

29: The Word of God

Ralph D. Winter

Introduction

This lesson falls right between Kaiser #7 and Kaiser #8, both of which have to do with the Law of God. So it seems strange to depart from that subject, but there is a connection. Our subject, after much reflection, has been given the phrase *The Word of God*.

The Word of God is quite different from God Himself because it has to do with a means of communication. God has given us His Word on paper, and it's about time in this Module—in fact it's a little overdue, maybe—to take a hard look at what it is we're studying.

When we talk about the *Law* of God—which, as we've already noticed, is a phrase that could refer to just the Bible itself, or the Torah, or the Torah plus the other documents—we have to ask: “Just how did we get this book? Where did this book come from?” And I don't know a better place to do this than early in the course while we are still going to be handling the document—that is to say, the Bible—for a number of weeks to come.

Let's talk today about the very nature of this Word of God as it comes to us. There are different aspects to this whole thing. There is the question of the physical material. Is it written on *papyrus*, which could be rolled up into long scrolls? Or is it written on *parchment*—which was the skin of an animal and thus a much more expensive type of thing? The shift from publishing texts on *scrolls* to using *codex* (which means *book*) was a big shift. We are talking now about the physical aspect of the Bible.

Now you couldn't put the whole Bible on one scroll, though you could put the whole Bible in one codex. So, in the era of scrolls, they had different scrolls for different parts of the Bible. Because the scrolls were physically separate from each other, the sequence, the order of them, was not ever in question. It didn't matter, because you weren't going to put them in a single book consecutively. Therefore it didn't matter where you stored the scrolls. They stored them in a special little cupboard behind the pulpit in the synagogue, and they would pull a scroll out here or pull a scroll out there. The actual sequence of the shelf positions was not important.

There's a more awesome question: How many of these scrolls are there? How many books?

What is actually the content of this set of materials? And so the question of the canon comes into the picture.

Then, when you get the physical thing settled, and the overall content of the Bible determined, you still have the question of interpretation. How are you going to go about interpreting it? Now, here is an interesting question. We've already had references to the Septuagint. *Septuagint* is one of those fancy words they teach you in seminary; don't be overawed by it. It's even more mysterious when it's referred to (as in our questions for today) as the LXX. What in the world could LXX stand for? It's the Roman number—which obviously the Hebrews didn't use—for “seventy.” “Seventy” has to do with the tradition of the origin of the Septuagint: that it was produced by 70 scholars (originally 72, because—this is a common thing—they assumed six people from each of the twelve tribes, which makes 72).

But why would we be interested in the Septuagint? It is a Greek document. Why would we be interested in that while we are studying the Hebrew Bible? Everybody knows that the Old Testament is in Hebrew. Why would we even worry about the Old Testament translated into Greek, which is what the Septuagint is?

There are several weighty reasons. One of them—the most obvious—is that the earliest existing manuscripts of the Septuagint are hundreds of years older than the oldest Hebrew manuscripts of the Old Testament. Even more important, the manuscripts we have derive from a translation made over a hundred years before Christ. The most ancient Hebrew documents are about a thousand years after Christ. The Hebrew documents may be very faithful translations of earlier texts, which we presume to be the case. But on the other hand, it is true that the very oldest of the collections of Hebrew Old Testament materials are much greater in number than the collection that produced the Septuagint.

A second reason, which is amply demonstrated in your readings for today, is that this early Greek translation of the Bible was incredibly influential. It wasn't the Hebrew form of the Bible that was circulated all over the Roman Empire clear up into England and perhaps as far as India. It was the Greek form of the Bible. The Greek form

of the Bible was the source from which many other translations were made. It was not until hundreds of years later that anybody got a grip on the Hebrew Scriptures and decided that they should be honored more than the LXX (the Septuagint).

The Septuagint is the earlier source of information, but it might not be quite as reliable in some respects. That is to say, the human translators might have missed the point. However, the translators were in all likelihood Hebrew-speaking people who likely did get the point.

For example, there are some very fuzzy passages in the Hebrew Bible, and it is necessary to make a horse-back guess as to what is meant. In our modern text, there are marginal readings that say: "It could be this," or "It could be that." These are texts which are not absolutely clear. In all such cases scholars always rush to the Septuagint and ask, "How did the Septuagint people translate it?" Well, sometimes they translate a fuzzy passage very clearly (even though wrongly, according to some scholars). Or maybe they translate it into a Greek phrase that is itself difficult to understand.

