

A Brief History Of The Evolution Of Christian Literature Translation Tradition

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How to cite this article: Ravinder Singh, (2024). A Brief History Of The Evolution Of Christian Literature Translation Tradition *Library Progress International*, 44(2), 1217-1219.

Abstract

From the early Christian era to the modern day, the translation of Christian literature has played a vital role in shaping religious, cultural, and linguistic landscapes. This paper explores the historical development of Christian literature translation. It delves into the significance of translation in the spread of Christianity, highlighting key periods such as the early Christian era, the medieval period, the Protestant Reformation, and the modern era. The paper examines the impact of key figures like Saint Jerome and the role of Bible societies in shaping the translation landscape. It also discusses the evolution of translation theories and practices, including the tension between literal and dynamic equivalence.

Keywords: *Christian literature, Bible, Old Testament, New Testament, Aramaic language, Roman Empire, Catholic church, Septuagint, Jerome, Cicero, Renaissance.*

Christianity is one of the religions that has spread too quickly throughout the world. Translation has played a major role in its spread. Christian literature stands unparalleled in the history of translation, with countless translations across languages and cultures.

The Bible, a sacred text of Christianity, is the most translated book in the world. It encompasses a diverse collection of historical narratives, poetry, prophecy, and moral teachings, spanning a period of over a millennium. The Bible is divided into two main sections: the **Old Testament**, which primarily recounts the history and laws of the Israelites, and the **New Testament**, which focuses on the life, teachings, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

The Old Testament was written in Aramaic and contains Jewish religious books. Unlike the works of the Old Testament, the works of the New Testament are Christian in nature, written in Greek in the second half of the 1st – early 2nd century AD. Some books of the New Testament were originally written in Aramaic, which were later translated into Greek.

When the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion, it accelerated the religion's spread across its vast territory. As the Roman Empire extended its influence into regions like *Syria, Egypt, Iran, India, and China*, Christianity followed suit. This expansion necessitated the translation of Christian texts into numerous languages to accommodate diverse cultural and linguistic contexts.

Initially, the spread of Christianity was largely confined to territories under Roman rule. These regions, with their diverse languages, necessitated the translation of the Bible into various vernacular tongues. However, as Greek became the dominant language in these regions, the need for translations decreased, as the Greek Bible could be understood by a wider population.

Here, examples are the translations of the Bible in the Western and Eastern parts of the Roman Empire. If the Western part needed a translation of the Bible into Latin due to the dominance of the Latin language, since it had not yet been supplanted by the Greek language, then the states of the Eastern part no longer needed translations of the Bible into local languages, due to the fairly good command of the Greek language by the inhabitants of this part of the Roman Empire.

Further, when the Greek language began to sound in all corners of the Roman Empire and acquired the status of the main language of communication, in this case, foreigners who were under the rule of the Roman Empire either forgot their native languages, in the case of interrupted relations with their fellow countrymen, being far from them, or mastered Greek to such a level that they were able to read the biblical books in Greek.

For example, the Jews (Hebrews) who found themselves under the rule of Alexandria forgot their language because they could no longer communicate with their compatriots. Consequently, the Old Testament had to be translated into Greek for them. This translation of the Holy Scripture is considered the first translation of the Bible. This translation into Greek was called the Septuagint (translation of the Seventy Interpreters).

Scholars who have studied the Septuagint have observed that its translators employed a variety of translation techniques, ranging from literal word-for-word translation to more dynamic and interpretive approaches, reflecting the diverse linguistic and cultural contexts of the time.

The Septuagint demonstrates a diverse range of translation approaches. Some passages are translated through paraphrase, conveying the meaning of the original text in a different linguistic form. Other passages are translated more literally, attempting to preserve the original word order and syntax. In certain cases, the translators have adopted an interpretive approach, seeking to convey the underlying meaning of the text, even if it requires departing from a strict word-for-word translation. However, in some instances, the translators seem to have misunderstood the original text, leading to inaccuracies or distortions in the translation.

In general, the translation tradition of biblical literature was not limited to literalism, on the contrary, it was more diverse. The most famous translators of the Bible were Aquila, Symmachus and Theodotion, who made a great contribution to the development of the biblical translation tradition. Each of them had his own style of Bible translation. For example, Aquila, a well-known Bible translator, prioritized a literal approach to translation, aiming to preserve the exact word order and number of words in the original text. While this approach ensured a high degree of accuracy, it sometimes resulted in translations that were less clear and comprehensible to readers. For his attempt to convey the original word for word, he is credited with the status of a literal translator.

Unlike Aquila, Symmachus used greater freedom in relation to the original. In his translation, he paid great attention to the main meaning of the original. According to O.E. Semenets and A.N. Panasyev, "in translating the Bible, Symmachus tried to impart a certain artistic quality to the translation. However, he went very far from the original text. He conveyed its ideas without following the text." As for Theodotion's translation of the Bible, his translation was a thorough reworking of the Septuagint.

