

INSPIRATION AND TRANSLATION IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

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The New Testament provides great assistance to us as we seek to understand the inspiration of the Bible, and how we are to translate it into our own and other languages. This is true because the New Testament itself deals extensively with the Bible—with the Old Testament in particular. Since the two testaments were written in different languages we can examine how the New Testament authors translated the passages they were dealing with, in this case from Hebrew into Greek. We can also observe what they thought about the text they were translating.

The Inspiration of the OT in the NT

Uniformly the NT considers the OT as the Holy Scripture, the Word of God. For this reason the NT very frequently quotes parts of the OT to prove or illustrate the point being made.¹ Consistently the NT writer will consider the citation to be proof sufficient—“case closed.”

The formulas used to introduce these citations also demonstrate the high regard the NT writers felt for the OT. When quoting the ancient text, they would introduce the passage with words such as “the Lord says,”² “Scripture says,” “The Holy Spirit says,” or simply “It is written,” or “It says.” These introductory formulas would only be appropriate in their contexts if the NT writer and his readers assumed the inspiration and consequent truthfulness and authority of the OT.³

The classic passage revealing the NT’s attitude toward the OT is 2 Timothy 3:16, “All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness.”⁴ The term “all Scripture” refers to the entire OT recognized by the Jews (our present 39 books). Paul asserts two things about the OT: it is “God-breathed” (i.e., inspired), and it is “useful” for all the necessary tasks of Christian instruction. This passage reveals Paul’s high view of the OT Scripture, agreeing with the OT’s own view of itself. In his teaching the OT was literally “breathed out” by God. Just as God “breathed” into Adam to make him a living person, so he “breathed” into the OT as it was being written. Both Adam and the Scriptures are the direct results of God’s creative work.⁵

The Inspiration of the NT Asserted in the NT

While the NT text is not as long as the OT, the NT still contains many passages and statements showing that it regards itself with the same authority as the OT. The gospel writers define their work as revealing the gospel of Jesus Christ, leading to certain knowledge.⁶ All the epistles are written in the authoritative spirit of the apostles and their representatives, and all expect their readers to study, remember, and follow the instructions given.⁷ The book of Revelation also contains such references.⁸

In two NT passages the writer identifies another NT passage as equal in authority to the OT. The apostle Peter in 2 Peter 3:15-16 asserts that the writings of Paul are equal in authority with the OT Scriptures:

Bear in mind that our Lord's patience means salvation, just as our dear brother Paul also wrote you with the wisdom that God gave him. He writes the same way in all his letters, speaking in them of these matters. His letters contain some things that are hard to understand, which ignorant and unstable people distort, as they do the other Scriptures, to their own destruction.

And in 1 Timothy 5:18 the apostle Paul quotes a statement of Jesus found in Luke 10:7 ("The worker deserves his wages"⁹); along with a statement in Deuteronomy 25:4 ("Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain"), and refers to them both together as "the Scripture":

For the Scripture says, "Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain," and "The worker deserves his wages."

The Teaching of Jesus Christ Regarding Scripture

As our Savior and Lord, Jesus Christ is the head of the church and our authority in all things. What he says about Scripture it is incumbent on all Christians to believe. This is the final and conclusive argument for those who know Christ. Since Jesus lived on earth when only the OT was available, his references to Scripture refer to the OT. However, he also made provision for the NT, which would be given after his ascension.

Jesus Christ loved the Scripture. He was thoroughly familiar with the OT; it saturated his thought and speech, and controlled his actions. The words of Scripture came from his mouth when he endured temptation, and when he was suffering on the cross. In his teaching he assumed the factual historicity of all the narratives in the OT. These include the creation and marriage of Adam and Eve,¹⁰ the murder of Abel, Noah and the flood, the destruction of Sodom, the death of Lot's wife, the existence and faith of Abraham, Moses and the burning bush, the manna in the wilderness, the Ten Commandments given to Moses, the serpent in the wilderness, David's eating the consecrated bread, the glorious reign of Solomon and the visit by the queen of Sheba, Elijah's helping the widow and his stopping the rain, Elisha's cleansing of Naaman, Jonah's being three days in the great fish, his preaching to the Ninevites, and their repentance.¹¹

We note that Jesus never questioned the factuality of these OT events. This fact is more remarkable because many of these events are miraculous in nature. He cited them and gave full credit to them as historical events, on which one could depend for principles of life. As the Son of God, he certainly would have told his disciples if they were wrong in holding to this high view of Scripture; but rather, he encouraged this attitude.

