



## Which Translation is Best?

by Dr. Charley Dewberry

As I was preparing for Gutenberg's 2015 Summer Institute, "Reunion: *Tanakh* and the Gospel of Matthew," I found myself spending more time than I ever have with the Septuagint. This Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures (*Tanakh*) has mostly languished on my shelf since I was in McKenzie Study Center's School of Exegesis during the 1980s. Once in a while I have checked a particular Greek word or verse in the Septuagint, but otherwise I have rarely used it. I had not thought about the Septuagint and its role in understanding the Scriptures, and going into the Summer Institute, I assumed nothing was to be gained by using it. Rather, the way to understand the Scriptures is to read them in their original languages, to get as close as possible to the original text written by the biblical author. Any translation is a step away from that goal. And so my goal was to work with the text copied from the original document in its original language. The Hebrew text is copied from the original source, and though errors can creep in during copying, by analyzing the copies we can get very close to the original, whereas studying a translation is much more complex and difficult. But thinking about the Septuagint and how the Apostles used it forced me to think about copies of original source documents versus translations of those documents, and it changed my view of the role of translations in understanding the Scriptures.

The Septuagint is a translation of the Hebrew Scriptures done at the library in

Alexandria, Egypt, in the third century BC during the reign of Ptolemy II. The name comes from the Latin for "seventy" because, supposedly, seventy or seventy-two translators (six from each of the twelve tribes of Israel) translated the Hebrew Bible (*Tanakh*) into Greek. The translation was made because Jews were spread throughout the eastern Mediterranean area, and the first language of many of them was Koiné Greek, which had become the dominant language when Alexander the Great had conquered the eastern Mediterranean basin and the Middle East all the way to India.

The Septuagint was widely used at the time of Jesus. In preparing for the Summer Institute, I noticed that sometimes Matthew was clearly referring to the Septuagint translation when he referenced sections of Scripture. He was not the only apostle to do so. The author of Hebrews (presumably Paul) was clearly quoting Scripture from the Septuagint. I found it curious that the Apostles used the Septuagint rather than the *Tanakh*. Wouldn't the Hebrew text be closer to the original manuscript? But as I began to think about this, I realized that the relationship between copies and a translation is not as simple as I imagined. My thinking about translations was overly simplistic and probably wrong. I will illustrate the main issues concerning the Septuagint by referring to the book of Hebrews.

Hebrews was written to Jews dispersed throughout the Roman Empire. The fact that it is written in Koiné Greek is no surprise, as it was the first language of many Jews at



### Fall CAPS Courses

Dr. David Crabtree will offer the following courses this fall:

- Translation of Acts
- Deuteronomy
- Josephus' *The Jewish War* (2nd half)

For more information, contact the GC office or go to [www.gutenberg.edu](http://www.gutenberg.edu).

this time. A number of Scripture references quoted in the book of Hebrews are from the Septuagint. This also should not be a surprise, as it is likely that the audience for Hebrews had been hearing the Scriptures read in the synagogues from the Septuagint. The author of Hebrew's use of the Septuagint seems to make sense, as it was the most appropriate text for the audience. The fact that inspired apostles quoted the Septuagint indicates that in their minds the Septuagint texts communicate the true understanding of the Scriptures. But the issues involved are more complicated.

In at least one verse in Hebrews (10:38), it appears that the Septuagint and the *Tanakh* differ in meaning, and the author of Hebrews (an inspired apostle) quotes the Septuagint version. For the sake of argument, let us assume that the two versions say something different. This example creates a difficult challenge to my perspective that the Hebrew text is *always* preferred because it was created by the process of copying a manuscript, not translating a manuscript. And there is another complication.

The Masoretic text, the accepted Hebrew text (*Tanakh*), was formalized from the



---

## Which Translation Is Best? continued

seventh to about the tenth century AD. It is reputed to include several texts from the time of Jesus, but it was not constructed until centuries later. The Septuagint was formalized centuries earlier. At minimum, the Masoretic text provides the opportunity to check the Septuagint against the *Tanakh* to see how closely they compare with each other. I have not done that work, but I now see that as an interesting task, whereas before I would not have seen it as useful.

