

Background to the Bible

Why study the background?

- So we don't take our Bible for granted – a lot of people died just to get it to us!
- So we can get a handle on the historical distance between us and the first readers of the Bible.
- Because it helps us better to answer other questions, particularly the claims of other religions.

Language and writing

- languages:
 - Hebrew (OT): right to left, vowels represented as dots and dashes
 - Aramaic (½ Daniel and parts of Ezra): related to Hebrew and Arabic, written in the same script as Hebrew.
 - Greek (NT and Apocrypha): more like English (similar alphabet), widespread through Roman empire
- samples:
 - Genesis 1.1 (Hebrew):
בְּרֵאשִׁית בָּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ:
 - John 3.16 (Greek):
οὕτως γὰρ ἠγάπησεν ὁ θεὸς τὸν κόσμον, ὥστε τὸν υἱὸν τὸν μονογενῆ ἔδωκεν, ἵνα πᾶς ὁ πιστεύων εἰς αὐτὸν μὴ ἀπόληται ἀλλ' ἔχη ζωὴν αἰώνιον.
- literacy: In the 1st century Roman Empire, the literacy rate was about 4%. Books were generally expected to be “performed” (read aloud). Even in the 4th century, others marvelled at Augustine's ability to read silently.
- translations:
 - OT: Targums (Aramaic) and Septuagint – “LXX” (Greek)
 - NT: Old Latin (Vulgate – 382 AD), Coptic (Egyptian), Syriac, Armenian, Ethiopic
- materials:
 - papyrus: paper made from reeds; reeds were found only in Egypt, very susceptible to cold and dampness
 - parchment: goat, sheep, or antelope skins; more durable in the cold and damp; more readily available outside Egypt; could be erased and written again.
 - pens: reeds, then quills (feathers); ink: made from soot, gum and water
- form of books:
 - roll/scroll
 - codex (book)
- manuscripts:
 - “uncial” – capital letters (about 100 on papyrus and 300 on parchment)
 - “minuscule” – cursive script (about 3000 parchments in Greek, many more in Latin)
 - abbreviations and contractions – saved time and space
 - aids for readers: accents, headings and titles, breathing marks & punctuation (not much before 700 AD), verse divisions (not added until 1551). (Headings are largely a product of the modern era.)
 - copying: probably copied first by individual Christians, later by “copy shops” or by monks; speed was much more important than accuracy – remember, for the first 300 years, Christianity was a persecuted and outlawed religion.
 - original manuscripts: there are no known original manuscripts (“autographs”) of any part of the Bible – all our translations are made from copies.
 - errors: every manuscript has mistakes, on average about 1 every 15 lines. So we need to compare manuscripts with each other to determine the original, which is called...

Textual criticism

- This is the discipline which concerns itself with the question, “Which Bible manuscripts should we translate from?”. It works with two kinds of evidence:
 - external – age, location, and reconstructed relationships between manuscripts
 - internal – scribal habits, author’s style
- Examples:
 - Easy – “science at work” 😊:
 - 1 Sam 8:16 KJV/NIV – only one letter different in the Hebrew, the LXX has probably preserved the original
 - Mark 1:2 KJV/NIV – copyist “corrected” the text to allow for Malachi
 - 1 Cor 11:29 KJV/NIV – assimilation to v. 27
 - Harder – human factors come in:
 - 1 Cor 13:3 NIV text vs. margin – probably a vote by the NIV translators: the majority’s decision was put in the text, the minority’s in the margin.
- Some textual choices don’t make much difference to the meaning of the text.

