

## **The Bible – From God To Man (#1 of 5)**

Allen Dvorak

[Note: This article is the first of a series which will examine the transmission and translation of the Scriptures. Future articles will demonstrate that we can have confidence in the accurate transmission of the Scriptures and provide some details about the Greek texts behind the various versions.]

We live in an age of privilege. For a long time after the close of the first century A.D., the average person would have been unlikely to possess a copy of the Scriptures. The cost of reproduction was just too expensive and thus copies of the Scriptures had to be shared! We, however, can enter virtually any religious bookstore and, for a few dollars, purchase a copy of the Word of God.

Have we actually purchased the Word of God? The question arises when we observe the multitude of versions or translations of the Bible which are available for purchase, versions with obvious and significant differences between them. The Bible certainly claims to be the very Word of God, a bold claim with far-reaching implications. If its claim can be sustained, the Bible is authoritative in every aspect of our lives. Naturally, we want to learn the will of God as accurately as possible so that we can be prepared for eternity. Which version of the Bible should we buy in order to be assured that we have access to God's Word?

We could simply assume that all of the versions convey the Word of God and thus we can just choose the one easiest for us to read. Such an assumption is countered by the multitude of poorly translated versions. For example, the New World Translation, the "Bible" used by Jehovah's Witnesses, is a version containing a number of translation errors which serve to support the religious error taught by that group. The translation published by Reader's Digest is another example of a poor translation. Do we really want a condensation of the Bible?

Perhaps we should assume that the oldest versions are the most reliable, the most accurate. As future articles will demonstrate, antiquity does not guarantee reliability.

How can we know which "Bible" to buy? Which version is an accurate translation of the original documents which make up the books of the New Testament?

Despite the possibility of using an inaccurate version, a version in our native language is necessary. The Old Testament was written almost exclusively in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. The average Bible student, however, is not fluent in either Hebrew or Greek.

The various versions available in our native language are the product of the work of textual critics. There are no existing original documents of any of the books of the Bible. Copies of the originals are all that we have. Textual critics compare these copies in order

to determine the original text (more information on this in future articles) from which various translations have been made.

Unfortunately, an accurate text from which to translate does not guarantee a reliable translation. In their effort to make the language “modern,” translators often “stray” from the actual meaning of the original text and they produce non-literal translations or the most general of all translations, a paraphrase. However, we must be careful of non-literal translations and paraphrases if we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. If even the very words of the writers were guided by the Holy Spirit (see 1 Corinthians 2:7-13), as Bible students we want translators to provide us with a version which is as literal as practically possible.

Choosing a reliable version necessitates some understanding of the process of getting the Bible from the inspired authors to modern man. That process can be divided into four stages: inspiration/revelation, canonization, transmission and translation.

The first stage in this process is the inspiration of the Scriptures. Inspiration describes how God revealed His will to human authors. As we survey the words of the biblical authors, we observe some specific claims about the divine revelation. The work of the Holy Spirit was to reveal the will of God (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:7-15). As already noted, Paul’s affirmation is that the Holy Spirit directed the very words to be used in the teaching/revealing of God’s will (1 Corinthians 2:7-13). Jesus had promised such guidance to His apostles (Matthew 10:19-20). The implication of divine authorship on a verbal level (the very words used) is that all Scripture is without error and perfectly harmonious (2 Peter 1:20-21; 2 Timothy 3:15-17).

The second stage of the process is canonization, i.e., the recognition of which books are inspired and which are not. This part of the process was necessary because the letters or epistles of the New Testament writers were not the only religious correspondence of the time. Clement of Rome is an example of a Christian who wrote an epistle to the church at Corinth, but he made no claim for divine inspiration. There are some books, known as apocrypha, which are of doubtful authenticity. Although the Catholic Church recognizes these books as canonical or inspired by God, other religious groups do not. The pseudepigrapha (literally “false writings”) are spurious books not considered canonical by anyone. This series of articles is not primarily concerned with this stage and so we will assume that the early church recognized the proper books.

The third stage of the process is the transmission of the inspired documents through the intervening centuries from the first to the present. Even if all modern Christians could read Koine Greek (the language of the New Testament) fluently, the fact still remains that the original documents were written on perishable materials and, to our knowledge, no longer exist.