These complications, then, compelled me to reexamine my perspective with regard to copying texts versus translating them. The process of copying is mechanical, but it is not infallible. Copies are made of the original manuscript of the author (who, in the case of Scripture, was inspired). Later, other copies are made, not only from the original but also from the copies. As the copies are generated, errors creep in, and the copies with errors are then copied. The existence of transcription errors illustrates that the *copying process* is not infallible, nor was it, in the case of Scripture, inspired.

Translating a manuscript is a whole different process from copying it. Translating is not a mechanical process of substituting a word in one language for a word in another language. Translating is high art that involves taking the understanding of the author in his original text and language and then communicating it in a different language so that the author's understanding appears in another mind. It is an inexplicable process.

Translation done by a committee takes on a new dimension. Suddenly, new questions become important: Who is selected to do the translation, and what criteria are used to select them? What are their qualifications? How are differences in translations resolved? These kinds of political issues become an integral part of the process of translation. Thus translations are inescapably complex, difficult, and mysterious. I see no way to claim that any translation is inspired. They seem to be the work of ordinary human beings using ordinary human means.

When comparing the processes of copying and translating, clearly copying is the more simple and straightforward process, but neither copying nor translating

is infallible. Translations are much more difficult to evaluate. This was the logic behind my original assumption that copies are always more desirable than translations. Now, however, it is clear that a copy is not necessarily better than a translation. As we saw from the Hebrews example, the apostle implied that what he quoted from the Septuagint translation was likely more accurate than the same quote from the Masoretic text.

Prior to the Summer Institute, I saw little purpose for the Septuagint. I now see the translation as an important document with a long pedigree that began its life centuries before the time of Christ. As a translation of the *Tanakh*, it can provide insight into the intent of the inspired writers of the text, information for questions regarding copy errors in the *Tanakh*, and additional clues to word choice and the range of meanings of Hebrew words. For instance, where a Greek word is used to translate a Hebrew word, the Greek word will usually have a different range of meaning from the Hebrew word. This difference can either increase or decrease the potential range of meaning of the Hebrew word in that context. As a result, the Greek word might provide additional clues to the possible meaning of the Hebrew word. So I now see the relationship between the Septuagint and the *Tanakh* as much more complex, and I see a much more important role for the Septuagint.

I also better understand how copy errors and various translations can affect the accuracy of the text. For us moderns, however, seeing the greater complexity of issues results in a greater skepticism that either the copied or the translated texts represent the original manuscripts. It is easy to become skeptical about the veracity of the Scriptures when we have to deal with variant readings and translation differences. For example, modern scholarship claims that there were several Hebrew texts with different readings and up to five additional Greek translations other than the Septuagint at the time of Jesus. These facts, combined with modern assumptions such as "all knowledge is culturally bound," make it easy to doubt the veracity and authority of the Scriptures.

I will grant, for the sake of argument, that modern scholars are correct about the number of different Hebrew texts and Greek translations at the time of Jesus; I have little reason to doubt them. However, I do not believe that this conclusion should necessarily lead to skepticism about the veracity and authority of the Scriptures. Moderns, or to be philosophically correct, post-moderns, assume that because a number of versions differ to a certain degree, it is impossible to assume that we can know a true version of the text with any certainty. This conclusion does not necessarily follow from the facts, however. Rather, it is the modern set of assumptions—our modern lens—which lead from the facts to the skeptical inference.

As I look at the writing of the apostles, I do not find a single instance where Jesus and his opponents are arguing over what text or translation they are using. This is an important observation. Neither side seems to doubt the veracity and authority of the Scriptures. Their interactions are rooted in their understanding of the text. They undoubtedly know about copy errors and potential translation errors, but they do not raise this issue. For Jesus and his opponents, the majority of the transcription errors and translation differences are minor issues and do not affect the overall understanding of the Scriptures. Their interactions are about fundamental issues in the text, not minor textual variants. How is it possible that Jesus and his opponents do not see differences in the copies or translations as important? Are they just naïve? I do not think so.