Jesus placed the Scripture as our highest authority for faith and life.¹² The Scriptures were the basis of his theological arguments.¹³ He used the very words, or even parts of words, to

make his points.¹⁴ He insisted that events in his own life were the fulfillment of OT prophecy,¹⁵ and that other prophecies would be fulfilled in the future.¹⁶

During his final supper with his apostles before his crucifixion, the Lord assured them that the Holy Spirit would guide them so that, among other things, they would have the knowledge to produce the NT books.¹⁷ It is that same Spirit who inspired the other NT writers (those not apostles—Mark, Luke, James, Jude), who were prophets.¹⁸ The Lord then led the church to recognize his working in the inspiration of all the NT books.

Types of OT Translation Found in the NT

The way that the NT quotes the OT is a fascinating study, and much has been written about it. Some critics say that the NT quotes the OT without care or precision. It is true that NT writers do quote the OT with varying degrees of precision, from precise quotes to paraphrases. However, the critics neglect the fact that there is no error involved in this type of quotation, as long as there is no claim to verbatim quotation. Careful study of the OT contexts shows that the NT quotes the OT with great care and profundity, being sensitive to the OT context. Likewise, the translating of the OT portions into Greek is honest and appropriate for the purpose of the NT context.

When the NT was written, the OT Scriptures were available to the early Christians in three main forms.

- Jewish Christians, especially those living in or around Judea, were able to read the original Hebrew. All Jewish boys were expected to attend synagogue school, where the Hebrew language was taught and many scriptural portions were memorized.
- Jewish Christians living in the territory of ancient Israel would have spoken Aramaic as the common language of that region. For them the OT was available also in what is known as the Aramaic Targums; this was a fairly paraphrastic or loose translation of the Hebrew text into the common Aramaic.¹⁹ These Aramaic Targums were read in the synagogue services after the Hebrew text was read. Therefore, Jewish Christians who had been brought up regularly attending the synagogue would be very familiar with that Aramaic translation.
- The third common form of the OT used by the early Christians was the Septuagint (abbreviated LXX). This was a translation of the OT into Greek, made by various Jewish scholars in Alexandria over a period of many decades. It was completed about two hundred years before Christ. For nearly all Gentile Christians, and for many Jewish Christians living outside the national boundaries, the LXX was the version of the OT used almost exclusively.

One difficulty NT scholars have is that the NT writers did not specify which text they were using. In many cases, the Greek NT text quoting the OT is exactly or nearly exactly the same as that of the LXX. When this is the case consistently with a particular NT writer, we can assume that he ordinarily uses the LXX. This quotation of the LXX is apparent in John's Gospel and in

the book of Acts (usually quoting speeches of Peter and Paul). The Gospels of Mark and Luke seem to have used a text that is close, but varies somewhat from the LXX. Matthew, on the other hand, seems to have avoided use of the LXX, choosing rather to provide his own translation of the OT text. The apostle Paul seems to have relied on the LXX about half the time, and to have provided his own translation or paraphrase the other times. In this usage he differs from the book of Hebrews and the other General Epistles, which almost always quote the LXX text when they quote the OT.²⁰

Some Observations on the NT's Translations of OT Passages

Careful examination of these many quotations of the OT in the NT provides evidence for an overall philosophy of translation held by the NT writers. Several features are clear:

Authority of the original.—When a controversy in interpretation occurred, those writers who had access to the original Hebrew based their final arguments on the original language of Scripture.²¹ This procedure is that required by our *Westminster Confession of Faith*:

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, and, by his singular care and providence, kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical; so as, in all controversies of religion, the Church is finally to appeal unto them. (*WCF* 1:8)

It is because of our belief in the inspiration of the Scriptures in the autographs, that we require ministers to be able to exegete the Old and New Testaments in the original languages. This involves much time and effort in the training of ministers, but it is time and effort well spent.