That’s probably just as well. What would certainly have happened if the original documents had been preserved? Witness the Catholic Church’s use of “sacred relics”!

The autograph copies (the original documents) would have been put under glass and people perhaps would have been more impressed with the papyrus document than the message conveyed by the document. God could have miraculously preserved the autograph copies, but He chose instead to preserve His word in written form by natural means – the same means by which all ancient documents were transmitted – scribal copies.

Unfortunately, the scribes who copied those documents were not guided by God. It is important to remember that the original authors were inspired, but there is no promise from God that the scribes who would subsequently copy the Scriptures would likewise be guided by the Holy Spirit so that their copies were error-free. It is a fact that copying, the method of duplication before the printing press, permits and even makes inevitable the committing of errors.

## **The Transmission Record of the New Testament (#2 of 5)**

Allen Dvorak

[Author's note: This article is the second in a series designed to discuss the transmission of the Holy Scriptures from the first century to modern man and the translation of those Scriptures into English.]

The original documents of the New Testament books were preserved by God through natural means. As in the case of all other ancient documents, the method of preservation from one generation to another was through copying. Scribes made copies of the original documents which apparently perished over time. Additional copies were made of the first copies so that the inspired words of the original documents (known as "autograph copies") were transmitted through the ages to modern man.

The individuals who made copies of the Scriptures were not inspired as were the authors of the New Testament books. As a result, these scribes made some errors in their copies. Although some may argue for divine guidance of scribes (and thus the inerrant quality of their work), it is an irrefutable fact that there are variants among the manuscripts, i.e., differences in the copied text. To properly evaluate the significance of these variants, it would be helpful to know what kinds of errors were made by the scribes who did the copying.

The original documents had no spaces between letters or words, probably due to the cost of the "paper" used for copies. Consequently, some errors involve the wrong division of words. Sometimes a scribe would mistake one line for another, resulting in the omission of letters, words or even phrases. Other errors caused by losing one's place in the text include dittography, the repetition of the same letter or word, and transposition, the reversal of position of two letters or words. Occasionally, scribes made notes in the margins of their copies, notes which were sometimes incorporated into the text of a subsequent copy. It should be obvious to the reader that most of these errors would be easily identified by the comparison of multiple copies.

Unfortunately, it is also the case that scribes sometimes intentionally made changes in the text being copied. Such alterations usually involved small grammatical changes, attempts to "harmonize" one passage with another and the supposed "correction" of historical or factual "errors."

To say that God preserved the original documents by natural means, however, does not exclude His superintendence. The divine answer to the problem of human error in copying was to make sure that we have many copies of the New Testament documents to compare with one another. The multiplication of copies inevitably increases the total number of scribal errors, but also provides the means for identifying those errors. Although the figure is inexact and dynamic (it changes as new manuscripts are discovered), the number of textual variants has been estimated at 200,000, occurring in about 10,000 places in the text of the New Testament. The reason for the difference in these numbers is that one place in the biblical text may account for multiple variants as

manuscripts differ in that one place. Although the number of variants may seem high, most of these variants are very trivial, spelling, style, etc., as already noted. It has been stated by those familiar with the manuscript variants that no biblical doctrine depends upon a debatable text.

Lest anyone think that the transmission of the New Testament text was haphazard and ineffective, it should be noted once again that all ancient documents were transmitted the same way and the record of the New Testament is far superior to any other ancient document.

The task of the textual critic is to compare all of the available manuscripts containing a particular text for the purpose of determining the original text. Several factors are important in determining how effectively an ancient document was transmitted. First, the “gap” in time between the date of the autograph copy and the earliest existing copy is crucial. The larger the gap, the less certain the textual critic is that he has an accurate text in the earliest extant copy. Second, the total number of copies is important since these copies will be compared to one another. The larger the number of existing copies, the greater the certainty that scribal errors can be identified and the original text then verified. Finally, the condition of the extant copies must be considered. How readable are they? Are they complete copies of the original text? Due to the perishable nature of early writing materials, some copies are fragmentary.