I have been rereading Michael Polanyi's book *Personal Knowledge*. I have had the pleasure of reading this book every two to four years since Gutenberg College opened. I first read it in the 1970s, and it has had a profound influence on my thinking since. An implication of what Polanyi argues about how we communicate could be a key to understanding why Jesus and his opponents do not focus on textual variants and translations. In Polanyi's view, the meaning of a word or a sentence is determined by its role in the *whole* argument or perspective presented by an author—that is, by how the author uses a word or sentence to lead a reader to the understanding the author wants to communicate. Therefore, each word or even a sentence

---

change must be understood in the context of all the other words or phrases comprising the argument. A word change or a sentence change leading to a radically different understanding of the argument would be possible but rare. When reading any text, then, the primary focus is to gain an understanding of an author's whole argument or perspective, and the author's particular words or phrases are primarily important only as they serve to lead the reader to an understanding of that argument or perspective. Thus, according to Polanyi, the process of communicating is generally conservative.

Polanyi's perspective, or something like it, could be why Jesus and his opponents are not focused on textual or translation differences. Jesus and his opponents seem to share the belief that a right understanding of the Scriptures can be gained from the study of the texts and translations. The issues that separate Jesus and his opponents are not rooted in textual variants and translation differences. Both sides seem to agree that their differences are at the level of understanding, not at the level of words and verses. If Jesus and his opponents are assuming something akin to Polanyi's perspective, then it would be an answer to modern skepticism. This conclusion also has implications for our perspective on translations.

If the focus of understanding the Scriptures is something like the process of communicating that Polanyi outlines, then our concerns about which translation to choose may change. The best translation would be the one that enables a reader to gain the understanding of the biblical authors. I no longer see a reason to assume that one version will fit all. Each person comes to a text with different reading skills and background. But the goal of reading the Scriptures is to come to an understanding of the biblical authors, and so the ability to read well is more important than the translation or text one chooses to read. Translations still must be judged on their ability to lead the reader to the understanding of the source document (that is, the author's original text), but I now see much more flexibility in how that goal is accomplished.

My new perspective is a godsend. I started Hebrew in exegesis school but did not keep it up. I now find myself, over sixty-five years old, facing the prospect of learning Hebrew

and knowing I will not gain a great deal of proficiency. But I now see that rather than focusing on the *means* of communication, the more important issue is to focus on understanding the communication as a whole. I will continue to learn Hebrew, but I can use the Septuagint and English translations to gain an understanding of the *Tanakh*. My lack of skill at Hebrew does not keep me from gaining an understanding of the Scriptures.

As I started to prepare for the Summer Institute, I had a simple view of translations: generally, they were to be avoided. I viewed the Hebrew Scriptures and the Koiné Greek writings of the apostles as the primary sources to study; reading the Scriptures in their original language was the gold standard for understanding them. Thus the Septuagint did not have a place in my study. What challenged my view was the fact that the Septuagint was written for Jews for whom Greek was their first language, and even the apostles read the Septuagint and wrote in Koiné Greek, not Hebrew. Thinking about

the role of the Septuagint in the lives of the Greek-speaking Jews helped me to see a much more important role for translations. Finally, to see that neither Jesus nor his detractors ever pointed to copy errors or translations as a source of their disagreements opened the door to seeing that the more important focus should be on the understanding of the biblical authors, not on the specific means of attaining it. This opens the door to a broader, more flexible study regime for me, one where I am not hampered by my lack of Hebrew skills. I will experiment and check various translations against the Hebrew and Greek as best I can, but my goal will be to increase my overall understanding of the Scriptures.