Use of the common version.—The NT writers more than half the time are content to quote the popular OT translation of the day, the Septuagint. This is true, even when the LXX provides a “dynamic” translation of the Hebrew.²² Most NT writers employed that version routinely; they did not insist on a “word-for-word” transfer from the Hebrew to the Greek. This practice confirms us in using commonly available versions of the Bible into English, as long as the idea being discussed is not obscured or changed by a faulty translation at that point.

Application within translation.—When Jesus quoted the OT, sometimes he paraphrased the OT text, bringing out more clearly the point he wished to make. For example, Jesus added the important and relevant word “only” when he quoted Deuteronomy 6:13 to Satan at his temptation: “You shall worship the Lord your God and serve him *only*.”²³ While the word *only* was not in the Hebrew, Jesus properly inserted it in his translation and quotation, since the idea was assumed in the OT context, and the current situation called for that emphasis.

In a similar way Jesus also changed a word in the greatest commandment so that it applied more directly to the Pharisees, who were trying to trap him with intellectually tricky questions. In the OT the command reads, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your might.” But, according to Matthew, when Jesus quoted it to the Pharisees, he substituted the word “mind” for “might”: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your *mind*.”²⁴ On an earlier occasion Jesus had answered another inquirer in a similar fashion, by adding the phrase “and with all your understanding” to the three in Deuteronomy.²⁵

It was this type of interpretive translation that Martin Luther defended when he inserted the word *only* into his translation of Romans 3:28, “der Mensch gerecht werde ohne des Gesetzes Werke, *allein* durch den Glauben [man is justified not by works of the law, but *only* through faith].” Although criticized harshly by Roman Catholic opponents, Luther defended his translation by stating that the word *only* was necessary to bring out the meaning of the Greek within the genius of the German language. In that case, a word-for-word translation would have obscured the meaning of the text.²⁶

Confidence in serious translations.—The NT writers quoted the OT much like preachers quote the Bible during sermons. It is the idea of the quotation that is important. The quotation may be word-for-word and complete, but often is more dynamic, partial, or even paraphrased. In only a few special cases is the actual wording insisted on, when the precise wording affects the point being discussed. And in those cases, reference to the original language is customary. In the balance of cases the NT used whatever translation was most convenient and accessible, or which was most appropriate to demonstrate the point being emphasized. In our days we can copy the NT methodology by using any serious version that is well known to the audience and appropriate for the situation. God in his providence has given us a plethora of translations into most of the languages of the world, which we should not hesitate to use for our own edification and for declaring his message to those about us and to all the nations of the earth.

¹ I counted 318 passages in the NT that quote the OT, according to the index in UBS⁴, pp. 888-890. The index also lists many times that number of verbal parallels and allusions to the OT.

² E.g., Heb 3:7, quoting Ps 95:7-11; cf. Heb 4:7, “God spoke through David.”

³ For these and many other illustrations, see Benjamin Breckinridge Warfield, “‘It Says:’ ‘Scripture Says:’ ‘God Says:’” *The Presbyterian and Reformed Review* 5 (1899): 472-510; reprinted as Chapter 7 of B. B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible* (ed. Samuel G. Craig; Philadelphia: The Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing Company, 1948).

⁴ The ASV of 1901 incorrectly translates this verse “Every inspired Scripture of God is also profitable.” The plainest rendering of the Greek is as it is in most other translations (including the KJV, RSV, NASB, LB, NRSV, NIV, and ESV). The Greek phrase in question is *πᾶσα γραφὴ θεόπνευστος καὶ ὠφέλιμος* (*pasa graphe theopneustos kai ophelimos*).

⁵ B. B. Warfield provides a detailed study of the Greek word for “God-breathed,” *theopneustos*, in “God-Inspired Scripture,” *PRR* 11 (1905): 89-130; reprinted as Chapter 6 of *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*.

⁶ Matt 1:1; Mark 1:1; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; 21:24-25.

