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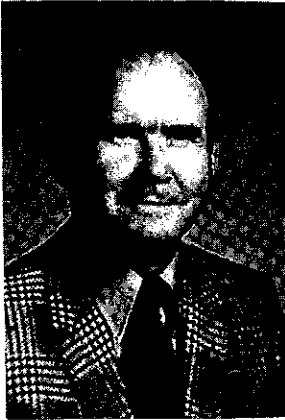
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# Inspiration, Tradition, and the Problems in Translation of the Scriptures

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The writer considers it axiomatic that the majority of the readers of this periodical believe in the inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. The importance of this doctrine can easily be seen by observing the number of articles and books on this subject written in the last century.<sup>1</sup> And this has not been without good reason. For, assent to "the inspiration of the Bible" has meant to some people that the Bible is a great piece of literature, comparable to the works of William Shakespeare. But to others, such a view of the Holy Scriptures is inadequate to say the very least. Thus terms like "verbal," and "plenary," have historically been associated with the noun "inspiration," and "infallibility and inerrancy" have been manipulated by theologians to bring them into meaningful relation to the concept of

inspiration. In turn, these terms have been subject to scrutiny themselves: What is the precise nuance of "infallibility" as distinguished from "inerrancy?" To answer various challenges, dynamic inspiration has been set against the theory of dictation. The human element co-exists with the divine, so to speak. Writers of Bible books did not have their hands mysteriously moved as a player (supposedly) does on an Ouija board. The extent of the inspiration of the Bible has also been covered in the creedal statements of various Protestant churches whereby it has been agreed that by "the Scriptures" the sixty-six books of the Old and New Testament are in view; i.e., the books generally called The Apocrypha (and accepted by the Roman Catholic Church) are rejected as not belonging to the canon.<sup>2</sup>

Further, a classic view of inspiration stipulates that the concept refers to the original writings, the autographa. It is with this aspect that many Christians have experienced difficulties—not due to a deficiency in that formulation, but to the disappearance of the autographa. Of course, it is not being suggested that we should expect that the autographa would still be in existence. One may well express gratitude to the God of Scriptures that in His providence the autographa have not been preserved. Like the alleged splinters of the cross, they would doubtless have been venerated and have had miraculous powers ascribed to them.

It is the loss of the autographa that has been a disturbing matter to some Christians. They reason that belief in inspired autographa—whether they are labeled verbally-inspired, fully inspired, plenary inspired—such a belief is of little use since the autographa no longer exist. We have apo-grapha (copies, rather than the originals) instead of auto-grapha (the very writings, the writings themselves). Furthermore, it must be admitted that the apographa which are extant are quite likely copies of copies of copies. Even when a scrap of papyrus is discovered that may reasonably be dated early—as has recently occurred—that is just one small piece. For the major portion of the Scriptures, our manuscripts must be considered copies of copies of copies, etc.

To the believer uninitiated in the discipline of textual evidence, the discovery of the above-stated situation may prove disconcerting. It may, but it should not. By carefully working with the existing manuscripts comparing, contrasting, evaluating—it is possible to arrive at a very close approximation to the original text of Scripture. In God's providence there have been preserved many more manuscripts of the biblical texts than of the works of Plato or Cicero. This means that the re-construction of the original, though still a formidable task and one that can not be done even by the best trained of

our ministers alone, must not be regarded as a worthless, impossible venture. It should, in fact, be the desideratum of every serious Christian that the best possible text of the Scriptures be produced. Lest that statement lead to misunderstanding, let me phrase it differently. The work of textual criticism (the technical term generally used for this activity) does not produce the Scriptures, in the sense that a composer produces a new musical score. It would be more appropriate, and in fact literally quite fitting, to say that textual studies aim at uncovering the original text. It has often been the actual discovery of papyri, vellum manuscripts, scrolls from caves (e.g., the Dead Sea Scrolls), from waste receptacles (Cairo Genizah) and from the sand (papyrus materials in general) that has led to an uncovering (revealing) of a more accurate text.

That Evangelical, "Bible-believing" Christians who hold to a "high" view of inspiration would oppose activity which would result in a closer approximation of the autograph, is baffling.<sup>3</sup> What actually is the case is that tradition has been revered more than the Scriptures. It is disturbing to find out that what one has become used to in a particular translation does not rest on good textual support.<sup>4</sup>

Let us look at certain well-known verses or even phrases that are taken from the authorized version (King James Version) of the Bible. This has been the dominant Protestant translation in the English-speaking world for more than three centuries.