---

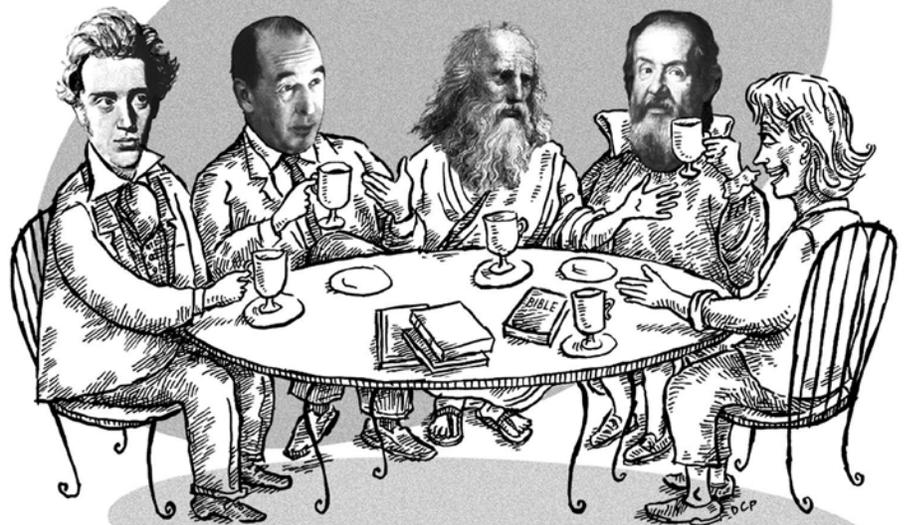
**Dr. Charley Dewberry** is the dean and a tutor at Gutenberg College. He has authored two books, *Intelligent Discourse: Exposing the Fallacious Standoff Between Evolution and Intelligent Design* (2006) and *Saving Science: A Critique of Science and Its Role in Salmon Recovery* (2004). He holds a PhD in philosophy.

---

## Join the Conversation!

Pull up a chair with

**Kierkegaard, Lewis, Plato, Galileo, and the rest of the gang.**  
At Gutenberg College, we interact with the originals.



## Please be praying...

1) Classes have been in session for a couple of weeks. Please pray that our returning students will be captured by a desire to pursue their studies diligently and, more importantly, to pursue God wholeheartedly and that our new students will catch the same vision for their time at Gutenberg College.

2) In keeping with Gutenberg's desire to recruit students from the Messianic community, our new academic calendar provides time for celebrating Jewish holidays as well as Christian holidays. Please pray for ongoing contact and opportunities to interface with

the larger Messianic Jewish community—not simply for recruiting purposes by any means but also because such interaction has enriched the Gutenberg community and because we hope that we can be of service to that community as well.

3) Please pray for our finances. Given our current situation, we are facing some very significant personnel cuts at the start of the new year.

4) Please pray for the encouragement and enthusiasm of the Gutenberg tutors and staff that they might not grow weary of well-doing.

*News & Views is published ten months a year by McKenzie Study Center, an institute of Gutenberg College promoting adherence to biblical teaching as a theological method and biblical Christianity as a philosophy of life. Editor: Robby Julian. Advisors: Richard Booster and Ron Julian. © 2015 Gutenberg College, Inc. Permission to reprint in whole or in part is hereby granted, provided the following credit line is used: "Reprinted by permission from News & Views, a publication of Gutenberg College, www.gutenberg.edu."*

**Subscription free upon request.** MSC is supported primarily through individual, tax-exempt contributions.

## News & Views • October 2015



**Gutenberg College**  
McKenzie Study Center • Art Project  
1883 University Street  
Eugene, OR 97403

TELEPHONE: 541-683-5141  
541-485-4801 (MSC/AP)  
FAX: 541-683-6997  
EMAIL: [office@gutenberg.edu](mailto:office@gutenberg.edu)  
INTERNET: [www.gutenberg.edu](http://www.gutenberg.edu)

NONPROFIT ORG  
US POSTAGE  
PAID  
EUGENE, OREGON  
PERMIT NO. 594



### Gutenberg College Welcomes the Class of 2019

Back row: Joseph Sheild  
Bethany Stroup  
Madelin Woodrum  
Chantel Dannis  
Jonathan Heredia

Front row: Emily Dunnan  
Elyse Baker  
Sirena Worman  
Audrey Barton