

**Problematizing the Notion of the Bible as an Original Text****Michelle Philip***Head, Department of English, Wilson Collage, Mumbai, (M.S.) India***Abstract**

The Bible is, for Christians, the Book of Law (Joshua 1:8), but it is also a text that has been through the rigours of translation through centuries to reach its current status. This research proposes to outline the politics of the process of translating the Bible in order to unearth attempts to assign meaning at connotative levels, aimed at privileging one section of people over another. The attempt is to question why the binary of meaning has to be present in an 'either/or' situation and why not an inclusionist 'and' situation. To that extent it seeks to problematize the notion of the bible as an original text.

Christians make up one third of the world's population, the Bible providing the foundation of their faith. "Keep the book of the law always on your lip; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful" Joshua 1:8 of the Holy Bible exhorts us. Christians believe the Bible to be the word of God and verses in both the old and the new testaments urge Christians to meditate upon it day and night for prosperity and success. People have questioned the veracity of the Bible considering its position as a translated text. How can the faith of a third of the world's population rely upon a book that is after all a translation? Understanding the problems of translation, can the book that we rely on for direction in life be reliable? This paper is an attempt to problematize the notion of the bible as an original text in the context of multiple historically located translations.

Based on a 1994 survey, the Bible Society recorded that 341 complete versions and 822 partial translations existed of the 3000 odd languages of the world, while around 1000

more language versions are currently in translation. The journey of its translation has been rocky and perilous, marked by religious wars.

One basic problem inherent in Bible translation is that we do not have the original manuscript of the bible, but copies of copies. The differences are not very significant in the Old Testament but they are in the New Testament where 3% of the Bible varies across manuscripts. In order to overcome this problem two approaches were used. Scholars put together a text from all the available manuscripts using various rules to sort out differences, but this approach was not accepted by many people, for it gave too much scope to human judgement. Ivan Panin, an atheist turned believer discovered that the bible was based on hidden numerical patterns of the number seven. Not only did this make it easier to choose from among the copies, but also proved beyond a doubt the divine hand in the authorship. This version was however, never taken seriously.

The lack of ability to speak Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the languages in which the Bible was originally written and continual changes in the languages we speak was another one of the problems encountered.

The sixty-six books of the Bible are written in a variety of styles viz historical narrative, prophecy, poetry, instruction, exhortation, etc. by a variety of people from all walks of life from Kings to Shepherds and addresses to a huge variety including theologians, adults, children, believers, non-believers, etc. Snell-Horn by states in Handbuk Translation Verlag, 'It is difficult for a translator to translate the bible since s/he must reproduce an equivalent text in the Target Language, which can be 'used' for the same purpose as that of the Source Language.'

As Eugene Nida points out no two languages are identical and therefore can be no absolute correspondence between languages and hence no exact translations. The challenge of the translator would then be to grasp the meaning of the original the best he can and then seek to reproduce that meaning in the Target language. Though this might seem an easy task there were problems inherent in the comprehension of meaning. With new words constantly added and others taking on added meanings even modern Greeks and Israelis would not fully understand the Bible. There are also problems of cultural understanding. Imperfect knowledge of ancient cultures often makes it difficult to understand references of various kinds. Even if translators know the cultural setting of the Biblical era, it is hard for them to

reconstruct the cultural setting in which the writing first took place since there are great differences between it and the current one.

Although there were several grammatical problems this one with Hebrew verbs seems most interesting. I will draw your attention to the Hebrew verb 'Sanah' (Judges 1:14). Three different versions state the following:

'Daughter of Caleb got off her donkey'.

NIV, RSV

'Daughter of Caleb broke wind.' New English Bible, 1st Edition

'Daughter of Caleb made a noise.' New English Bible, 2nd Edition

The above example I believe is self-explanatory.

Textual problems also abound. For example, did St. Paul write, 'Not beyond what is written' in 1 Corinthians 4:6 or was it a scribal note left in the margin and later incorrectly incorporated into the text as some commentator's insist?

