

ISSUE

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BULLETIN OF
THE OLSEN
PARK CHURCH
OF CHRIST

Faithful Sayings

July 30,
2017

Services

Sunday: 9:00 AM

10:00 AM

11:00 AM

Wednesday: 7:00 PM

Elders:

Pat Ledbetter
Jeff Nunn

Deacons:

Steve Dixon
Ryan Ferguson
Arend Gressley
Ben Hight
Blake McAlister
Brady McAlister
Walker McAnear
Sam Nunn
Lance Purcell
Rusty Scott
Justin Smiley
Trevor Yontz

Evangelist:

Kyle Pope



“Everyone Heard Them Speak in His Own Language” How the Bible Came to Us (9) By Kyle Pope

The Holy Spirit records that after the flood **“the whole earth had one language and one speech”** (Gen. 11:1, NKJV). When arrogance led mankind to build a great tower to make a **“name”** for themselves (Gen. 11:4), God acted to **“confuse their language, that they may not understand one another’s speech”** (Gen. 11:7).

Throughout most of the Old Testament this confusion of tongues coincided with God’s purposes. Israel was to be distinct from the nations around it. The Messiah would come through Israel and its language and culture were kept distinct. Faithful Israelites resisted efforts to force Gentile culture upon them. Only as captives did they learn the **“language and literature”** of their captors (cf. Dan. 1:4).

When Jesus commanded His disciples to **“Go into all the world and preach the gospel to every creature”** (Mark 16:15), some things changed about this distinctiveness. Not only was the gospel now open to Jew and Gentile, but how could you teach someone with whom you could not communicate? When the gospel was first taught the confusion of tongues was the first obstacle to be overcome. On the Day of Pentecost, the same God who once confused mankind’s languages, miraculously gave the apostles the ability **“to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance”** (Acts 2:4). This was a miracle of the tongue and the ear. Those assembled in Jerusalem from all over the world each **“heard them speak in his own language”** (Acts 2:6). With the comple-

tion of the New Testament and the passing of miraculous spiritual gifts this divine aid in communication also came to an end. There was no miracle of the pen. How would the gospel spread to people of different languages? How would the Scriptures become accessible to the world?

The Translation of the Old Testament

So far in our study we have seen that the Bible was revealed in three languages: Hebrew (in the Old Testament), Greek (in the New), and Aramaic (in a few passages in both the Old and New). Long before the time of Christ Jews dispersed among other nations faced the challenge of language. Remember, there were no tools of technology like we have today. Efforts to convert Gentiles to Judaism, or the need to have readable Scriptures for Jews who no longer understood Hebrew led to the first translations of the Old Testament. According to historical sources Ptolemy II (309–246 BC), the Greek king of Egypt who greatly expanded the library of Alexandria, sponsored the first translation of the first five books of the Old Test-

ament into Greek. This translation was called the *Septuagint* (from the Greek word for “70”—LXX) because 72 Jewish scholars were said to have completed the project. Over time all of the books of the Old Testament were translated and the name was eventually applied to the entire work. The Septuagint was the Old Testament from which many of the first Christians read. Some of the names we still use for Old Testament books, such as *Genesis* “The beginning” and *Exodus* “The going-out” come from the Septuagint. The Septuagint is often quoted in the Greek New Testament—a testimony to its important role in religious history.

We noted in earlier lessons that before Alexander the Great spread Greek throughout the ancient world, Aramaic had become a language of international commerce. Aramaic was much closer to Hebrew and for many Jews it remained a common spoken tongue. Quite early Jewish teachers began to translate and explain Hebrew Scriptures in Aramaic to help their listeners understand (cf. Ezra 4:7). These interpretations, or *Targums* were not written down at first, but by the late first century a proselyte named Onkelos (thought by some to be another name for Aquila of Sinope) produced an Aramaic Targum of the Pentateuch. In the second century a Jewish scholar named Jonathan ben Uzziel produced a looser Aramaic Targum of the prophetic books. These Targums were read in Jewish synagogue worship for centuries and continue to be used by Yemenite Jews today.

As Christians increasingly used the Septuagint to argue that Jesus was the promised Old Testament Messiah, some Greek speaking Jews sought a different translation. In the second century three were produced by Jewish scholars. The most literal (although awkward) was done by Aquila of Sinope. As noted above, some believe Aquila and Onkelos, were the same person. It would make sense that one who tried to bring Old Testament Scriptures into one language would see the need to bring it into another. His Greek translation quickly replaced the Septuagint in many Jewish synagogues, including the one in Alexandria. A second translation was done by Theodotion of Ephesus but it was really just a revision of the Septuagint. The third, done by an obscure scholar named Symmachus, was perhaps the best mix of staying literal to the text but making it smoother and more readable to the Greek ear. It is unclear however exactly who Symmachus was. Different sources associate him with Samaritans, Jews, or even Ebionites (a sect of Jew-

ish Christians). Around 240 AD the Christian scholar Origen produced a *Hexapla* of the Old Testament, placing all of these translations in parallel columns beside the Hebrew text. The original was lost in the Muslim destruction of the library in Caesarea in 638 AD, but fragments from copies have survived to the present.

