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The Language of the Scriptures
Paul V.M. Flesher

While traveling last week through the Frankfurt Germany airport, I noticed the advertisements were in German, as one would expect, as well as in English. At first I was puzzled, for I could not imagine that the number of Americans and British going through the airport was significantly more than the French or Dutch, for whom I saw no ads. Then I realized that the English ads were not for native English speakers, but for non-German speakers. For whatever their first language, most people from Europe or the Middle East now speak English as a second (or third) language. English has become an international language used for communication by people of nearly all language backgrounds.

The adoption of a single language for widespread use has happened many times in history. In the ancient Middle East, languages such as Greek and Aramaic (now relatively unknown) rose not only to widespread use, but even replaced local languages. For Jews living during the few centuries before and after the time of Jesus, the loss of widespread knowledge of Hebrew to these languages created a serious problem for understanding their sacred scriptures, the Hebrew Bible, known to Christians as the Old Testament.

For the large community of Jews living in Egypt during the third and second centuries B.C., Greek replaced not only the knowledge of Hebrew, but the local Egyptian language. Since knowledge of Hebrew was almost totally lost, the community decided to translate its Scriptures into Greek. Once this was done, Egyptian Jews used their translation quite happily.

But when the Jews of Jerusalem, who still knew Hebrew, read the Greek translation, they saw many differences in wording between the Greek and the Hebrew, and criticized the

Egyptian Jews for this. Philo Judeas, a highly-educated Egyptian Jew, responded by telling the story of the translation's creation. He told of 70 men, learned in Greek and Hebrew, who each wrote a separate translation while deep in prayer with God. These translations were all the same, word for word, and Philo argued that God had inspired the Greek translation as much as he inspired the original Hebrew text. Thus the new translation, now known as the Septuagint, was a reliable, independent witness of God's words.

In Palestine, the situation was different, for the rise of Aramaic as the main language was accompanied by an increased respect for the sacred character of Scripture. The Palestinian Jews still had to write an Aramaic translation so that they could understand their holy writings, but they did not abandon the original text. Instead, in the synagogue, the reading of the Aramaic translation was preceded by and subordinated to the reading of the Hebrew Bible. By stylizing the presentation of the scriptures in this fashion, the people were reminded that the translation was not the Hebrew Bible, even though it was what they could understand.

The Septuagint model is followed in the modern Christian world as English translations are seen as valid substitutions for the Bible in its original languages. Sometimes, that substitution is raised almost to a holy standing, as is illustrated by the woman who declared "If the King James was good enough for St. Paul, it is good enough for me!" Although her comment is rather silly, in our modern world the translation becomes as valid a basis for interpretation as the original texts of the Scriptures and, so believers hold, a guide for practice and belief.