This article is being written at Christmastime and one of the most common greetings on cards is: "Peace on Earth, Good Will to(ward) Men." This rests on the familiar translation (KJV) of Luke 2:14, where the praise of the "heavenly host" is given as: "Glory to God, in the highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men." As a boy I was told that "Peace on Earth to men of good will" was a Roman Catholic (per) version of this

text. Although the latter translation still leaves an element of uncertainty (who are the people of good will?), it does come closer to the message of the angels. The internal evidence (*analogia fidei*) supports the external evidence that *εὐδοκίας* is a better reading. That it is God's goodwill or good pleasure which was in view still needs to be emphasized: Christ's birth was (and still is) good news to the people of God's good pleasure (his own people); but to those who continue to reject the Christ, Christ's birth, life, and death are at best a fancy fable, at worst, a tragedy. An undue regard, indeed, a veneration, of a particular version/tradition, coupled with the remnants of an anti-Catholic spirit prevalent in a "basically Protestant nation," have contributed to the continuance of the slogan "Peace on Earth, Good Will to Men."

Recently, Elmer and Dorothy Schwieder published a book about the Old Order Amish. Their title: A Peculiar People: Iowa's Old Order Amish (Iowa State Press, 1976, \$8.50, 183 pages). According to an article by George Mills in The Des Moines Register (Dec. 14, 1975), the Schweiders named their book A Peculiar People at the request of the Amish themselves, for a Biblical reason. A verse in the Bible says: "But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a peculiar people." What Mills kept from many Register readers was that he was quoting one version of the Bible at I Peter 2:9a. More tragic, however, is that many Christians who otherwise do not appear as peculiar as the Amish, believe that Christians are supposed to be peculiar, thus providing themselves with a rationalization for persecution which may be based on their own cantankerousness rather than their dynamically aggressive Christian witness. What the KJV translators meant by peculiar does not convey the proper meaning today. It just does not communicate the idea of "one's own" as it did in 1611. (We are "God's own" people, His own possession.)

Unless one has grown up with the KJV (as so many older Christians in North America have), reading the Bible in that version becomes, to a great extent, an exercise in decoding. The following are verses (or parts of verses) selected at random. Try to think what they mean to a new Christian, or to a school-child.

"I am in a strait betwixt the two and what I shall choose I wot not." "They suborned men." "I purposed to come but was let hitherto." "God, who at sundry times and in divers manners spake..." "The Cretians are alway liars, evil beasts, slow bellies." "For when they have begun to wax wanton against Christ, they will marry..." "The end of the commandment is charity out of pure heart, and of a good conscience and of faith unfeigned; from which some having swerved have turned aside unto vain jangling."

If these statements are less than clear, it is partly due to obsolete, archaic terminology. This may often be combined with an awkward (from our modern perspective) word order: e.g., "Of his own will begat, he us," "There salute thee Epaphras," "For the mystery of iniquity doth already work: only he who now letteth will let, until 'he be taken out of the way."

The archaic language of the KJV has so made its way into public prayers and pulpit vocabulary that it is common to hear obsolete words either when people are addressing God, or when God's representatives (ministers) are communicating (?) His Word to the people. Permit again a sampling: "mammon, peradventure, ensample, stablish, saith (usually mis-pronounced say-eth), babe, kine, (draw) nigh, hearken, whithersoever, leaven, husbandman, tarry." Verily, the list might have been prolonged had not this very writer been moved with bowels of mercy to forbear loading thy back with burdensome words to thine own hurt.

A conservativistic attitude toward the Scriptures has fostered the notion that the traditional "thee/thou" pronouns with

their matching obsolete verbal forms ("hast, wert, dost," etc.) indicate a higher degree of reverence than the modern "you" forms. Since neither Hebrew nor Greek distinguish such forms—knowing only a difference between singular and plural forms in the second person—there is no biblical, or grammatical, basis for introducing such a difference. To insist on such forms as a display of reverence to God may be emotionally appealing to a number of sincere Christians, but it reflects ignorance of the languages in which the Scriptures were written, and a refusal to recognize the nature of modern English.<sup>5</sup>