To illustrate the excellent transmission of the New Testament documents, the transmission record of other famous ancient documents should be compared. Julius Caesar, for example, wrote his “Gallic War” sometime around 50-58 B.C. The original text is preserved in less than a dozen copies and the earliest one is 900 years removed from the autograph copy! All the copies made of Caesar’s work for the first 900 years have perished or are undiscovered. How many changes were made to the text by scribes (in the ways already detailed in this article) during that 900-year period? Since those copies are not available for study and comparison, we will perhaps never know.

The Roman historian Livy wrote 142 books around the time of the birth of Christ, of which only 35 survive in 20 manuscripts. The early manuscript is 300 years removed from the autograph copies and even that manuscript contains only fragments of four books. This ancient work was so poorly preserved that we don’t have any text for most of the books written and very few manuscripts for those actually preserved.

Tacitus was another Roman historian whose *Histories* and *Annals* were completed around the end of the first century. Of the 14 books of his *Histories*, only 4½ survive. There were 16 books in his *Annals* and only 10 of them survived. Textual critics have only two manuscripts of these works with gaps of 800 and 1000 years from the autograph copy! That is an incredibly poor transmission record, yet scholars rely heavily on the writing of Tacitus for details concerning the history of the Roman empire during that time.

The *History of Thucydides* is an ancient document written about 450 B.C. Only eight manuscripts survive and the earliest of those is 1,300 years removed from the autograph

copy. That's a long time for copies to be made and errors to multiply in those copies and yet we have no extant copies from that period.

The *History of Herodotus* was written about the same time as that of Thucydides and has a very similar transmission record, yet few historians seem to doubt that we have an accurate text of this Greek historian's work. I have seen Herodotus referenced by many historians.

Homer's *Iliad*, considered sacred by the ancient Greeks, has one of the best transmission records of any ancient document with 643 manuscripts available. Yet the earliest manuscript is 500 years removed from the autograph copy.

In contrast, there were 5,366 manuscripts of New Testament documents listed in 1986. We have the entire New Testament within 250 years and most of the New Testament within 150 years. Future articles will describe the nature and quality of some of these manuscripts.

## **Tools of the Textual Critic (#3 of 5)**

Allen Dvorak

[Author's note: This article is the third in a series designed to discuss the transmission of the Holy Scriptures from the first century to modern man and the translation of those Scriptures into English. Previous articles were published on 4/27/08 and 5/4/08.]

The transmission record of the New Testament documents is excellent, especially when compared to the transmission records of other well-known ancient documents. There is a large number of manuscripts for comparison purposes and the chronological gap between the original documents ("autograph copies") and the earliest extant manuscripts is relatively small.

The scholastic discipline which deals with the actual transmission of the text of the New Testament is known as textual criticism or lower criticism. In this context, the word "criticism" is not being used in the sense of "finding fault", but rather to mean "evaluation" or "analysis." "Textual criticism...is the science that compares all known manuscripts of a given work in an effort to trace the history of variations within the text so as to discover all its original form" (Harrison, Waltke, et. al., *Biblical Criticism*, p. 127). As noted in previous articles, textual criticism is necessary because of the errors introduced by scribes into copies of the New Testament documents.

Textual critics have three main sources available to them for their work: manuscripts, versions and patristic quotations. The manuscripts are the most valuable source, followed by versions in importance, but the patristic quotations are both early and numerous.

The autography copies of the New Testament books were most likely written on papyrus, an inexpensive, but extremely perishable material. Later manuscripts were written on vellum and parchment, writing materials made out of animal skins and thus much more durable than papyrus.

The Greek manuscripts can be divided into four classes: papyrus, uncials, minuscules and lectionaries. The papyrus manuscripts, so named because of the writing material used, number about 88 and are typically the earliest manuscripts. Unfortunately, they also tend to be fragmentary and sometimes in poor condition because papyrus is so perishable.

Uncials are manuscripts written in a type of lettering comparable to our capital letters. This script is square in form and is a slow and laborious way to copy a document. This form of writing, however, flourished until the ninth century. The uncial manuscripts are typically written on vellum or parchment. There are approximately 274 of these manuscripts.