Jerome of Stridon, a 4th-century theologian and scholar, is widely regarded as one of the greatest translators in history. His Latin Vulgate Bible, a translation of the Bible into Latin, became the standard text for the Roman Catholic Church for centuries. Jerome's approach to translation, which emphasized both accuracy and clarity, continues to inspire and inform contemporary translators. His work highlights the importance of careful textual analysis, linguistic precision, and cultural sensitivity in the translation process.

Jerome's approach to translation was informed by his extensive experience in translating the Bible and other religious texts. By the 2nd century, various Latin translations of the Bible had already been produced. However, these translations lacked consistency and accuracy. Jerome was tasked with creating a definitive Latin translation that would serve as the standard text for the Roman Catholic Church. To accomplish this, he carefully examined the existing Latin translations, as well as the original Hebrew and Greek texts, and produced a revised and improved version of the Bible.

After a careful analysis of existing Latin translations of the Bible, Jerome determined that a comprehensive revision and translation were necessary. For the New Testament, he revised existing texts, incorporating corrections and improvements. However, for the Old Testament, he embarked on a new translation project, directly from the Hebrew and Greek original texts. This allowed him to produce a more accurate and faithful translation of the Old Testament, reflecting the latest scholarly understanding of the biblical texts.

Jerome believes that Bible translation needs special treatment. While on the one hand he supports the need to ensure close adherence to the original, because every sacred word is valuable and signifies something divine, on the other hand, because of his anti-literalist approach to the original, he suggests that translators should allow themselves more freedom when translating the Bible. He proposed to translate not word for word, but sense for sense.

Jerome criticized the Roman writers and poets, supporting the method of translation of Cicero, Horace, Terence, Plautus and Caecilius, who also adopted a critical approach to literal and word-for-word translation: "Did they fetter themselves with words? But they preserve even more beauty and elegance in translation. What you call the accuracy of translation, educated people call pedantry..." Thus, Jerome pays great attention to the beauty and elegance of language.

In his famous letter to Pammachius, called "Letter to Pammachius on the Best Method of Translation," Jerome speaks of the appropriate way to translate the Bible. This is what he wrote: "I not only confess, but I also declare for all to hear, that in translating from Greek, excluding the Holy Scripture, where the very order of words is a mystery, I do not convey word by word, but thought by thought. And in this I have Tullius as my mentor... This is not the time to say how much he omitted, how much he added, how much he changed, in order to express the peculiarity of a foreign language through the peculiarity of his own. For me, the authority of the translator himself is enough..."

One of the unique features of Jerome's translation of sacred texts is the use of translation methods such as addition, omission, change (of forms and structures of words, phrases and sentences), which in modern translation studies

are called translation transformations. He spoke about translation transformations approximately in the middle of the 4th century and at the beginning of the 5th century, which testifies to his unique talent. Jerome used these methods in translation in order to preserve the spirit and beauty of the original language.

How great was Jerome's talent as a translator can be imagined considering that the mention of translatability and untranslatability, the most controversial issue in modern translation studies, can be found in Jerome's reflections on translation. According to him, "it is difficult for what is well said in another language to retain the same brilliance in translation."

After Jerome, the Bible and its parts were repeatedly translated into Latin over a long period. Biblical works were translated not only in the Middle Ages, but also in the Renaissance and modern times.

However, the question of the method of translating the Bible has always occupied a key place in the circle of interests of translation scholars. For a long time, there were heated debates about what is more important: to preserve the form or the meaning of the Bible text, i.e. to translate "word for word" or "meaning for meaning".

At certain periods, many translations of the Bible appeared, and any deviation from the original text, and even any attempt to translate the Bible into national languages, were considered heresy. In the history of Bible translation, for trying to reproduce the meaning of the original in the translation, neglecting the word-by-word approach to translation or the desire to translate the Bible into national languages, a number of translators were killed.

According to reliable information, during the Renaissance, the translator Etienne Dolet in 1546, for an uncanonical interpretation of one part of Socrates, and another English translator William Tyndle (1494-1536) for translating the Bible into English, were burned at the stake because their acts were considered anti-religious and heretical.

As for the significance of the Bible translation, it can be noted that the Bible translation not only contributed to the rapid spread of Christianity throughout the world, but also, unlike other translations, the Bible translation made a huge contribution to the development of both translation studies and linguistics.

Thanks to biblical translations, translators realized how important it is to preserve the original features, deviated from the literal approach to adequate translation, and for the first time recognized the rights of translators to use translation transformations such as omission, addition, change of structure, and others. The translation of biblical texts has had a profound impact on the development of translation studies. The challenges and complexities involved in translating sacred texts have led to the development of various modern translation theories and techniques.

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