

Chapter Two

GARBLED TRANSMISSION?

Role of the Scripture Writers and Translators

At first, Christians gave little thought to their own history. The Lord would return soon, they believed, and put an end to all history. When men give up their jobs, gaze into the heavens, and look for the end of the world, they write no history. Why record the past if there will be no one to remember it?

— Robert Wilken
(*Myth of Christian Beginnings*, 1971)

We tend to think of the early Christians as pious men who knew that they were helping to form and spread a religion which would become the great force that it is today. We assume that the disciples Matthew, Mark, Luke and John wrote the Gospels as tools to be used in the early spread of that religion. It comes as a surprise to most people that the first writings to circulate among early Christians were Paul's letters.

In fact, much of what we recognize today as the basic teachings of Christianity came to us through Paul, originally known as Saul of Tarsus. Though he never met Jesus, he was the major missionary to the gentiles in the years immediately following the crucifixion.

His letters were written to various different congregations, often trying to solve localized problems, or to consolidate the faithful into one cohesive congregation, rather than to document and spread the teachings of Jesus. For the early Christians, the Kingdom of God was very close at hand. They expected it at any time. These expectations undoubtedly changed the nature of the transmission of Jesus' teachings.

Any study of Christian doctrines must deal with the issues involved in that transmission, for it is only through the transmission process that we have any idea what Jesus taught.

TEACHINGS COME SECONDHAND

Frank W. Beare in the Introduction of his book *THE EARLIEST RECORDS OF JESUS* (Abingdon Press, 1962, pp. 16, 18) gives us a glimpse of the problems faced right from the beginning by anybody researching in the field:

In any serious study of the Gospels, we have always to keep in mind that Jesus himself left nothing in writing, and that the earliest records of his career which have come down to us were not put into writing until about forty years after his death. All our knowledge of him is drawn from the deposit of a tradition which was transmitted for several decades by word of mouth. We are therefore obliged to raise the question of the relationship between the documents as we have them and the events and sayings which they report. For it must be realized that in a generation or more of oral transmission, sayings and stories do not remain unchanged. Once they have been committed to writing, they are to some degree stabilized, as it were; though even at this stage, we have to observe that Luke and Matthew do not shrink from altering the Marcan record which they are both using....

We cannot too lightly assume that what the earliest Christians thought worth preserving would be identical with what we ourselves would regard as most important, or even that it would reflect essentially what Jesus himself regarded as central to his message. It must be regarded as possible that 'Jesus was over the heads of his reporters,' and we shall indeed find indications in the Gospels themselves that he from time to time manifested keen disappointment and even a certain impatience with the lack of understanding shown by his immediate disciples...it is not at all unlikely that the...people who followed him may not have been capable of taking in all the range of his thought, and communicating it clearly to others.

Bearé's first point is that sayings and stories change as they are passed by word of mouth from person to person and generation to generation. To illustrate, do you remember the children's game "Telephone"? Everyone sits in a circle and one person whispers something into the ear of the next person. The message is passed from ear to ear until it comes back to the person who first whispered it. By the time it gets back to the original source, it is totally different from the original message, causing much amazement and laughter.

We know from the above short history of the Gospels that most, if not all, of the initial transmission was oral, and that the Gospels were not written down until several years (perhaps as many as forty or fifty years for the earliest—the Gospel of Matthew) had passed after Jesus' departure. In that period of time, many human errors could have entered the transmission, and indeed did.

To make things more difficult, there are variations among ancient manuscripts of the same material. Sometimes these variations are minor, but sometimes they are substantial. Thus, even committing the transmission to writing did not solve all the problems.

Bearé's second point is that we do not know that the apostles always understood Jesus and correctly and clearly transmitted his teachings. To expand that, the process of attempting to communicate clearly to others did not stop with the initial writing of the gospels. The revising and 'clarifying' continues even to this day. On almost every page of any annotated English version of the New Testament, there are variant readings from ancient texts for one or more verses.

