

The Bible – From God To Man

By Allen Dvorak

We live in an age of privilege. For a long time after the close of the first century A.D., the average person would have been unlikely to possess a copy of the Scriptures. The cost of reproduction was just too expensive and thus copies of the Scriptures had to be shared! We, however, can enter virtually any religious bookstore and, for a few dollars, purchase a copy of the Word of God.

Have we actually purchased the Word of God? The question arises when we observe the multitude of versions or translations of the Bible which are available for purchase, versions with obvious and significant differences between them. The Bible certainly claims to be the very Word of God, a bold claim with far-reaching implications. If its claim can be sustained, the Bible is authoritative in every aspect of our lives. Naturally, we want to learn the will of God as accurately as possible so that we can be prepared for eternity. Which version of the Bible should we buy in order to be assured that we have access to God's Word?

We could simply assume that all the versions convey the Word of God and thus we can just choose the one easiest for us to read. Such an assumption is countered by the multitude of poorly translated versions. For example, the New World Translation, the "Bible" used by Jehovah's Witnesses, is a version containing a number of translation errors which serve to support the religious error taught by that group. The translation published by Reader's Digest is another example of a poor translation. Do we really want a condensation of the Bible?

Perhaps we should assume that the oldest versions are the most reliable, the most accurate. As future articles will demonstrate, antiquity does not guarantee reliability. How can we know which "Bible" to buy? Which version is an accurate translation of the original documents which make up the books of the New Testament?

Despite the possibility of using an inaccurate version, a version in our native language is necessary. The Old Testament was written almost exclusively in Hebrew. The New Testament was written in Greek. The average Bible student, however, is not fluent in either Hebrew or Greek.

The various versions available in our native language are the product of the work of textual critics. There are no existing original documents of any of the books of the Bible. Copies of the originals are all that we have. Textual critics compare these copies in order to determine the original text (more information on this in future articles) from which various translations have been made.

Unfortunately, an accurate text from which to translate does not guarantee a reliable translation. In their effort to make the language "modern," translators often "stray" from the actual meaning of the original text and they produce non-literal translations or the most general of all translations, a paraphrase. However, we must be careful of non-literal translations and paraphrases if we believe in the verbal inspiration of the Scriptures. If even the very words of the writers were guided by the Holy Spirit (see I Corinthians 2:7-13), as Bible students we want translators to provide us with a version which is as literal as practically possible.

Choosing a reliable version necessitates some understanding of the process of getting the Bible from inspired authors to modern man. That process can be divided into four stages: inspiration/revelation, canonization, transmission and translation.

The first stage in this process is the inspiration of the Scriptures. Inspiration describes how God revealed His will to human authors. As we survey the words of the biblical authors, we observe some specific claims about the divine revelation. The work of the Holy Spirit was to reveal the will of God (John 14:25-26; 15:26; 16:7-15). As

already noted, Paul's affirmation is that the Holy Spirit directed the very words to be used in the teaching/revealing of God's will (I Corinthians 2:7-13). Jesus had promised such guidance to His apostles (Matthew 10:19-20). The implication of divine authorship on a verbal level (the very words used) is that all Scripture is without error and perfectly harmonious (II Peter 1:20-21; II Timothy 3:15-17).

The second stage of the process is canonization, i.e. the recognition of which books are inspired and which are not. This part of the process was necessary because of the letters or epistles of the New Testament writers were not the only religious correspondence of the time. Clement of Rome is an example of a Christian who wrote an epistle to the church at Corinth, but he made no claim for divine inspiration. There are some books, known as apocrypha, which are of doubtful authenticity. Although the Catholic Church recognizes these books as canonical or inspired by God, other religious groups do not. The pseudepigrapha (literally "false witnesses?") are spurious books not considered canonical by anyone. This series of articles is not primarily concerned with this stage and so we will assume that the early church recognized the proper books.

The third stage of the process is the transmission of the inspired documents through the intervening centuries from the first to the present. Even if all modern Christians could read Koine Greek (the language of the New Testament) fluently, the fact still remains that the original documents were written on perishable materials, and, to our knowledge, no longer exist.

That's probably just as well. What would certainly have happened if the original documents had been preserved? Witness the Catholic Church's use of "sacred relics"! The autograph copies (the original documents) would have been put under glass and people perhaps would have been more impressed with the papyrus document than the message conveyed by the document. God could have miraculously preserved the autograph copies, but He chose instead to preserve His word in written form by natural means – the same means by which all ancient documents are transmitted – scribal copies.

Unfortunately, the scribes who copied those documents were not guided by God. It is important to remember that the original authors were inspired, but there is no promise from God that the scribes who would subsequently copy the Scriptures would likewise be guided by the Holy Spirit so that their copies were error-free. It is a fact that copying, the method of duplication before the printing press, permits and even makes inevitable the committing of errors.

This article is the first of a series which will examine the transmission and translation of Scriptures. Future articles will demonstrate that we can have confidence in the accurate transmission of the Scriptures and provide some details about the Greek texts behind the various versions.