Minuscules are manuscripts written in a cursive style of writing. Much faster for copying, this style of writing eventually replaced the uncial script. There are approximately 2,800 of these manuscripts on vellum or parchment, but they are later manuscripts than the uncials.

Lectionaries are a special kind of manuscript designed for public reading of Scripture. Numbering more than 2,200, lectionaries employ both the uncial and the minuscule scripts. Although the lectionaries typically date from the sixth to twelfth centuries, they tend to be good manuscripts because they were copied for public church use. There are several manuscripts of each class which stand out as singularly important. For instance, among the papyri, the John Rylands Fragment (p52 – its designation) is a very valuable witness. It is a small portion of the gospel of John. Its value is not in the reconstruction of the text (contains only five verses), but in the determination of the date of writing for the gospel. This manuscript, found in Egypt, has been dated at A.D. 117-138. At one time, liberal scholars dated the gospel of John in the third century (and thus not written by the apostle John), but this papyrus fragment will not permit such a late date and is, in fact, strong evidence for a first century date of authorship.

The Chester Beatty Papyri (p45, p46 & -47) are three codices (a manuscript in a book form rather than a scroll format is called a codex; codices is the plural) which together contain most of the New Testament. They are dated at A.D. 250.

Another important witness to the text is the Bodmer Papyri (p66, p72 & p75). These early manuscripts (A.D. 175 – 200+) contain Jude, 1 & 2 Peter, and the earliest known copy of Luke.

Among the uncials, several manuscripts stand out. Codex Vaticanus (designated “B”) is thought to be the oldest uncial and contains most of the New Testament with the exception of Hebrews 9:14-13:25, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus and Revelation. It is dated at A.D. 325-350. Codex Sinaiticus (designated by the Hebrew letter Aleph) is also considered to be an extremely important witness. It is dated at A.D. 340 and contains about half of the LXX (a Greek translation of the Old Testament) and the entire New Testament.

Codex Alexandrinus (“A”) contains most of the Old Testament and the New Testament. It is dated at

A.D. 450. Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus (“C”) is a unique kind of manuscript. Dated at about A.D. 345, the biblical text was rubbed out and sermons of a church father by the name of Ephraem were copied onto the manuscript material! The original biblical text was restored by chemical means, providing a manuscript of the New Testament missing the books of 2 Thessalonians and 2 John.

The oldest known bilingual manuscript is the Codex Bezae (“D”) and is dated about A.D. 450-550. It contains the gospels, Acts and part of Third John, written in both Greek and Latin.

As already noted, another source for the textual critic is versions. Examples of early versions include the Old Syriac (2 main manuscripts, evidently copied from a second century manuscript), the Syriac Peshitta (New Testament from the fifth century with 350 manuscripts of this version) and the Latin Vulgate. The Latin Vulgate, dated c. A.D. 384, was actually a revision of the Old Latin version (A.D. 200) and became THE version in the western half of the Roman empire; as a result, there are many copies of this version.

The value of the versions is that they give the textual critic valuable information concerning textual transmission and corruption. They are inferior to the manuscripts in importance because some features of the Greek language are lost in the translation to another language, making it difficult to reconstruct the original text behind the translation.

The third source for textual analysis is patristic quotations. The “apostolic fathers” were men who studied under the apostles or sat at the feet of others who studied under the apostles. It is estimated that there are approximately 32,000 quotations in the writings of these apostolic fathers by the turn of the fourth century. Although it should be noted that the apostolic fathers were not given to verbatim quotations, they quoted so extensively that it has been said that the New Testament could be reconstructed from these quotations except for eleven verses!

Textual critics have a vast amount of material to analyze and compare in order to determine what the original text is in cases of manuscript variations. Sir Frederic Kenyon wrote that “the Christian can take the whole Bible in his hand and say without fear or hesitation that he holds in it the true word of God, handed down without essential loss from generation to generation...The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world.” (Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts, p. 55; quoted by Geisler and Nix, A General Introduction to the Bible, p. 355)

## **The Greek Texts Behind The Versions (#4 of 5)**

Allen Dvorak

[Author's note: This article is the fourth in a series designed to discuss the transmission of the Holy Scriptures from the first century to modern man and the translation of those Scriptures into English. Previous articles were published on 4/27/08, 5/4/08 and 5/18/08]

There are clearly discernable differences in wording between various English versions of the Bible. Those differences stem primarily from three factors. The most superficial cause is simply the choice of English vocabulary to translate the Greek text. There are many synonyms in the English language with slightly different shades of meaning and the translators of the various versions sometimes choose different English words to translate the same Greek word(s).