Once the Gospels were committed to writing, they were still fragmented and difficult to come by, as the following quote from Dr. George Lamsa demonstrates (*NEW TESTAMENT ORIGIN*, Aramaic Bible Society, Inc., no date given, p.65):

Even today in Turkey and Persia complete manuscripts of the Scriptures are very rare. Scrolls containing portions of the Bible are found in the possession of various families. In some

districts one portion may be found in one village and the other completing portions perhaps in towns many miles away. When family ties are broken, the scrolls books are divided among the members. The student of the Bible must remember that in Jesus' day libraries, printing presses, and paper were unknown and that sacred writings were available only to the priests, rich men, and rulers.

This continued unavailability of written scripture would have caused oral transmission to be an important factor in the developing doctrines and attitudes of Christianity, even after the Gospels were recorded. This fact may also help explain some of the differences among manuscripts.

In any case, it is certain that there is a great variability among manuscripts of the Gospels.

AUTHENTICITY NEVER KNOWN

With so much variation among manuscripts, the absolute authenticity of any text, even the most venerable manuscripts, is always in question. The Codex Vaticanus is a prime example of this. The facsimile reproductions edited by the Vatican City in 1965 include an accompanying editorial note with the following information:

Several centuries after it was copied, a scribe inked over all the letters except those he thought were a mistake.... The different hands that corrected and annotated the manuscript over the centuries have not yet been definitely discerned; a certain number of corrections were undoubtedly made when the text was inked over.

Sir Frederic Kenyon lists some of the important variations in the manuscripts of the Gospels (*OUR BIBLE AND THE ANCIENT MANUSCRIPTS*, Harper and Brothers, 1958, pp. 48-49):

The Doxology of the Lord's Prayer is omitted in the oldest copies of Matt. vi. 13; several copies omit Matt. xvi. 2, 3 altogether; a long additional passage is sometimes found after Matt. xx 28; the last twelve verses of St. Mark are omitted altogether by the two oldest copies of the original Greek; one very ancient authority inserts an additional incident after Luke vi. 4, while it alters the account of the institution of the Lord's Supper in Luke xxii. 19, 20, and omits altogether Peter's visit to the sepulcher in xxiv. 12, and several other details of the Resurrection; the version of the Lord's Prayer in Luke xi. 2-4 is much abbreviated in many copies; the incident of the Bloody Sweat is omitted in xxii. 43, 44, as also is the word from the Cross, "Father, forgive them", in xxiii. 34; the mention of the descent of an angel to cause the moving of the waters of Bethesda is entirely absent from the oldest copies of John v. 4, and all the best authorities omit the incident of the woman taken in adultery in vii. 53-viii. 11. Besides the larger discrepancies, such as these, there is scarcely a verse in which there is not some variation of phrase in some copies. No one can say that these additions or omissions or alterations are matters of mere indifference.

These variations and possible distortions are not "matters of mere indifference" because many Christian beliefs are based on a small portion of the Bible. If those portions have been distorted or misunderstood, then the beliefs themselves may actually go against the teachings of Jesus.

If we are trying to worship God with all our heart, all our mind, all our soul, and all our strength, then some traditional Christian beliefs may be getting in our way, without our even being aware of it.

HUMAN ERRORS

Why are there so many variations in the manuscripts? As one possible answer, Kenyon goes on to describe the types of errors introduced into manuscripts of the Gospels by the copyists. He divides them into three basic types. The first type of error has to do with the mechanics of hand copying long documents. Words with similar sounds or spellings are easily confused, letters and words can easily be skipped and abbreviations or contractions can be misunderstood. We must remember that hand copying, unlike touch typing, requires constant looking from the original to the new copy. When the same words are used in different lines, the copyist may pick up again at the wrong occurrence of the words, thus omitting intervening text.

Given the fact that there were no spaces between words, little punctuation, and no difference between capital and lower case letters in ancient manuscripts, it is easy to see how marginal notes might have been mistaken for part of the scripture, and included as such. Poor lighting, adverse working conditions and poor nutrition undoubtedly plagued the copyists, making their task more difficult and prone to error.

