

HOW WE GOT OUR BIBLE

IV. The Ancient Versions and their Value in Biblical Study

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(Topic for week beginning July 16.)

The versions we have examined are not the only translations of the Bible into the languages of early Christendom. But space will not permit us to study these interesting old documents further. Those we have studied are the ones of primary importance for our purposes. I shall, therefore, merely add a list of the remaining early versions, with a remark or two on each.

5. MINOR EASTERN VERSIONS.

Christianity early spread amongst the peoples who lived in the parts beyond the Mediterranean coast-lands. Many of these peoples embraced the teachings of the Bible. This, of course, led to its translation into the various native tongues of the believers. These translations were generally made from the versions which found their way to the various races, and these later versions are therefore of but secondary importance for purposes of textual study, since they are translations of translations. Such are:

(a) *The Coptic Version:* This was a version made by the Christians of Upper Egypt. There are several dialects of this language, as the Sahidic, Fayyumic and Bohairic. The Scriptures were rendered into all these, the Sahidic version being probably the oldest, as it reaches back to the sixth century. The Bohairic version is now used by the Egyptian Christians, and is sometimes improperly called the "Memphitic" version.

(b) *The Ethiopic Version* was prepared from the Septuagint, as early as the fifth or sixth century, for the Christians of Abyssinia, whose native speech was Ge'ez or Ethiopic. There are a number of manuscripts of this version in the British Museum.

(c) *The Gothic Version* was the translation made by Ulfilas for the Goths of Dacia, as early as the middle of the fourth century. All of the dozen or so known early manuscripts of this version only fragments remain of a few of the Old Testament books.

(d) *The Slavonic Version* was the Bible of one of the great races contiguous to the centres of Christianity in the early centuries. It was probably made about the ninth century.

(e) *The Armenian Version:* This version supplied the Christian communities of Asia Minor with the Bible. It seems to have been prepared from the Septuagint at the close of the fourth, or the beginning of the fifth, century. This is said by competent scholars to be one of the most beautiful and accurate of all the versions. It is apparently a very faithful rendering of the Greek.

(f) *The Arabic Versions:* These were versions prepared for the Christians of Syria and Egypt, after the Arab invasion had supplanted the native tongues by the Arabic language. They are based on several originals (Greek, Syriac, Hebrew and Samaritan); but while there are a good many manuscripts, they have as yet been very little used for purposes of textual study.

QUOTATIONS FROM THE FATHERS.

The writings of the early Christian Fathers, which contain so many quotations from the Scriptures, we shall not stop to examine. There are a great many of these writings, but, like the minor versions, they have as yet been but slightly used in criticism of the text. Further study will, no doubt, give them an important place, for while these quotations are often very fragmentary, and loosely made from memory, they yet are of value in textual study, because some of them go back to the days of the original New Testament writings. As with the minor versions, I shall merely append a list of the more important of these writers, whose works abound in Scriptural quotations, and leave the reader, for a fuller treatment, to any good text book, such as the Rev. Patterson Smyth's "How We Got Our Bible" (pp. 41-46); *Clement of Rome, Ignatius, Polycarp, Irenaeus, Justin Martyr, Tertullian, Eusebius.* This list contains the name of a man who was a disciple of St. John, viz., *Polycarp.* This we know from the writings of Irenaeus, who tells us in one of his letters how that, when he was a boy he had seen Polycarp, who told him of certain conversations he had had with St. John and others who had seen the Lord. In Polycarp's works, then, we have the writings of a man who was a disciple of St. John, the much-loved follower of our Lord. Hence the evidence we can gather from such writings as his, as to the original text of Scripture, must not be ignored.

Now, the reason so much time has been spent in the study of the mistakes which have sometimes been made by copyists, and the means which textual students now have of correcting them, is that we may be able to understand clearly why Bible revision is necessary, and especially what authority our recent revisers had in making changes in the text of Scripture. And we cannot hold these reasons too carefully in mind.

(1) First, then, there are now available, for purposes of textual study, a great many more and older manuscripts, and versions, and quotations, than were accessible to the men who prepared the King James Version in 1611.

(2) Biblical scholars of the present day have a much more accurate knowledge of these original languages of the Scriptures, and the science of textual criticism, than did the scholars of that day.

(3) And a third reason, which has not been touched upon, but which of itself would make Bible revision from time to time necessary, even were there no advances in scholarship or manuscript discoveries, is the natural growth of language. Over two hundred words of our Authorized Version have actually changed their meaning, since that version was prepared, for example, such words as "conversation," "quick," "prevent," etc. The change often affects the meaning of an important passage.

Hence, Prof. Smyth's words in this connection are very wisely chosen: "Therefore, we are able to detect faults even in our almost perfect Authorized Version—faults here and there which scholars have known for some time past; verses where the rendering needed to be improved, and in a few instances passages whose right to stand in the Bible at all was very doubtful. In such

cases I need hardly say that no amount of sentiment about our grand old Bible should prevent our making the corrections required."

In speaking thus plainly about the probability of textual errors in the Scriptures, there is danger that an exaggerated impression should be created with regard to the extent of these errors. We must remember that the great majority of them are of a very trivial kind, such as the misspelling or transposing of words, the omitting or inserting of insignificant particles, and such like. There are a great many more of these variations in the New Testament than will likely ever be discovered in the Old, and yet two of the greatest modern textual critics of the New Testament (Westcott and Hort) have affirmed that the New Testament variations of any importance, if all put together, would not exceed the one-thousandth part of the whole text.

It may be disturbing to some to find that our Bible has not been transmitted to us absolutely correct, word for word. At all events, this is the fact, and we do well not to quarrel with facts. I here quote the words of another: "We know with certainty that we have the substance of God's revelation exactly as the original writers had it; that we cannot say the same of every letter and syllable is surely not of so very much account. And perhaps it may not be altogether an unmixed evil either. It may help men to broader and truer notions of what inspiration really means. It may teach that not the ignorant worship of the letter, but the honest learning and obeying of the spirit of His revelation is what God values, since He has left the words of the Bible, in some degree, to run the same risks as the words of other books, when taking care that its substance should come down to us as originally given. It is surely instructive to see our Lord and His apostles content to use a Bible (the Septuagint) which, while giving faithfully the substance of God's Word, was often very inaccurate in minor details. We have a much more accurate Bible than they. But whatever our feeling about the matter, we should remember that we have it as God has thought fit to let us have it. Had it been necessary to His purposes that the text should have been miraculously preserved from the slightest flaw, we need have no doubt but that this would have been accomplished."

And now, having learned something about these ancient documents, let us anticipate our study of the Revised Version a little, and see how these versions may be used in the effort to find the original text. Suppose we take our Bibles and turn to Genesis 4: 8. The Authorized Version reads, "And Cain talked with Abel his brother; and it came to pass, when they were in the field, that Cain rose up against Abel his brother, and slew him." The Revised Version reads, "And Cain told Abel his brother; and it came to pass," etc. One says, "Cain talked with Abel," and the other, "Cain told Abel." Now, which is right? Or is neither? Are the words of the revisers of our Bible in 1885 change "talked with" to "told"?

The Hebrew verb used here means regularly "said to," and when we meet it, we always expect to find after it the words of the one actually said. But in the Hebrew text as we have it today, no such words appear. Therefore, the men who prepared the Authorized Version saved the sense of the passage by giving a wrong rendering to this Hebrew verb (you see that their translation makes good sense), while the revisers attempted what appears like a compromise.

Now, the point is, the Hebrew must not be translated either "talked with"