The other two factors responsible for the differences in wording in English versions are more foundational. One is the translation philosophy followed by those doing the work of translating. Some translators strive for a more literal translation; others translate more "loosely" in an effort to produce a version which is smoother in English or more easily read. Translation philosophies probably represent the greatest source of significant differences in readings between versions. A future article in this series will discuss different translation philosophies with an evaluation of their advantages and/or disadvantages.

The third factor is the Greek text used for translation. As noted in previous articles, not all of the Greek manuscripts of the New Testament documents are identical; errors crept into the manuscripts by means of the fallibility of copyists. Our desire to know the exact original text stems from the teaching of the New Testament that the Holy Spirit guided the human authors in the choice of even the precise words to use (1 Corinthians 2:8-13). There is no evidence of supernatural guidance in the canonization, transmission or translation stages involved in getting the Scriptures from the first century to modern man.

The work of the textual critic (detailed in the third article of this series) is to compare and evaluate all available sources of the biblical text (manuscripts, patristic quotations and ancient versions) in an effort to determine the original text of each of the New Testament documents. Several Greek "texts" of the entire New Testament have been assembled by textual scholars and essentially lie behind various versions. If translators do not use the same exact Greek text for their work, it is inevitable that there will be differences between their translations. It is this factor with which this article is concerned.

Efforts to produce a standardized Greek text probably date back to the beginning of the fourth century. The Roman emperor Constantine charged Eusebius to produce, with the utmost care, 50 copies of the Scriptures to be placed in the churches of Constantinople.

The first Greek New Testament to be published was produced by Desiderius Erasmus in 1516. Erasmus had no single, complete manuscript of the New Testament so he used two

manuscripts from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, comparing them with two or three other manuscripts. It is interesting that he had only one manuscript of Revelation and that manuscript was missing the final leaf containing the last six verses of the book. Erasmus translated from the Latin Vulgate back into Greek, creating a Greek text for these verses that is found in no extant Greek manuscript. That text, however, is still used in editions of the Textus Receptus (“Received Text”) today. Based on a hasty promise, Erasmus also included 1 John 5:7 in the third edition of his text (published in 1522) on the evidence of a single late manuscript.

The royal printer of Paris, Robert Etienne (also known as Stephanus) produced several editions of a Greek New Testament. The Stephanus text was based on Erasmus’ fourth and fifth editions. Stephanus had access to the Codex Bezae (one of the more important uncial manuscripts), but apparently made little use of it. Stephanus’ fourth edition, published in 1557 became a standard in England and was used as a basis for the King James Version of 1611.

Theodore de Beze (Beza), who replaced John Calvin as the leader of the reformation in Geneva, produced nine editions of the Greek New Testament during his lifetime. The translators of the King James Version (1611) relied heavily on Beza’s editions of 1588-1589 and 1598.

Some consider the King James Version to be the only acceptable English version because “it was translated from the Textus Receptus.” The perception of these people is that the Greek text behind the King James Version was “received” from God, thus placing the divine seal of approval on that version. However, the specific edition of Greek text normally identified as the Textus Receptus was the second edition of a text produced by Bonaventure Elzevir and was not actually published until 1633, meaning that the text was not even available to the translators of the King James Version! Furthermore, the Textus Receptus got its name from the publisher’s comment in the preface: “Textum ergo habes, nunc ab omnibus receptum: in quo nihil immutatum aut corruptum damus.” [Translation: “Therefore you have the text, now received by all, in which we give nothing changed or corrupted.”]. D.A. Carson comments, “The TR is not the ‘received text’ in the sense that it has been received from God as over against other Greek manuscripts. Rather, it is the ‘received text’ in the sense that it was the standard one at the time of the Elzevirs.”<sup>i</sup>