⁷ Cf. the epistles of James, Jude, Peter, John; and especially Paul, as in 1 Cor 2:13; 14:37; 1 Thess 2:13; 5:27; 2 Thess 3:14.

⁸ E.g., Rev 1-3; 22:18-19.

⁹ Luke was written before 1 Timothy; there is a similar verse in Matt 10:10.

¹⁰ In Matt 19:4-6 Jesus takes two passages from Genesis, which critics identify as coming from different sources (Gen 1:27 from “P,” and Gen 2:24 from “J”), and puts them together with the simple formula “Have you not read?” He takes these passages together as the word of God.

¹¹ Matt 23:35; 24:38; 11:23; Luke 17:31-32; John 8:56; Mark 12:26; John 6:49; Mark 7:10; John 3:14; Matt 12:3; 6:29; 12:42; Luke 4:25, 27; Matt 12:40, 41; Luke 11:51.

¹² Mark 7:9-13; 22:29; Luke 10:25-28; John 10:35.

¹³ E.g., Matt 5:18; Luke 24:25-27, 44; John 10:34-35.

¹⁴ Cf. Matt 5:18; 22:31-32; 22:43-45. In a similar way Paul bases an important point of doctrine on a singular form of a word in the OT: Gal 3:16, “The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The Scripture does not say ‘and to seeds,’ meaning many people, but ‘and to your seed,’ meaning one person, who is Christ.” Here Paul notes the singular form of the word *seed* in Gen 12:7; 13:15; and 24:7; and he draws a suitable inference from that form. In this case, he depends on the number of a single noun in the biblical text.

¹⁵ As in Matt. 5:17; 21:1-5; 26:24; Mark 14:49; John 13:18; 17:12; 19:28. Note in Matt 21:1-5 and in John 19:28 that he even consciously adjusted his behavior so as to fulfill the prophecy.

¹⁶ E.g., Matt 21:42; 26:31, 64-65.

¹⁷ John 14:26; 16:13-15.

¹⁸ Cf. Acts 15:32; Rom 16:25-26; 1 Cor 12:28; Eph 3:5; 4:11.

¹⁹ The Aramaic language was much better understood than Hebrew by the common Jewish people; cf. Neh. 8:8. Jesus used the common Aramaic, according to various quotations of his found in the Gospels (Mark 5:41; 15:34; John 1:42).

²⁰ Much detailed work has gone into this subject. See, for example, the listings and analyses of Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (8th ed.; Edinburgh, 1839; repr., Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1970), 2/1: 281-346, and Henry Barclay Swete, *An Introduction to the Old Testament in Greek* (rev. by Richard Rusden Ottley; Cambridge University Press, 1902; repr., New York: Ktav Publishing House, Inc., 1968), 381-405.

²¹ As Paul did in Gal 3:16.

²² For example, Heb 10:5 quotes the LXX text of Ps 40:6, which paraphrases “a body you prepared for me” for the original “my ears you have opened.” In other cases, it may be that the LXX has actually preserved an earlier form of the Hebrew text, now absent from most Hebrew MSS (as Acts 15:17 quoting Amos 9:12).

²³ Matt 4:10. The Hebrew text of Deut 6:13 does not contain the word “only,” nor is the word in the text of the LXX at that point. The parallel passage in Luke 4:8 contains the word “only,” confirming that Jesus actually did use that additional word in his quotation of Deuteronomy.

²⁴ Matt 22:37, quoting Deut 6:5. On the other hand, the parallel in Mark shows the phrase “and with all your understanding” added to the word “strength,” the more literal quotation (Mark 12:30), thus making the quotation have four phrases instead of the original three.

²⁵ Luke 10:27.

²⁶ Martin Luther, “An Open Letter on Translating,” (available many places on the web; e.g., <http://www.bible-researcher.com/luther01.html>). His arguing with his Catholic critics is entertaining as well as insightful: “I also know that in Rom. 3, the word *solum* is not present in either Greek or Latin text—the papists did not have to teach me that—it is fact! The letters *s-o-l-a* are not there. And these knotheds stare at them like cows at a new gate, while at the same time they do not recognize that it conveys the sense of the text—if the translation is to be clear and accurate, it belongs there.”