Kenyon describes a second type of error that he calls 'Errors of the Mind.' This is the intentional or unintentional harmonizing of two similar passages. This happens especially easily when two passages contain the same words, but in a different order. If one is more familiar with one order, it is easy to use that order on both passages without even realizing one is doing so.

The final type of textual alteration that Kenyon discusses is the deliberate type. These are the most dangerous, and most likely to affect doctrinal issues.

In spite of Kenyon's assertion that none of the fundamental Christian doctrines is dependent on a disputed reading, he states (Ibid p. 52):

At times reverential and dogmatic motives have influenced the transmission of the text. Thus, e.g., the incident of the ministering Angel and the Bloody Sweat in Gethsemane, Luke xxii:43-44, is omitted by a number of MSS (including Vaticanus) and representatives of the version because, it might seem, these verses were inconsistent with the divinity of Christ.

Clearly, in some cases, important doctrines are affected by disputed readings.

Then, not only were the original documents subject to corruption in copying, but there were also the inevitable changes introduced as they were translated from language to language. Every person working on a translation, or the revision of one, naturally introduces changes as they try to make it more correct or clearer. The changes introduced depend on that person's body of knowledge, viewpoint and grasp of the languages involved.

KING JAMES AS A CASE IN POINT

There are always major difficulties in translating from one language to another. Often idioms and even individual words are colored by the culture which produced them. This makes direct translation impossible, and unless the translator is very familiar with the cultural context, the attempted translation may be far from the original flavor and intent. Communicating Hebrew/Aramaic ideas and outlook in such a culturally alien language as Greek poses special problems, of which the early translators may not have always been aware. All of these problems are compounded when translations are again translated, as was the case for the gospels.

The majority of English speaking Protestants use the King James translation in one of its many revisions. It is often considered the standard translation. George Lamsa has a nice look at the history of the King James version in the introduction to his own 1957 translation of the Bible (*THE HOLY BIBLE, FROM ANCIENT EASTERN MANUSCRIPTS*. A.J. Holman Co, 1957):

When the King James translation was made, western scholars had no access to the East as we have today. In the 16th century, A.D., the Turkish empire had extended its borders as far as Vienna...the Scriptures in Aramaic were unknown in Europe. The only resource scholars had was to Latin and to a few portions of Greek manuscripts.... It is a miracle that the King James' translators were able to produce such a remarkable translation from sources available in this dark period of European history. Even fifty years ago, the knowledge of Western scholars relative to the Eastern Scriptures in Aramaic and the Christian Church in the East was conjectural. Moreover, these scholars knew very little of the Eastern customs and manners in which the Biblical literature was nurtured.

All of these factors have led to some definite problems in the translation. Johannes Lehmann gives a very good example of the lack of understanding that can occur in trying to translate from culturally different languages. (See his Rabbi J. Stein and Day, New York, 1971.)He refers to the following verse:

On the third day there was a wedding at Cana in Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there.

[John 2:1]

What is this third day? The third day after what? Some translators have omitted the reference to the day at all, others have tried to make it the third day after the wedding. But there is a very simple explanation. Except for the Sabbath, Jewish days do not have names. They are numbered from the Sabbath. Thus the third day is our Tuesday.

In the above example, the effect of the translation is unimportant. But in some cases, the whole meaning of the passage has been changed. Lamsa cites a good example of the dramatic reversal of meaning:

In the King James version, we read in Numbers 25:4:

“And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Take all the heads of the people, and hang them up before the Lord against the sun, that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from Israel.’”

The Aramaic reads:

“And the Lord said unto Moses, ‘Take all the chiefs of the people and expose them before the Lord in the daylight that the fierce anger of the Lord may be turned away from the children of Israel.’ ”

The difference between exposing the corruption of a group’s chiefs, and hanging them or their heads before God is quite dramatic.