So we have two subjects already: the subject of the physical transmission of the text itself, and the additional and profound set of problems that arise when you go to interpret that text. This is why having both a Greek and a Hebrew text available is a very important thing.

Thirdly, you have to realize that out of the actual use of these texts, enormous social, cultural, and historical changes took place. In this marvelous article titled *The Scriptures in the Christian World Mission*, found in your reader, Dr. Richey Hogg states that *the most influential of all translations of the Bible ever made, by far, is the Septuagint*. The readings in Kaiser are, in fact, very technical and complicated. But the easiest thing to think about as you read the Kaiser materials is that our Bibles in English today, and most Bibles in the world today other than the Hebrew Scriptures, employ the sequence of books closer to the Septuagint than to any Hebrew Bible. Even though our Bibles in English may be translated from the Hebrew, they follow the sequence of books that you find in the Septuagint. This is mute testimony to the incredible impact of the Septuagint, long before Jerome in the fourth century, or anybody else, began to check back to the Hebrew. Origen did the same thing; he tried to deal with those languages. But the dominant document producing and extending the faith was the Septuagint. It was a missionary translation, you see. This fact is very significant.

Also in this lesson is the matter of the growth of the children of Israel while in captivity in Egypt. Kaiser refers to the idea that populations quite

often will double in a 25-year period. Since 430 years is about seventeen 25-year periods, that gives you well over the 2 million coming out of Egypt. But some populations double in a 50-year period, or a 15-year period. In some rapid-growth situations, populations double in even less time. But in any event, no matter how you look at it, the mathematics of interest rates on deposits in a bank—or the growth rates of human beings in Egypt—can readily account for as many as two million people coming out of Egypt, in case anyone wondered if that is an exaggeration or an error in the Bible. There is absolutely no possibility of this being an unreasonable result of this large family that went to Egypt 430 years earlier. So you can peruse the reading assigned on that topic. We hope to go further with this same kind of arithmetic later on, because it is useful for other purposes. Do take a good look at it; it isn't just a one-shot thing.

Review

Our lesson is titled simply, *The Word of God*. Now that sounds very pretentious, as if this is the most important lesson in the entire module. And, in a way, it is.

Up to now we have been talking about things happening in the Bible. We have talked about events in the Bible and events that happened outside of the Bible. But thus far we have never talked about the Bible as an event in itself.

I am sure that everyone at some time along the way—maybe as a teenager or later on, someplace, in his or her Christian life—began to realize that Abraham didn't have a copy of the King James Bible. He probably had some other version. No, we are only joking! Of course, Abraham didn't have any Bible at all! The Bible *begins* with Abraham in a sense.

Let's review the story of Abraham for a moment. The introduction to the entire Bible seems to be constituted by Genesis 1-11, so that when Abraham comes into the picture in the very first few phrases of the remainder of Genesis, that is, Genesis 12-50 (which is, as we've termed it for fun, Chapter One of Part One of the Bible), you can see that the Bible really begins with Abraham. And Abraham really didn't have a Bible. So what did he have? This question has profound missionary significance.

What do peoples of the earth do if they don't have a Bible? One extreme says that unless they have a Bible they can't be Christians. Certainly missionaries ought not to be content with any kind of activity that does not put the Bible into *everyone's* language. That emphasis may be very reasonable and acceptable. But there is this one

little problem—most of the Christians who have ever lived down through history did not have a Bible to read around the family circle, or perhaps even within their community! What they actually believed no doubt could be traced back to the Bible somehow, in some language. There is no question about that. But it is, I think, a bit dubious to insist that the gospel cannot be preached without the Bible itself as a document being reproduced.

However, having said that rather theoretically, in this lesson we studied Dr. Richey Hogg's document—a very remarkable document—we confront the fact that a book in the language of the Greeks had a tremendous contribution to world history, outweighing all the contributions of all other translations of the Bible.

For one thing, as we read Richey Hogg's document we get the feeling of something that we don't normally come across in classical studies. Classical studies talk about Greece and Rome; they talk about the Greco-Roman civilization. But people often underrate the fact that the really scholarly, literary, important language, even of the Empire of Rome and even in the western parts of the Empire, was not Latin but Greek. Greek was the major multi-cultural, multi-society language, thanks to Alexander the Great and other influences. Greek was, you might say, the "English" of the Roman Empire.