Scribes who spend their waking hours making copy of the manuscripts encountered major problems. Imagine this before about 1560 AD and the Genevan New Testament, Bible scripture was not divided into verses. Genesis 1 would then appear (in English) basically like the following:

I. In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the

darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.

Earlier than that, the Greek texts were written without spaces or breaks between words, and no punctuation. As an example, the same Genesis 1 would look very different from the above:

I.InthebeginningGodcreatedtheheavenandtheearthAndtheearthwaswithoutformandvoidanddarknesswasuponthefaceofthedeepAndthespiritofGodmoveduponthefaceofthewatersAndGodsaidLettherebelightandtherewaslightAndGodsawthelightthatitwasgoodandGoddividedthelightfromthedarknessAndGodcalledthelightDayandthedarknesshecalledNightAndtheeveningandthemorningwerethefirstday

When we get back to about the ninth Century AD, this Greek text was written in a scriptio continua called MINISCULE WRITING or Cursives. This had the text not only unspaced but written in a handwritten script where all the letters were connected. The appearance of our example text would now look more like:

1.  
Inthebeginninggodcreatedtheheavenandtheearthandtheearthwaswithoutformandvoidanddarknesswasuponthefaceofthedeepandthespiritofgodmoveduponthe faceofthewatersandgodsaidlettherebelightandtherewaslightandgod sawthelightthatitwasgoodandgoddividedthelightfromthedarknessandgodcalledthelightdayandthedarknesshe

callednightandtheeveningandthemorningwerethefirstday

This text might have been presented in either Greek or Latin in that era. We cannot see what this sort of situation would have looked like in Greek; since we don't have available a computer font that can represent connected Greek script:

Prior to around 900 AD, essentially all texts in most languages were apparently written with only the consonants presented, without ever recording any of the vowels! So consider this same text first in English and then in Greek!

nthbgnnngdcrttdthhvndthrthndthrthswthtfrmnvdnddr

knsswspnthfcfthdpndthsprtfgdmvdpnthfcfthwtrsndgdsdl

tthrbghtndthrwslghtndgdswthlghttthtwsgdndgdddvdthl

ghtfrmthdrknssndgdclldthelghtdnddthdrknsshclldnghtndt

hvnngndthmrnngwrthfrstd

A comparison of the copies of the Old Testament revealed a surprisingly small number of errors in spite of the difficulties shown above.

Biblical Hebrew often uses word repetitions and a poetic structure difficult to convey in another language. The English version of Genesis 2:25-3:1 reads like this:

“And the man and wife were both naked... Now the serpent was more crafty”. The words naked and crafty are translated from Hebrew *arom* and *arum* which are identical in spelling and pronunciation and serve to connect the two verses. The best possible

way to convey this aspect in an English translation would be to make the words rhyme:

“And the man and his wife were nude...now the serpent was more shrewd”. This example shows that the translator has to choose between translating word for word and translating the meaning at the risk of losing the richness and poetry.

The most important problem in understanding the Bible is a spiritual one. As we read in I Corinthians 2:14, ‘the natural mind does not receive things of the Spirit of God’. Many of us have experienced reading a passage hundreds of times and then suddenly noticing a different, deeper meaning in a passage. As we grow in spiritual maturity, the Holy Spirit or Divine Inspiration, if we may call that, slowly guides us into a deeper understanding that lies therein.

Identifying the problems in translating the bible becomes even more meaningful by locating it historically. Translation became necessary when the Jewish Community in the diaspora forgot their Hebrew and Old Hebrew had to be translated into Chaldaic or Aramaic giving us the Targums.

Between 280 and 150 BC the Septuagint or Greek version of the Old Testament was commissioned by Ptolemy Philadelphus, King of Egypt. This work of translation was criticized because the translators differed greatly in knowledge of Hebrew and Greek.

Latin versions beginning with the Itala were followed by the Vulgate which has come to be considered the only sacred original of the Roman Catholic Church, having being

declared so by the Council of Trent in 1546. The work of translating the Vulgate was undertaken by St. Jerome from the Septuagint.