There is yet another example of dramatic translational distortion in the King James version. This time it has contributed to the doctrine of the divinity of Jesus. It has to do with the crucial word *worship*. Here is the King James version of Matthew 2:1-2 and 2:7-8:

*Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judaea in the days of Herod the King, behold, there came wise men from the East to Jerusalem, saying, Where is he that is born king of the Jews? for we have seen his star in the east, and are come to **worship** him.*

[Matthew 2:1-2]

Then Herod, when he had privily called the wise men, enquired of them diligently what time the star appeared. And he sent them to Bethlehem, and said, Go and search diligently for the young child; and when ye have found him, bring me word again, that I may come and worship him also.

[Matthew 2:7-8]

Let us now compare these same verses as translated in the *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE*, which is a recent translation drawing from the oldest documents available to the translators, rather than being a revision of earlier translations as the King James version is:

After Jesus’ birth in Bethlehem of Judea during the reign of King Herod, astrologers from the east arrived one day in Jerusalem inquiring, “Where is the newborn king of the Jews? We observed his star at its rising and have come to pay him homage.”

[Matthew 2:1-2]

Herod called the astrologers aside and found out from them the exact time of the star’s appearance. Then he sent them to Bethlehem, after having instructed them: “Go and get detailed information about the child. When you have found him, report your findings to me so that I may go and offer him homage too.”

[Matthew 2:7-8]

Notice that the King James version tells us that the Magi and Herod spoke of ‘*worshipping*’ the Christ child, while the New American Bible says they wanted to ‘*pay homage*’ to him. How do we know that “*pay homage*” is more correct than “*worship*,” or vice versa?

First, we know that in general the New American Bible is a more current and scholarly translation than the King James version. This is not to belittle the effort put into the King James version, but to simply reiterate Lamsa's point that there have been great strides in Bible scholarship in the four centuries which have passed since it was produced.

Furthermore, it makes more sense that Herod would say he wished to pay homage to the one he calls "*king of the Jews*," rather than wanting to worship him. Homage is due to a king; worship is due to one you consider divine.

TRANSLATION OF 'WORSHIP' AS AN EXAMPLE

The human tendency is to introduce one's own understanding into a translation. This constitutes a major pitfall in any translation, but in scriptural translation it has wide-ranging consequences, since it affects the religious doctrine upheld by millions of people.

There is another example of this translation error found in both the King James and *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* versions of John 9:38.

When Jesus heard of his expulsion, he sought him out and asked him, "Do you believe in the Son of Man?" He answered, "Who is he, sir, that I may believe in him?" "You have seen him," Jesus replied. "He is speaking to you now." "I do believe, Lord," he said, and he bowed down to worship him.

[John 9:35-38]

An authority on the Bible and its original language, George Lamsa, explains the crucial word "worship" as it occurs specifically here in John 9:38. In his book *GOSPEL LIGHT* (1936 edition, p. 353), Lamsa writes:

The Aramaic word **sagad**, worship, also means to bend or to kneel down. Easterners in greeting each other generally bow the head or bend down. When a ruler or holy man is greeted, the people kneel before him. "He worshipped him" does not imply that he worshipped Jesus as one who worshipped God. Such an act would have been regarded as sacrilegious and a breach of the first commandment in the eyes of the Jews and the man might have been stoned. But he knelt before him in token of homage and gratitude. This is also a sign of self-surrender and loyalty. The blind man worshipped Jesus in acknowledgment of his divine power and in appreciation of his compassion on him in opening his eyes. He had no knowledge of the claims of Jesus nor was he interested in his teachings, but he was convinced by the miracle performed that he must be a holy man and one empowered by God.

It is noteworthy that, in addition to the translation error discussed above, a footnote in the *NEW AMERICAN BIBLE* points out another problem with this verse:

9:38 This verse, omitted in important MSS, may be an addition for a baptismal liturgy.

In other words, John 9:38, stating that the man "*bowed down to worship Jesus*" was probably added to the scriptural text. The indication is that it was added as part of the passage's use in the liturgy used for a baptism.

EXAMPLE OF 'RACIAL' BIAS

There are many other instances of human introduced bias throughout the Bible. In Genesis, for example, there is a clear illustration of 'racial' bias as shown in these verses from the King James version:

And Hagar bare Abram a son: and Abram called his son's name, which Hagar bare, Ishmael. And Abram was fourscore and six years old, when Hagar bare Ishmael to Abram.

