

HISTORY AND CHALLENGES IN BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

1. BRIEF HISTORY OF HEBREW SCRIPTURES AND INTERPRETATIONS

God's commands and the events in Genesis happened before Moses was born. Those commands and events were passed from generation to generation orally and maybe written on tablets of clay and stone as was the practice of the Ancient Near Eastern cultures then.

Under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, Moses put them together in the Book we have come to know as Genesis. Then he wrote the next 4 books (Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers and Deuteronomy). Genesis and those 4 books are known as the Pentateuch.

Now all the people gathered together as one man in the open square that was in front of the Water Gate; and they told Ezra the scribe to bring the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded Israel (Neh 8:1 NKJV).

The Levites were the first biblically recorded interpreters. As Ezra, the priest, read from the Book of the Law of Moses, which was in Hebrew, the Levites explained or interpreted it to the congregation.

Also Jeshua, Bani, Sherebiah, Jamin, Akkub, Shabbethai, Hodijah, Maaseiah, Kelita, Azariah, Jozabad, Hanan, Pelaiah, and the Levites, helped the people to understand the Law; and the people stood in their place. So they read distinctly from the book, in the Law of God; and they gave the sense, and helped them to understand the reading (Neh 8:7-9 NKJV).

"According to rabbinic tradition, this incident spawned a new Jewish institution, the Targum (i.e., reading and interpretation), an occasion one scholar deems "the birthday of Judaism" with the reading and explaining of the law of Moses at its center."¹

2. TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES INTO GREEK

About 285 BC, 70 Jewish scholars in Alexandria translated the Pentateuch from Hebrew to Greek. The rest of the Hebrew Scriptures were translated later. This compilation was called the Septuagint (Septuagint means 70) because the number of translators was 70. The Septuagint, also called the OT (Old Testament), became the Bible of the early Church.²

¹ William W. Klein, Craig L. Blomberg and Robert L. Hubbard Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation*, Third edition (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2017), 69.

² *Ibid.*, 70.

3. TRANSLATION AND COMPILATION OF OT AND NT SCRIPTURES IN LATIN

Apostolic writings (the gospels and epistles) circulated freely in the early church.

Jerome (AD 331-420) was the person who translated the OT, the Apostolic writings (NT) and the Apocrypha into Latin. Jerome's translation, called the Vulgate, became the official Bible of the Latin (Western Church) until the Reformation.

4. MODERN TRANSLATIONS

Jerome's "dynamic-paraphrase method of translation gave renderings that were not as accurate in reflecting"³ what were in the original languages. Hence modern translators prefer to translate directly from the ancient manuscripts (Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek).

More importantly, because these translators work in groups, individual biases are minimized.

5. CHALLENGES FOR THE 21ST CENTURY INTERPRETER

5.1 TIME

- It has been more than 1,900 years since the last book of the Bible was written.
- Many of the events in the OT happened thousands of years ago.
- The interpreter should have a good understanding of biblical worlds that are many thousands of years removed from his own time for an accurate interpretation.
- She (the interpreter) should have a good understanding of the processes involved in the writing, collating and translating of the various books of the Bible.
- A faithful interpretation has to reckon with those times when the sayings and events occurred and how subsequent generations preserved those writings/books.

5.2 CULTURE

- There are so many cultural differences in the 21st century world.
- Imagine how your own culture has changed in the last 100 years.
- Then, imagine how the aggregate of the world's cultures have changed in the last 100 years.

With those in mind, the interpreter

- has to navigate that distance between a 21 century very inter-connected (English is universally understood everywhere in the world) world with a world that was so disconnected (people groups were disconnected from each other in every way)--so many different languages, beliefs and ways of life.

³ Ibid., 88.

5.3 GEOGRAPHY

- The interpreter must try to understand the geography of the biblical world. This is a challenge since most of the empires and nations mentioned in the Bible no longer exist. Even cities and landscapes have changed; some have disappeared while others have emerged.
- Visiting those ancient places does help. However, the interpreter still has to match present landscapes with historical events.

6. INSPIRATION

All Scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness, (2Tim 3:16 NKJV)

While the challenges are many, to accurately interpret, the interpreter must be one who is both Spirit filled and faith-filled.

He or she must believe the following without doubting:

- The Holy Spirit breathed the words which Moses and other biblical authors spoke or wrote to their audience.
- The Holy Spirit inspired those who compiled the books of the Bible.
- The Holy Spirit inspired those that translated the various books of the Bible.
- The Holy Spirit inspired those who chose the books to be included in the Bible.
- The Holy Spirit interprets His word through only Spirit filled and faith-filled vessels seeking to advance God's mission.