The intention of St. Jerome, translating into Latin the Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Greek of the New Testament, was that ordinary Christians of the Roman Empire should be able to read the word of God. ‘Ignorance of the scriptures’, he wrote, ‘is ignorance of Christ’. Gradually the perception of St. Jerome was altered and after the collapse of the western empire, the people of Christian Europe began to speak varieties of German, French, Anglo-Saxon Italian or Spanish. The text of Jerome’s Vulgate is understood only by the learned, most of whom are priests. They prefer to corner the source of Christian truth, keeping for themselves the privilege of interpreting it for the people. Translation into vulgar tongues is discouraged.

The English Versions begin with Anglo Saxon but these were only fragments. Caedmon, Bishops Eadhelm and Egbert and Bede rendered portions of the bible into Anglo-Saxon and it was Wycliffe who gave us the first complete text of the bible in English.

The invention of the printing press sparked a revolution. Bibles were printed in large numbers making them easily available to scholars. The result was the Reformation when translations were undertaken in vernacular languages. Tyndale, an expert in seven languages translated the Bible from the original Hebrew but was opposed by the Church and was martyred for the crime of translating the Bible. A year later Henry

VIII ordered that every church should have a bible and ironically it was Tyndale's version which was selected. The church however condemned Tyndale's book believing that the common man's access to the Bible should be at the sole discretion of the superiors. The translation of the Bible into the vulgar tongue of English would only be an occasion of continuance or increase of errors among said people.

The one that we are most familiar with is the King James Version of 1611. This was declared the Authorized Version and all other versions were refused Royal Sanction.

More wars have been fought over religion and god and over territory. The point in question here is the several 'Authorised Versions of the Bible, each one declaring that their version was the most authentic if not the only sacred original. If churches in the past refused access to the scripture to the common man, more recently during the Cold War the Romanian Orthodox Church refused to permit the Romanian Baptists to print the version used by them. Both considered the other's versions to be inaccurate. As Orlaith O'Sullivan says in *The Bible as Book: The Reformation*, 'The fear was not that the translation might encourage heresy but that the heresies of the translators not to mention the hidden agenda of the editors might infiltrate the text'

In *Fascinated by Languages* Eugene Nida elucidates how the translation constructs and contests cultural and religious identities. He problematizes the double agency of translators in their role of negotiating the asymmetrical relationship of texts and unearths the function of hidden transcripts in

translated texts. The design of the bible offers compelling evidence of its authenticity. Although written 1500 years ago by different writers every book is consistent in its message. The intricacy with which the books are planned and interlinked could not have been executed by any human agency. Archaeological findings also validate the Divine Authorship by fulfilled prophecies however human agency in the act of translation and the effects of Christian bigotry in the past, present and undoubtedly in the future will continue to render more modified versions of the Bible.

Critique of Western Philosophy based on current understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition gained from the translated versions of the Bible is flawed. My hypothesis will involve far-reaching ramifications for the study of literature which draws heavily on Western Philosophy and the Judeo-Christian tradition.

If our understanding of the concepts of Comparative Literature is correct it involves comparing two kinds of literary traditions without privileging one side over the other, yet in practice this appears very different.

This paper does not propose to offer any conclusion but will leave with observations and open-ended questions:

Is our understanding of Western Philosophy flawed because our understanding of the Judeo-Christian tradition is several times removed? Based on the findings of Claude Levi-Strauss, is there homogeneity at the root of all religions and cultures? If Comparative Literature does not privilege any one form of literature, why then do practitioners always deride the 'other'? Why

do all comparisons result in the binaries of west vs. east, man vs. woman, vernacular vs. national language and or English, state vs. nation privileging one over the other depending on which position the critic take?

If we believe that the work of God is revealed to us through divine inspiration, is it possible to uncover new insights if scholars study the Bible as a secular text?

Can the hierarchies truly be dismantled and the state of East AND West, Man AND Woman, Indian AND English over be reached? Given Foucault's view that Knowledge and Power are inexorably linked can there ever be a truly objective translation?

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