[Genesis 16:15-16]

For Sarah conceived, and bare Abraham a son in his old age, at the set time of which God had spoken to him. And Abraham called the name of his son that was born unto him, whom Sarah bare to him, Isaac. And Abraham circumcised his son Isaac being eight days old, as God had commanded him. And Abraham was an hundred years old when his son Isaac was born unto him.

[Genesis 21:2-5]

This means that Ishmael was fourteen years old when Isaac was born.

And it came to pass after these things, that God did tempt Abraham, and said unto him, Abraham: and he said, Behold, here I am. And he said, Take now thy son, thine only son Isaac, whom thou lovest, and get thee unto the land of Moriah; and offer him there for a burnt offering upon one of the mountains which I will tell thee of.

[Genesis 22:1-2]

But we know that Isaac was never the only son of Abraham; Ishmael was Abraham's only son for 14 years until Isaac was born. Thus, we see here that the Jewish writer wanted to bestow the honor upon Isaac, his ancestor.

Some have raised the possibility that Ishmael might not be considered a son of Abraham, since his mother, Hagar, was an Egyptian slave. However, we find that the scripture has considered Ishmael to be a son of Abraham, up until Abraham's death:

And these are the days of the years of Abraham's life which he lived, an hundred threescore and fifteen years. Then Abraham gave up the ghost, and died in a good old age, an old man, and full of years: and was gathered to his people. And his sons Isaac and Ishmael buried him in the cave of Machpelah....

[Genesis 25:7-9]

The above illustration, though it is not from the New Testament, shows how easily human prejudices can enter into the scripture and become accepted as the truth, even when they are contradictory. This is very important for us to examine. While we certainly

do not want to discard the Bible, with all its great wisdom and comfort, we must be aware of the ways in which it may have been changed.

HISTORY OF THE GOSPELS

A review of the general history of the Gospels may help us understand the inconsistencies we observe.

As mentioned before, it comes as a surprise to most people that the first religious writings of the early Christians were Paul's letters. These letters occupied a prevalent position long before the Gospels. It was not until late in the second century that the four Gospels were officially accepted by the Church as genuine, thus becoming part of the canon.

Each of these four canonic Gospels went through its own vicissitudes. For example, in its *"Introduction to the Books of the New Testament,"* THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE (Ibid, p. xxxiv) notes that there were probably several Greek translations of the early collection attributed to Matthew. The introduction to the Gospel according to John is even more telling:

...It should be remembered that for the ancients authorship was a much broader concept than it is today. In their time a man could be called the "author" of a work if he was the authority behind it, even though he did not write it. Modern critical analysis makes it difficult to accept that the fourth gospel as it now stands was written by one man. Chapter 21 seems to have been added after the gospel was completed; it exhibits a Greek style somewhat different from the rest of the work...Within the gospel itself there are signs of some disorder; e.g., there are two endings to Jesus' discourse at the Last Supper.

[NEW AMERICAN BIBLE, p. xxxvii]

The footnote goes on to state a widely accepted theory that the Gospel of John was actually written by someone other than John, probably his disciple, and then later edited by another disciple. How much, if any, direct input actually came from John is impossible to know.

Frank Beare goes even further and declares all the gospels to be anonymous, with their traditional names being "second-century guesses."

During the period in which the church was organized there was an abundance of literature with widely divergent views of Jesus. Church officials set about deciding on the officially acceptable materials. As many as one hundred gospels were excluded, and only the four we have today were retained to make up the "Canon." Needless to say, only gospels that agreed with the Church's views at that time were canonized. This is especially significant when we recall that the Church had become a political, not just a religious, establishment during the second century. The canonization of four Gospels, rather than just one, indicates that there were some compromises to satisfy the wide range of divergent views that must have been in the scores of gospels that existed at that time. If the church authorities had agreed on everything, we would have ended up with only one authorized Gospel, the Gospel of Jesus.