It was important, of course, for Paul to be a Roman citizen. And he grew up in Tarsus, which was a Roman town. But it was very, very important that he grew up speaking Greek, not Latin. Latin would have been helpful in some ways, but Latin was a foreign language in the eastern part of the Empire. Greek was far better known in the West than Latin was in the East. And Greek was known far beyond the Roman Empire, since the Greek outreach following Alexander's death pushed clear into South India. So it is itself a very significant consideration not only that Paul knew Greek but that the Bible itself came into the Greek language very early.

In fact, it is hard to imagine how Paul's ministry would have been what it was had the Bible not been in Greek. The Greek Bible was the evangelistic tool of people like Paul. He employed the Greek Scriptures as the Sword of the Lord in his work, and would have been incredibly handicapped if all he had was Hebrew Scriptures. The Bible got out into the currency of the world when it got into Greek. Even though we don't know a whole lot about it, the originating event of the Greek Bible, when 70 people supposedly translated the Old Testament, is very hazily known and understood. But it did happen, and the impact

of that book down through history has been phenomenal.

1. How does the exponential nature of population growth relate to the question of the size of the community that escaped Egypt?

Let us not overlook our **first question**. This entire lesson which we are spending on the Word of God has to do with whether the Word of God is trustworthy or not. One of the obvious questions coming up in our studies is about the statement that 70 people (plus their wives and children) came into Egypt and 2,000,000 went out a few years later. There are many scholars, ill-equipped in terms of mathematical skills, who question whether this could happen. Kaiser in his lecture, though not in his two earlier books, comments on this. He draws on a conjecture by a famous English sociologist, you might call him, who says that population doubles every 25 years. Now that's a very rough, crude estimate because most populations are either faster or slower than that. Modern populations are mainly much slower, but in populations where birth control does not take place on a mass basis, 25-year doubling is not an unusual thing.

The effect of doubling in 25 years is 2.81% growth per year. Now most people couldn't figure that out, although here is one way you could understand the value of such a calculation. If you put \$1000 in the bank, the bank may say, "Guess what? We can double your money in 25 years." What are they telling you? If you don't know how to figure that out, you might be interested to know that they're offering you 2.81% interest. While that is not very good interest on money in a bank, it is a pretty good population growth rate.

However, you don't even need 2.81% growth rate, or say, 25-year doubling, for 70 people to become 2,000,000 in 430 years. In fact, first of all, the 70 people were all married and had children. And so you had more than 70 to begin with. And supposing you start with 200 people, you get millions and millions of people—more like 20 million people in 430 years, using the 25-year doubling rate. So, in our materials we have suggested that other, slower growth rates are still readily feasible in terms of explaining this kind of growth rate.

Now, I realize that the credibility of the Bible does not consist or is not produced by its veracity in technicalities in the existing copies which we have. However, it is even more important to realize

that probably no other body of literature, no other document so extensive, was ever translated that long ago. You have to stop and think about the spiritual power behind this document and the spiritual power of the movement behind the document.

Consider the fact that this document was deemed essential for Jewish people in Alexandria who no longer spoke Hebrew or Aramaic; the fact that it became impressive then to people who never spoke Hebrew in the past—at all—that is to say, the Gentiles; the fact that such people crept into the synagogues, so to speak, and sat in the back rows in order to hear ultimately from this document; the fact that the synagogues handled this document, either the Hebrew or the Greek, in a very, very central manner. Think of the incredible spiritual and intellectual power of this document. That is a fact far more weighty than simply historical veracity and technical questions!

The impact it had shows up in the fact that when we open up our English Bibles, or our Dutch Bibles, or our Japanese Bibles—any of the modern Bibles, all of which are translated not by Jews but by Gentiles—they all carry with them this Gentile stamp, this LXX stamp. The LXX is the Gentile Bible, no matter what the language it is in, simply because of the incredible impact of that first missionary translation. Of course, it wasn't just a missionary translation; it was translated also for the benefit of Hebrews who now spoke Greek. In both cases the moving power of the document itself is very readily displayed.

It's interesting that Hogg points out that the areas into which migrating Jews were spread were virtually coterminous with the Greek-speaking areas. Thus, on the Day of Pentecost, as Jewish-related nations arrived, they all could probably understand Greek and were acquainted with the Septuagint. It is further quite possible, as we have said earlier in this class, that the Septuagint was used in Nazareth at the time of Christ, and that Jesus Himself was bilingual. One reason for this supposition, as we've mentioned earlier, is that as He traveled around He did not seem to have the need for a translator. When He and the disciples were in the Decapolis, which consisted of ten Greek-speaking cities, and were talking to the people, nobody needed to translate. It was just possible, then, that this amazing LXX translation was something that Jesus Himself was familiar with.