Among a number of Evangelical Christians, further insensitivity to the problems of translation and the nature of language parades under the banner of loyalty to verbal inspiration. It is argued that since the words of the original writings were inspired—not just "the thoughts," then a proper translation must be a literal, i.e., "word-for-word" translation. This argument has been very appealing to Evangelical Christians to whom the concept of verbal inspiration is understandably precious. But it contains the fallacy of equating of word-for-word transference with understanding the concept.<sup>6</sup> Languages contain idiomatic expressions which cannot be translated piece by piece. To attempt to do so is to destroy the thought. For example, Hebrew uses the expression "son of ninety years" to mean "ninety years old." To insist on "son of ninety years" would not express what was meant in Hebrew, and it would therefore not make good sense to the average English reader. The KJV's "bowels of mercy" does not convey "compassion/compassionate" to the modern reader, though it is close to the literal expression in Greek. We should recognize that there are not only problems in trying to find the appropriate term, expression, or phrase to translate the Hebrew (Aramaic) or Greek of the Bible, but there are limits to translation itself. Since no two languages have a one-to-one correspondence, there will "always be some-

thing lost in translation." That old dictum has its particular applications in working with the Bible.

The translator must be sensitive to the structure, vocabulary, and usage of the original language, as well as to that of the "target language" (i.e., the language into which he is translating). Differences in culture and time-span add to this problem when the Scriptures are to be translated. For instance, will the translator be accurate in handling the text if he converts the measurement system (linear, liquid, or monetary) into inches/feet, quarts/gallons, dollars and cents? (The whole metric shift will immediately outdate such an equivalency!) We can sense an injustice to the historical character of the writings if such an equivalency is made. How dare Western translators impose modern North-American measurements units on ancient written-in-The-Near-East-documents?

Another difficulty concerns words which even the best lexicographers and philologists are uncertain about. Without getting involved with some of the more abstruse hapax legomena (words found only once), let us consider the word Selah. Familiar to anyone who has read the book of Psalms, this word is not translated, but transliterated; i.e., we have represented its Hebrew pronunciation in Roman letters. But even the latest Hebrew lexicon (Koehler and Baumgartner) lists it as an "unexplained technical term of music or recitation." Actually, in public reading the word is often skipped—because it doesn't add anything to our understanding of the psalm. Yet it was, we believe, a part of many psalms (including the psalm in Habbakuk 3) and had a significance which has been lost.

A much more imposing problem is how to translate the particular name of God found in the Old Testament. This name may be represented by the consonants whose closest equivalent in the Roman ("English") alphabet are YHWH. The ancient Jews believed that to pronounce the tetragram (the four-letter name YHWH)

would constitute a violation of the third commandment. So for the most part they substituted another word, "Lord" or "my Lord" for this. The scribes kept the consonants YHWH when they copied the scrolls, but they usually wrote the vowels that belong to "Lord" for this word. (They could not always do this, for sometimes the word YHWH itself was used with the word "Lord.")

Psalm 68:4 (KJV) reads: "Sing unto God, sing praises to his name; extol him that rideth upon the heavens by his name JAH, and rejoice before him."<sup>7</sup> The -jah element is also found in the names of many Old Testament saints, e.g.: Isaiah, Jeremiah, Obadiah, and Nehemiah. Like names involving -el (Daniel, Eliezar, Joel, Ezekiel, etc.), the theophoric (God-bearing) element -jah/yah indicates that Old Testament parents did not consider it improper to give their sons names that used one of God's names as a dominant element. The -jah/yah elements and the name JAH in Psalm 68 shed some light on the pronunciation of YHWH.

But with many Evangelicals the use of Yahweh/Jahveh is associated with critical scholarship, which regarded the God of the Israelites as a Canaanite storm deity. So there is an emotional block present. "Lord" has a tradition behind it—being used even in antiquity (though for improper reasons). The present association with Yahweh, for many Evangelical Christians is negative, so it is unlikely that that designation will gain the acceptance I believe it should.<sup>8</sup>

The word "Jehovah" remains an enduring reminder that a little knowledge is dangerous. "Jehovah" is a hybrid resulting from the reading of the consonants YHWH and the vowels of the Hebrew word for "(my) Lord." Instead of understanding what the Jews did—that they read "Lord" in place of "Yahweh,"—the translator combined the vowels in the Hebrew word for Lord: e/a—o—a in an "impossible way" with the consonants YHWH.<sup>9</sup> Despite unfavorable connotations (e.g., Jehovah's

Witnesses), "Jehovah" will continue for many Christians as an acceptable term for God's covenant Old Testament name.

