to what most of us would have chosen. Instead of preserving one set of manuscripts that would be the standard for everybody, God preserved the original text in thousands of different manuscripts. What at first seems counterintuitive becomes obvious when one thinks about it. Instead of preserving the autographs, which would probably become the object of sinful worship, God kept the text protected by providing so many copies of it that no one can effectively change the reading of the text and get away with it. G. I. Williamson explains this concept in more scholarly terms:

At first sight it would appear that with the disappearance of A [autographs] (probably worn out with use) the text would be doomed to progressive corruption thereafter. But such is not the case. The reason is that God has exercised control over all the elements and agencies concerned with the preservation of the sacred text. We see that God determined that early copies of the original would be made. True, each erred in a slight degree, but they did not all err in the same points. Being human, the copier of manuscript B would make a mistake here and there. Likewise would the copiers of C and D. But they would each err in a different, individual way. So that where B erred, C and D would not err. In effect, C and D would thus bear witness against the error of B. And so, while the true (or perfect)

⁴ Benjamin B. Warfield, “The Biblical Idea of Revelation,” in *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (Phillipsburg, N. J.: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1948), 92.

⁵ See 2 Pet 1:21; same word used in Acts 27:17, 15; Acts 2:2; John 21:18; Eph 4:14 (related word).

original text would not be entirely reproduced in any single copy, yet it would not be lost or inaccessible because by the majority testimony of several copies, error would always be witnessed against. The true text would be perfectly preserved within the body of witnesses.⁶

Thus, when the science of textual criticism has been correctly applied, we can truly say that we have today the inspired and inerrant text of God. Now, keep in mind that this is true of the text in the original languages. That is why the Confession says that “in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them.” Therefore, it is imperative that the leaders in the Church of the Lord Jesus Christ know the language of his Word.⁷

Not everybody in the Church, however, is able to study and learn the original languages and the Confession makes provision for that. It says, “But, because these original tongues are not known to all the people of God, who have right unto and interest in the Scriptures, and are commanded, in the fear of God, to read and search them, therefore they are to be translated into the vulgar language of every nation unto which they come.” The need for translating the Scriptures into the vulgar, or common, language of people is made clear by the testimony of the Scriptures themselves and by the testimony of God’s providence in history.

When the Israelites returned to Judea from the Babylonian captivity, Hebrew was no longer their everyday language. Aramaic had become the popular language among the people of Israel. So, when Ezra gathered the people to hear the Law read, he also provided a translation of the sacred text:

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel. So Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly of men and women and all who could hear with understanding on the first day of the seventh month. Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading. (Neh 8:1-2, 7-8)

The Levites helped the people understand what was being read by providing a translation from Hebrew into Aramaic. The result of providing a translation of the law that the people could understand was hearts broken by the Word of God.⁸

⁶ G. I. Williamson, *The Confession of Faith for Study Classes*. (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1964), 16.

⁷ A particular Greek instructor I had in seminary would always say that “Greek will liberate you from the tyranny of translations.”

⁸ “And Nehemiah, who was the governor, Ezra the priest and scribe, and the Levites who taught the people said to all the people, ‘This day is holy to the LORD your God; do not mourn nor weep.’ **For all the people wept, when they heard the words of the Law.**” (Neh 8:9)

We find the same pattern in the New Testament. Time and time again, the gospel writers go through great pains to translate words they think their audience will not understand. For example, Mark wrote to a primarily Gentile audience. So, when he recoded Jesus' utterance of Psalm 22:1 in Aramaic, he also gave a translation of it in Greek.⁹ In another place, Mark translated into Greek what Jesus said to the little girl.¹⁰ John, who also wrote to a Gentile audience, gives translations of Hebrew and Roman terms in Greek.¹¹ Luke did the same thing in Acts.¹² So, we see that translations were used by the biblical writers to increase the understanding of their audience, thus, making the Scriptures more profitable to them. The Holy Spirit himself made use of a translation in moving the biblical writers to write the New Testament. Almost every Old Testament quotation in the Epistle to the Hebrews is from the Septuagint, a Greek translation of the Hebrew/Aramaic Old Testament.

Another very important witness to the fact that the Scriptures need to be translated into the common language of the people is the very Greek that the New Testament biblical writers used. By the end of the 1800s it was commonly accepted that there were words in the New Testament that were specially coined by the Holy Spirit. Some lexicons even provided a list of "Holy Ghost Greek" words.¹³ The reason for such belief was that these words were not found in any of the literary works of the time. With the early 1900s discoveries of non-literary papyri (bills of sale, personal letters, business documents, etc.), it became clear that the words in the "Holy Ghost Greek" list were not specially coined by the Holy Spirit. In fact, they were common, everyday, down to earth words. That is why they weren't in Plutarch, or in the other authors of the time; the words weren't erudite enough for them.¹⁴ So, God, in his providence, chose to use a very accurate, yet current, language for the text of the New Covenant. Therefore, we must follow his lead in our translations.

God, through providence has shown how useful and needed translations are. Very early, following the closing of the canon, the Scriptures were translated into Syriac, Armenian, Old Latin, etc. God used these translations to further his kingdom among non-Greek speaking nations. Later on when Latin became the language of Christianity, the Church commissioned Jerome to revise the Old Latin translation. Instead Jerome started afresh and produced a magnificent Latin translation, the Vulgate. As the name indicates, the Vulgate was designed as an accurate translation in the common language of the people. Jerome wanted it to be accessible. Through the years, however, the Vulgate became idolized by the church and became the standard of biblical text, instead of the Hebrew and Greek. Not till two centuries before the 16th century Reformation another meaningful translation was produced. Even then, the translator was persecuted as a

⁹ Mark 15:34-35.

¹⁰ Mark 5:41; for another place where Mark translates a Hebrew term into Greek see Mark 15:22.

¹¹ John 1:38; 1:41-42; 9:7; 19:17.

¹² Acts 4:36; 9:36; 13:8.

¹³ Joseph Henry Thayer, *The Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament with Index*. (1886; reprinted, Peabody: Hendrickson Publishers, 1981), 698.

¹⁴ J. Gresham Machen, *New Testament Greek for Beginners*. (Toronto: The Macmillan Company, 1923), 5.

heretic. Interestingly enough, most of the pre-Reformation efforts to put the Bible into the common language of the people were coming from Great Britain.

During the Reformation years, the benefit of having an accurate and current translation became clearer than in any other time. Luther's German translation was mightily used by God to bring German-speaking people to salvation. Current translations popped up all over Europe. "The fullness of time" had come for the people to have the Word of God in their native tongues. The best, most accurate translations were coming out of England with the Bishop's Bible, the Geneva Bible, and in 1611 the King James Version. All these were excellent translations greatly used by God. Because of its accurate translation and magnificent style the King James Version became the standard for English translations. Sadly, however, this translation was elevated to a status of almost perfection and any efforts to update the language in it were met with fierce opposition. Yet, in God's good providence, in the 1900s current translations became available to English speaking people and once again they were able to read the Word of God as it was designed to be read: in the common language of the people.