The First Translations of the New Testament

While it is important to know the history of Old Testament translation, it does not compare to the wonderful story of love and self-sacrifice revealed in the first steps taken to bring the word of God to a lost (and sometimes even illiterate) world. On my phone I can pull up something called “Google Translate.” I can scroll through dozens of languages and with the tap of a finger translate any text I find into whatever language I choose. Remember, the gospel was born into a world without computers and smart phones. While many in the Greco-Roman world read and spoke Latin or Greek, on the edges of the “civilized world” were hoards of people who might not even have a written language. Many of us are descended from such people. Can you imagine what it would require to bring the word of God to them?

Some of the first steps were the easiest. Like the Targums, some of the earliest translations of the New Testament were in Aramaic. Translations in a dialect of Aramaic known as Syriac, from the region near Antioch, began to be produced in the second and third centuries. By the fifth century the most widely accepted version called the *Peshitta*, meaning “pure” came into use within Syriac speaking churches and continues to be used today.

In the second and third centuries Latin translations began to be produced all over the Roman Empire. But imagine if people from every state in the United States began to randomly translate Scripture. The Bible in Georgia would sound much different than the Bible in New York. By the fourth century the chaotic state of these first Latin translations led authorities in Constantinople to assign a Latin scholar named Jerome (342-420 AD) to research and produce a trustworthy translation of the Bible into Latin. Jerome as a boy had been trained in Greek and Latin. He had studied Hebrew while living for a time in a

cave as a hermit. Jerome traveled to Palestine and compared biblical manuscripts to determine the most accurate readings. By 405 AD with the help of others, Jerome produced the first critical Latin translation of the Bible written in *vulgar* (i.e. “common”) Latin. The *Latin Vulgate* became the main biblical translation in Europe for over a thousand years. We will see in future lessons the impact it continues to have on English translations.

In Egypt the ancient language of the pharaohs had gradually changed. The influence of Greek rulers had merged Greek vocabulary into their speech and the written hieroglyphics had been simplified into a cursive shorthand with little resemblance to the picture writing engraved on pyramid walls. Christians who taught in Egypt are believed to have contributed to the development of a written form of Egyptian known as Coptic that borrowed Greek letters and created some additional symbols for Egyptian sounds. Coptic translations of the New Testament date back to the second and third century.

In the fourth century a boy named Ulfilas, meaning “Little Wolf,” was carried off captive with his family from Cappa-



docia to Dacia in the region of modern day Bulgaria. Although raised as a Goth, Ulfilas learned Greek, Latin, and Gothic and began teaching his faith in Christ to the very people who had once taken him captive. The Goths had no written language. So Ulfilas had to invent an alphabet which, like Coptic, used Greek letters with some additional letters representing Gothic sounds. He then translated most of the Bible into Gothic so he could teach these barbarous people. The Gothic Bible is the oldest preserved example of a Germanic language, like English.

Ulfilas was not the only one to act so unselfishly. In the fourth century the son of a prominent Armenian family named Mesrop Mashtots, left his service to the royal court and invented alphabets for the Armenian, Georgian, and Albanian languages. In 411 AD he created the first Armenian translation from the Syriac. In 434 AD, after gaining access to Greek texts he completed a translation from the Greek that is still used in Armenian churches. The

alphabets he created were also used in the first Georgian and Albanian translations of the Bible. Finally, in 865, at the request of Prince Rostislav of Moravia (in the modern Czech Republic) Constantinople sent two brothers, Cyril and Methodius to teach the Balkan Slavs. They too had to invent an alphabet for their language now known as “Old Church Slavonic.” Cyril died before the Bible translation was completed, but Methodius continued the work. Although their followers were expelled from Moravia after Methodius’ death, their translations were highly influential in Russia, Bulgaria, and Serbia. In fact, the alphabet now used in modern Russian is called Cyrillic, in honor of Cyril from whose work it was developed. It is ironic that the alphabet used in the former atheistic Soviet Union, was created from work first used to translate Scripture. In our next lesson we will see how similar acts of self-sacrifice led to the translation of the Bible into English—a blessing we continue to enjoy today.



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