Bible Translations

- The first tools in Bible study are *several* good translations. When doing thorough Bible study, we need to choose ones whose styles are known to differ (more below).
e.g. 1 Cor 7:36 – KJV, NASB, NIV, NEB: all are legitimate, but only one is correct – Paul did not intend to be ambiguous.
- Types of translations:
 - formal: word for word
 - dynamic: meaning for meaning

More formal			More dynamic	
KJV, NKJV	NIV	GNB (TEV)	NEB, REB	The Message
ASV, NASB	NAB	NCV	LB, NLT	Amplified
RSV, NRSV, ESV			JB Phillips	

- Differences between translation theories:
 1. Weights and measures, money (e.g. Matt 18:24, 28)
 2. Euphemisms: sex and toilet (e.g. Genesis 4:1; 31:35; 1 Cor 7:1)
 3. Vocabulary (e.g. Rom 1:3; 2 Cor 5:16; 1 Cor 1:26)
 4. Grammar and syntax:
 - (a) grammar (e.g. Heb 1:3 – “his powerful word”; 1 Th 1:3 – “endurance inspired by hope”)
 - (b) word order (e.g. Gen 1 – “and” beginning sentences)

Choosing a translation

- “I like it”, “it’s readable”, and “it supports my doctrinal persuasion” are not good reasons for choosing a translation. They might be desirable, but not a basis for your choice.
- Textual criticism is the discipline of determining the most likely text of the original manuscripts of the Bible. Basically, on textual grounds choose any modern translation other than KJV, NKJV, etc.

Samples of English versions¹

Date	Version	John 3.16 text
2001	ESV	For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
1996	NLT	For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.
1991	Msg	This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.
1984	NIV	For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.
1965	Amplified	For God so greatly loved and dearly prized the world that He [even] gave up His only begotten (unique) Son, so that whoever believes in (trusts in, clings to, relies on) Him shall not perish (come to destruction, be lost) but have eternal (everlasting) life.
1946	RSV	For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.
1901	ASV	For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth on him should not perish, but have eternal life.
1789?	KJV	For God so loved the world, that he gave his only begotten Son, that whosoever believeth in him should not perish, but have everlasting life.
1611	KJV (1 st edn.)	For God so loued the world, that he gaue his only begotten Sonne: that whosoouer beleeueth in him, should not perish, but haue euerlasting life.
1582	Rheims	For so God loued the vworld, that he gaue his only-begotten sonne: that euery one that beleeueth in him, perish not, but may haue life euerlasting
1560	Geneva	For God so loueth the world, that he hath geuen his only begotten Sonne: that none that beleue in him, should peryshe, but haue euerlasting lyfe.
1539	Great Bible	For God so loued the worlde, that he gaue his only begotten sonne, that whosoouer beleueth in him, shulde not perisshes, but haue euerlasting lyfe.
1534	Tyndale	For God so loveth the worlde, that he hath geuen his only sonne, that none that beleue in him, shuld perisshes: but shuld haue everlastinge lyfe.
1380	Wycliff	for god loued so the world; that he gaf his oon bigetun sone, that eche man that bileueth in him perisch not: but haue euerlastynges liif,
995	Anglo-Saxon Proto-English Manuscripts	God lufode middan-eard swa, dat he seade his an-cennedan sunu, dat nan ne forweorde de on hine gely ac habbe dat ece lif.

¹Sources: <http://www.biblegateway.com/>, <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/cgi/r/rsv/>, <http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/>.

Shameless plug²

6,912 languages spoken in the world today

2,251 languages without any of the Bible, but with a possible need of a Bible translation to begin

1,953 translation programs currently in progress for languages without adequate Scripture

1,144 language communities which have access to the New Testament in their heart language

429 language communities which have access to the entire Bible in their heart language

120 the number of new English Bible translations made in the last 100 or so years

Further reading

Bauckham, Richard (ed.) *The Gospels for All Christians: rethinking the Gospel audiences*. Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1998.

Chapter 2: “The Holy Internet: communication between churches in the first Christian generation”, by Michael B. Thompson.

Chapter 3: “Ancient Book Production and the Circulation of the Gospels”, by Loveday Alexander.

Bruce, F. F. *The English Bible: A History of Translations*. London: Lutterworth Press, 1961.

Kubo, Sakae and Walter Specht. *So Many Versions?* Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1980.

Patzia, Arthur G. *The Making of the New Testament*. Leicester: Apollos, 1995.

Smyth, J. Paterson. *How We Got Our Bible*. London: Sampson Low, Marston & Co., n.d.

Wegner, Paul D. *The Journey from Texts to Translations: the origin and development of the Bible*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 1999..

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²Source: <http://www.wycliffe.org/About/Statistics.aspx>.