Marcion of Sinope founded a Gnostic movement around 140 A.D. He acknowledged the Gospel of Luke as the only authentic Gospel. He believed that Luke, who was almost certainly a non-Jew, was the spokesman for Paul. Marcion exerted tremendous pressure upon the ecclesiastic authorities to accept only Luke. Since he was an ardent enemy of the Jews, he rejected the whole of the Old Testament. The Church, however, declared Marcion a heretic and put in its canon all the Epistles of Paul. In addition, they included the other canonized Gospels, Luke's Acts of the Apostles, and other works.

It was not until the councils of Hippo Regius (A.D. 393) and Carthage (A.D. 397) that the contents of the New Testament were solidified. Up until that time, what was accepted by the Church as authentic scripture varied. Some works that were then excluded are now accepted as part of the New Testament, and vice versa.

For almost four centuries after Jesus, the Christian scripture was not put into any definite order. The oldest available manuscripts of the gospels date from the fourth century. Older documents (e.g., papyri from the First to Third Century) contain no more than small fragments of the gospels.

The two oldest parchment manuscripts are not even in the language of Jesus; they are in Fourth century Greek. They are the Codex Vaticanus, now preserved in the Vatican library, and the Codex Sinaiticus, which was discovered in the monastery of St. Catherine on Mount Sinai and is now preserved in the British Museum, London. This second manuscript contains two apocryphal works. The place of discovery of Codex Vaticanus is unknown.

INCONSISTENCIES LEAD TO DOUBT

Many critical readers of the Bible find borrowing, inconsistency and contradiction among the scriptures. A typical example of this general disillusionment is found in Carl Sagan's best selling novel of the 1980's, entitled *CONTACT* (Simon and Schuster, 1985, p. 30). Sagan's heroine points out serious contradictions in the New Testament which led her to question its divine inspiration:

When they came to the New Testament, Ellie's agitation increased. Matthew and Luke traced the ancestral line of Jesus back to King David. But for Matthew there were twenty-eight generations between David and Jesus; for Luke forty-three. There were almost no names common to the two lists. How could both Matthew and Luke be the Word of God? The contradictory genealogies seemed to Ellie a transparent attempt to fit the Isianic prophecy after the event-cooking the data, it was called in chemistry lab.

The problem of Jesus' genealogy and its inconsistencies was also evidently noted by the scribe working on the fifth or sixth century Codex Bezae, now in the Cambridge University Library. This enterprising cleric put Matthew's genealogy into Luke, padding it where necessary!

With such discrepancies among manuscripts of the Gospels, and among the accepted Gospels themselves, it is impossible to decide which versions are the closest to the

original truth. Perhaps in the future, discoveries of new manuscripts will give us a closer approximation.

CONCLUSION

In summary, we have discussed several sources of error in the Bible as it exists today:

1. The natural changes that take place over an extended period of oral transmission;
2. Errors in the original transmission due to the lack of understanding of Jesus' intent;
3. Copying errors resulting from the tedious process of hand copying, which was the only means of reproduction for the centuries before the invention of the printing press;
4. Translation errors resulting from the lack of understanding of linguistic rules, grammar and idioms, and of the culture;
5. Errors resulting from the translator's unconscious bias toward personal convictions, i.e., human bias;
6. Intentional innovation: conscious additions to the scripture for prejudicial, political or other reasons.

The importance of these errors lies in their effect on the basic doctrines of Christianity. As we have seen in this chapter, and will see even more clearly in future chapters, verses that seem to support some of the fundamental doctrines of today's Christianity may well be mistranslated or taken out of their cultural and temporal context, thus giving a distorted picture of the original teachings of Jesus.

This may be discouraging to searching Christians. It should not be. Though humans may have introduced distortion, none of this possible distortion affects the fact that two thousand years ago a man walked on earth, delivering a message of hope and strength. He spoke of the coming Kingdom of God, and how to gain admission to it. He taught us how to love and worship God with our whole beings, and thus win the prize of redemption.

No human interference can ever change the essential truth of Christ's message, but clearly discerning it from our human concepts may seem almost impossible. A look at some of the basic doctrines of Christianity may help clarify the issue.