In 1881-82, Westcott and Hort published *The New Testament in the Original Greek* in two volumes. Their work was influenced by such textual scholars as Lachmann, Trefelles and Tischendorf, all of whom moved away from the Textus Receptus in favor of a text which depended more on the “application of textual criticism and variant reading evaluation.”<sup>ii</sup> Their text is sometimes referred to as the Critical Text. Manuscript discoveries provided more witnesses to the text and textual criticism had made available extensive comparisons of major manuscript finds since the time of the Textus Receptus. The English Revised Version (1881) and the American Standard Version (1901) are based on the Westcott/Hort text.

In 1982, Zane Hodges and Arthur Farstad published *The Greek New Testament, According to the Majority Text*. This text is based on the “consensus of the majority of existing Greek manuscripts” and thus is quite similar to the Textus Receptus, its main difference being the correction of readings which have insufficient support in the Greek manuscripts.

There are many textual critics/translators who favor a text which is eclectic, meaning that no particular text-type or major manuscript is followed; the “original” text of the New Testament is determined on a variant-by-variant basis. A number of modern English versions use some form of eclectic text.

The New King James Version is based on a text very similar to the Textus Receptus. Sometimes, however, the NKJV translators will refer to “NU” or “M” in the margin, noting a variant reading. “NU” is an acronym which represents the Critical Text in the 26<sup>th</sup> edition of the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament (N) and the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of the Greek text published by the United Bible Societies (U), *The Greek New Testament*, edited by Aland, Black, Martini, Metzger and Wikgren. “M” represents the Majority Text.

It should be noted that the differences between these Greek texts are small indeed. About 85% of the New Testament text is exactly the same in each of these Greek texts (Textus Receptus, Critical Text and Majority Text) and most variants are inconsequential to any biblical doctrine.

i D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate*, p. 36.

ii Geisler and Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, p. 455.

## **Which Version? (# 5 of 5)**

Allen Dvorak

[Author's note: In this series of five articles, the first article (published 4/27/08) examined briefly the four stages of getting the Scriptures from God to man. The second article (published 5/4/08) noted the superior transmission record of the Scriptures, particularly when compared to other books of antiquity. The third article (published 5/18/08) discussed the work of textual critics and listed some of the major sources for their analysis of the Greek text behind our English translations. The fourth article (published 6/8/08) drew attention to the development of the Greek texts which are used by translators to give us the Scriptures in our native tongue. This article completes that series.]

The steps involved in getting the Scriptures from God to man are each important. Through the process of inspiration, God revealed His word directly to individuals of the first century who taught the gospel message and recorded it in written form without error (e.g., John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13). In the second step, canonization, the early Christians distinguished such inspired literature from many other religious writings which were not, in fact, produced through the miraculous divine guidance known as inspiration.

The incredible transmission record of the Scriptures, through the means of human copying, clearly shows the fingerprint of divine providence.

The final step of the transmission process, translation, is made necessary by the fact that the New Testament was written in the Greek language and is made possible by the work of textual critics who determine the Greek text to be translated. The manuscript copies of the New Testament documents, used to confirm the text of the autograph copies, were copied primarily in Greek and Latin. Since relatively few of us who wish to read the Scriptures are fluent in Greek or Hebrew (the primary original language of the Old Testament), reading the Scriptures in our native language necessitates a translation of the Greek text into another language.

As we began this series of articles, it was noted that religious bookstores sell many different English translations of the Bible. The striking differences between some of these translations suggests that not all of these versions convey the Word of God. How can we know which "Bible" to buy? Which version is an accurate translation of the original documents which make up the books of the New Testament?

There are two factors which greatly influence the quality of any version of the Scriptures. One is the quality of the Greek text used for the translation and the second is the translation philosophy of the translators.

The fourth article in this series discussed the major Greek texts which are used for the translation of English versions. We will not repeat that discussion here. Although there are some differences in these texts, the differences are relatively minor and are not the

primary reason for the sometimes striking differences in versions of the Bible.

Although a translation can be no better than the text from which it is translated, an accurate Greek text does not guarantee a good translation. The translation philosophy adopted by the translators has a great deal of influence on the integrity of a translation to the original message.