3. How does the present-day order of the "books" of the Bible shed light on the ancient influence of the LXX?

As I have said, the very order of the books of our English Bibles follows almost exactly the LXX order not the Hebrew order. This is one more impressive testimony of the ancient influence of that translation.

Now, if a translation can have such tremendous impact, what about the strategic significance of translations today? Most mission societies don't bother with translation. They say, "That's the task of the Bible Societies." Wycliffe Bible Translators came into existence with the idea of assisting all of the standard mission societies to get into the indigenous languages. They failed. Most of the standard mission societies felt they could deal in trade languages. Otherwise, it was too daunting a task. Mission societies working in Latin America employing Spanish (which is practically the same as English compared to the exotic American Indian languages) were undoubtedly overwhelmed at the very thought of trying to learn all those hundreds of incredibly difficult languages.

So, Wycliffe was forced to change its strategy and finally said, "Okay, if you're not going to translate the Bible, we will!" Today, at least half of all Bible translation in the world is being done by that one society that started out without the intention of translating the Bible themselves but simply supplying specialized training to the missionaries of existing societies.

However, it is still true that even today Bible translation is so much of a problem, technically and practically, that most mission societies do not have the resources for Bible translation.

There is another kind of problem facing translations. Even if a translation is done, it might be difficult to print it. In the country of Pakistan, for example, 40 million speak Urdu. That Urdu is a different Urdu from what the Christians in that part of the world speak; the Christians' Urdu is loaded down with Hindu words. In their translation of the New Testament, Hindu words come up. Even Hindu words for God are employed! And you can imagine how repulsive and objectionable this is to Muslims. So you say, "Why hasn't anyone translated the New Testament into the Sunni Muslim Urdu of northern Pakistan?" Well, they have. It has been translated; it's been sitting on the shelf now for over a decade. But the Pakistani Bible society, controlled by Christian believers with Hindu backgrounds, isn't willing to print it. They talk about it annually at their board meeting, I

understand, discussing that they might print it sometime. But they find it hard to spend Christian money to help the massive majority population which has been their oppressors for a thousand years.

This is a great tragedy, because to translate the Bible from one language to some other, or let's say from the original to some other language, is almost always a labor of love. It doesn't do you any good at all; there is no personal benefit that comes out of a person putting something into someone else's language. It seems always, by nature, missionary.

In the case of the LXX, God forced the Jews out of Palestine into places employing the Greek language, and then they, out of their own interest in the Bible, translated it for their own purposes.

Probably today there are many circumstances in missions where translations would have phenomenal impact. I think of one country, which I shall not name, where the New Testament was put into the colloquial language of many millions of people. It's not a country with any background at all in the Christian Scriptures, but this phenomenal book became an instant best-seller. Now perhaps hundreds of thousands of people are followers of Christ because the Word of God became accessible to them.

4. How does the ancient role of the LXX in a multi-cultural world give clues for modern missionary strategy?

So let's let the ancient event of translating the Old Testament into Greek become significant for us as we think about missionary activities today. Let's also realize this is not an event that simply took place before Christ. It was an event that undergirded the missionary movement of the

Jewish people. Yes, there was a very extensive missionary movement, which most Christians are unaware of, prior to the birth of Christ. And Paul the apostle simply picked up on that vehicle for his own missionary travels.

The reason why we are taking this up so early in this course is that every time we open up the Bible, whether it is Genesis or Exodus or Leviticus, we are dealing with a text that came to us through a very tortuous process. The earliest manuscripts we have of the Septuagint are centuries older than anything we have of the Hebrew. This doesn't mean that the Hebrew isn't the basic text. But it does mean that whatever damage the Hebrew incurred can be checked against the Syriac and principally the Septuagint, and other translations—even though in the modern seminary curriculum structure very, very little emphasis is given to this incredible translation. Practically all the key words of the New Testament come from the Septuagint. Eighty percent of all the quotations in the New Testament come not from the Hebrew but from the Septuagint. That itself is a mute testimony to the incredible importance of the labors of translation in the transmission of the gospel to the ends of the earth.