

Why New Bible Translations Matter: An Example

A Christian magazine recently asked readers to comment on why we need new translations of the Bible from time to time. English Bible translations are a subject dear to my heart, and I shared a brief response for that magazine. Here on the blog I would like to give a slightly longer explanation. While I am arguing that it is important to make regular use of a modern English translation of the Bible, it should be noted that not all translations are equal. Some modern translations on the market are not well-suited to use as your primary Bible because they employ a very loose and interpretive method of translation. But, with that caveat aside, I begin by diving into a fascinating difference between newer and older English translations.

First, compare these two translations of Titus 2:13 which were released less than fifty years apart.

ASV: *looking for the blessed hope and appearing of the glory of **the great God and our Saviour** Jesus Christ; (1901)*

RSV: *awaiting our blessed hope, the appearing of the glory of **our great God and Savior** Jesus Christ, (NT released 1946)*

Does this passage speak of both the Father and of Jesus? Or does it speak of Jesus as our “God and Savior”? Older English translations seem to refer to both the Father and the Son. More recent translations of this passage explicitly call Jesus “our great God.”

Of course, we don’t need modern translations to know that Jesus is a fully divine person of the Trinity. But to see the phrase “**our great God and Savior Jesus Christ**” is a glorious affirmation for the Christian, and it is quite jarring for those who deny the deity of Christ. Jehovah’s Witnesses, for example, have their own translation and do not include that phrase.

The story begins in the late 1700’s with Granville Sharp, an early British abolitionist and man of many interests. In his day there were many unitarians who denied the Trinity and the deity of Jesus. Sharp endeavored to show that the New Testament affirmed the deity of Christ. One

fruit of his study was a list of passages which he believed affirmed the deity of Christ much more explicitly than the current English Bible indicated. Titus 2:13 is a passage where Sharp's interpretation stood the test of time, although it was not until the 1900's that his insight was incorporated into our Bibles.

While most of us have no need to personally understand Sharp's rule, looking at a few details will help us appreciate his work, and the work of other scholars. Behind the nice, polished Bible translations we read lies a lot of detailed scholarly work.

Sharp's rule concerns Greek phrases of a very specific form: **Article noun1 kai noun2**, where both nouns are the same grammatical case.

For our purposes we can think of this as:

"The _____ and _____"

For the rule to apply, both blanks must be filled in with singular nouns, which refer to persons but are not proper names. Think about it: Granville Sharp had to be a very observant person to pick up on a pattern that detailed!

Now for the upshot: Sharp's rule says that when those detailed conditions are met, the phrase describes only one person. Thus the passage at the beginning of this post does not concern two persons (the Father and the Son), but one person Jesus, who is our great God and Savior.

Sharp's rule is about biblical Greek, not about English. An English phrase like "the mayor and police chief" would likely refer to two different people. However biblical phrases like "the great God and Savior of us" (Titus 2:13) and "the God of us and Savior" (2 Peter 1:1) mean that the very same person is both God and Savior.

Again, my point is not to make us all study biblical Greek (as cool as that would be!), but to help us appreciate detailed scholarship. It took significant insight for Granville Sharp to discover this rule and tremendous work on the part of other scholars to verify it.

So, why do we need new English translations of the scripture from time to time? One reason is to incorporate the work of men like Granville Sharp. We should not need a commentary to learn that Paul referred to Jesus as "our great God and Savior." That phrase belongs on the

pages of our Bibles.

Today, the King James Version is the traditional translation, but in 1611 it was the new translation, with various others on the market. In a preface, the translators explained why we need new translations from time to time. They emphasized that since the scriptures are supremely important, we must use supreme diligence to translate them as well as we can. A scholar should, in their words, “assay whether my talent in the knowledge of the tongues may be profitable in any measure to God’s Church” (§11, 11). This diligence, they say, leads to careful revisions of Bible translations. They give examples from ancient Bible translators and then note that regular books written in foreign languages “have been gone over again and again” by various translators. They conclude that the scriptures are much more worthy of our efforts at translation.

Now, if this cost may be bestowed upon the gourd, which affordeth us a little shade, and which to-day flourisheth but to-morrow is cut down, what may we bestow, nay, what ought we not to bestow, upon the vine, the fruit whereof maketh glad the conscience of man, and the stem whereof abideth forever? And this is the Word of God, which we translate. (§12, 10-12)

The Bible is important: Study it! The Bible is important and scholars have worked hard to translate it well: take advantage of that and include good modern translations in your Bible study!

Sources:

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The Translators to the Reader (Preface to the King James Version)
[https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_\(King_James\)/Preface](https://en.wikisource.org/wiki/Bible_(King_James)/Preface)

“Granville Sharp.” Wikipedia https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Granville_Sharp accessed 5/29/2020

1. *This rendering is quite consistent from the mid-twentieth century onward. The RSV and NRSV offer a footnote suggesting the older rendering as a possibility, but most versions do not.*

2. *I checked the online edition of the New World Translation hosted at www.jw.org on 5/25/2020.*