We could perhaps describe such translation philosophies by three words: concordant, equivalence (also known as “dynamic equivalence”) and paraphrastic. There are two primary concerns in translation, accuracy and understandability (readability), and these three philosophies vary as to the relative importance they place on each of these concerns.

Translators who subscribe to the “concordant” philosophy are meticulously careful about verbal accuracy and literal translation, approximating a “word-for-word” translation. Although most languages share certain syntax and grammatical characteristics, there are significant differences between English and Greek. The more literal the translation from one language to another, the more difficult the translation can be to understand. Or in other words, some things in one language do not neatly translate word-for-word into another language. The “concordant” philosophy tilts toward accuracy, but sometimes sacrifices readability to some degree. The King James, New King James, American Standard and New American Standard Versions could probably be described as having been translated by this philosophy.

On the other end of the “translation philosophy” spectrum is the paraphrastic method. The translators of The Living Bible followed this philosophy and they explain the consequences as well as anyone in the preface to that version:

“To paraphrase is to say something in different words than the author used. It is a restatement of an author's thoughts, using different words than he did. This book is a paraphrase of the Old and New Testaments. Its purpose is to say as exactly as possible what the writers of the Scriptures meant, and to say it simply, expanding where necessary for a clear understanding by the modern reader...There are dangers in paraphrases, as well as values. For whenever the author's exact words are not translated from the original languages, there is a possibility that the translator, however honest, may be giving the English reader something that the original writer did not mean to say. This is because a paraphrase is guided not only by the translator's skill in simplifying but also by the clarity of his understanding of what the author meant and by his theology. For when the Greek or Hebrew is not clear, then the theology of the translator is his guide, along with his sense of logic, unless perchance the translation is allowed to stand without any clear meaning at all. The theological lodestar in this book has been a rigid evangelical position.”

As the translators of The Living Bible acknowledge, there is danger in using a paraphrase of the Holy Scriptures. Serious Bible students prefer to have a translation that may be more difficult to understand, but is faithful to the actual words written by the inspired

authors. A paraphrase allows the translator(s) to intrude between the inspired writer and the Bible student.

Somewhere between the two ends of the translation spectrum is the “equivalence” philosophy of translation. Translators who embrace this method try to balance understandability and accuracy in a more even way. The New International Version is an example of the dynamic equivalence method of translating. The translators’ preface to the NIV includes this paragraph:

“The first concern of the translators has been the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers. They have weighted the significance of the lexical and grammatical details of the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. At the same time, they have striven for more than a word-for-word translation. Because thought patterns and syntax differ from language to language, faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands frequent modifications in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meanings of words.”

Again, serious Bible students need a literal translation from which to determine for themselves “the thought of the biblical writers.” I believe that a translator technically should convey the meaning of the “words” of the writers of the Bible, not “the meaning of the writers of the Bible.” As with the paraphrastic method, translators who are determined to convey the “thought of the biblical writers” may very well not understand those thoughts correctly!

The translators’ preface to the NIV continues:

“A sensitive feeling for style does not always accompany scholarship. Accordingly the Committee on Bible Translation submitted the developing version to a number of stylistic consultants...Concern for clear and natural English – that the New International Version should be idiomatic but not idiosyncratic, contemporary but not dated – motivated the translators and consultants. At the same time, they tried to reflect the differing styles of the biblical writers.”

As an aside, the number of translators and their experience should also be considered. Some versions have as their strength the large number of translators who worked on the version. However, many translators working together, but using the paraphrastic method, will probably not produce a good version. On the other hand, a version produced by a single translator, even following the concordant philosophy, will probably suffer from the absence of “peer review.”

Finally, it should be observed that no translation of the Bible is faultless. Nevertheless, all of the hard work of textual critics to determine the original text is largely pointless if we then choose a translation which sacrifices accuracy for the sake of easy reading. Some translations that lean toward understandability may be helpful for comparison purposes (suggesting possible meanings in obscure or cryptic texts), but for a primary

study Bible, I would prefer accuracy with a text that is harder to understand than an understandable text which is inaccurate and even teaches error!