There are not only difficulties in translation, but there are actual impossibilities. As already stated, since no two languages exactly parallel each other, there are things which just cannot be conveyed in translation. For example, there are some Psalms that are acrostics. That means that the first letter of each verse follows a pattern. (Compare I-CH-TH-V-S, Greek for "fish," which provides the abbreviation for Jesus Christ, of God, Son, Saviour.) Inasmuch as Hebrew poetry and English poetry differ in style and format, it is quite difficult to capture the beauty as well as the content of the one poetic form in a comparable way in the other language. But when the translator is faced with Psalm 119, he has the ultimate obstacle. The longest Psalm—one hundred seventy-six verses—is an alphabet acrostic. The Hebrew alphabet of twenty-two consonants is represented, successively, by eight verses, each starting with a word whose initial letter is that particular consonant; i.e., the first eight verses all begin with aleph, the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, the next eight with beth, then gimmel, etc., through the twenty-two letters.

Not only are the Roman and Hebrew alphabets different in number, but they are also different in arrangement (partially), consonant sounds represented, and the fact that Hebrew, unlike English, omits vowels from its system. It is therefore impossible to convey the beautiful acrostic structure of the longest Psalm in non-Semitic language.

Psalm 119 points up the limits of translation. Reliable, accurate, clear translations of the Scriptures are needed not just for English-speaking people, but for people of various linguistic backgrounds. Yet, translations will never replace the need for Bible-specialists being trained in the original languages. By "Bible-specialists" is meant theologians, seminary professors, and ministers of the Word.

Ministers in the Reformed tradition have always been subjected to a rigorous training. From personal experience, I know that neither pre-seminarians, nor seminary students themselves, have always appreciated exposure to the linguistic training demanded. To some, it has been a test of endurance; to others, a senseless hurdle placed in their path. More than a few have seen in Hebrew and Greek studies something that could enhance their pulpit performance. In this they have been encouraged by pastors who sprinkle their declamation with Hebrew and Greek words. Nothing is more reprehensible to me than such ostentatious parading of one's supposed learning.

The Biblical specialist must make use of the original languages, and the results, not the research itself, should be evident in his ministry. When ministers are freed from de-coding an archaic translation, when their parishioners will be able to read a reliable, accurate translation themselves, then these "servants of God," it is hoped, will be able to return to the important task of leading Christians to apply the principles of God's Word to the problems of our ever-complex, anti-Christian society.

#### Footnotes

1. Note that the first prizewinner in Zondervans' \$2500 Christian Textbook Contest (1957) was R. Laird Harris' Inspiration and Canonicity of the Bible (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1957) and that in 1946. The members of the faculty of Westminster Theological Seminary produced The Infallible Word (Presbyterian Guardian Publishing Corp., Phila., 1946): In another symposium volume The Bible: The Living Word of Revelation (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1968) Merrill Tenney (ed.) and others keep this subject before evangelicals.

2. See, for example, the entire first chapter of The Westminster Confession of Faith.

3. Yet this is pursued with great zeal

by some evangelicals. A former student supplied the writer with the tract New Eye Opener compiled and edited by J. J. Ray (Junction City, Oregon, 1969). Under the heading "Here's the Acid Test" Ray states (p. 3) "Any version of the Bible, that does not agree with the Greek Textus Receptus, from which the King James Bible was translated in 1611, is certainly to be founded on corrupted manuscripts." Not surprisingly the tract carries an ad for Edward F. Hills Believing Bible Study (Christian Research Press, Des Moines, Iowa, 1967). Hills is another champion of the Textus Receptus.

4. For a view with which the writer agrees see John H. Skilton's "The Transmission of the Scriptures" in The Infallible Word 137-187, and J. Harold Greenlee's Introduction to New Testament Textual Criticism (Eerdmans, Grand Rapids, 1964).

5. An excellent, readable work that focuses on this matter is John Beekman and John Callow's Translating the Word of God (Zondervan, Grand Rapids, 1974).

6. This comes to clearest expression in the so-called "concordant method." A number of volumes produced by the Concordant Publishing Concern (Canyon County, California) demonstrate these principles: Concordant Literal N. T., Keyword Concordance to the N. T., Concordant Commentary on the N. T., and The Concordant Greek Text (in uncial letters without spaces between word!).

7. Several other places in the M. T. (i.e., Hebrew text) give the divine name as YAH, e.g., Ex. 15:2 (Moses' hymn), Ps. 94:7, 12, Ps. 102:19, Ps. 118, 5, 17, 18, 19, etc.

8. Not only is YAH shown in these proper names but the common word "Hallelujah" could be translated (instead of trans-literated) "Praise YAH." To the writer's knowledge no Christians appear to have difficulty (emotionally or on linguistic/theological grounds) in accepting Hallelujah into their vocabulary of praise.

9. "Impossible" because the v/w is used both as a vowel marker and as a consonant.