

ΔΙΝ ΤΡΕΒΕΤΤΑΝΕΝΝΑΥ  
 ΟΥ ΚΥΝΕΣΤΗΤΙCΝΕΝΟΥ  
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 ΜΙΚΚΝ... ΕΝΕΟΝ  
 ΕΙΑ ΜΑΚΟΝΤΕ ΦΙΛΙΗΝ  
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# BIBLE TRANSLATION IN THE BIBLE

Vern S. Poythress

2025 marks the 500th year since William Tyndale completed the first translation of the New Testament directly from Greek into English. By 1526, copies were being printed in Worms and Antwerp, and smuggled into England. Yes, *smuggled*—it was illegal. The translation was opposed and suppressed by English bishops. Tyndale himself was later caught, imprisoned, and executed. Yet much of Tyndale’s wording is preserved in the early approved English versions leading up to the King James Version (1611). Indeed, much is still preserved in the English translations that have revised the KJV: the Revised Version (1885), American Standard Version (1901), Revised Standard Version (1952), New American Standard Version (1971), New King James Version (1982), and English Standard Version

(2001). The anniversary of Tyndale’s New Testament is a suitable time to reflect on the role of Bible translation in the growth of the kingdom of God.

## Translation in the Bible

What does the Bible itself say about its own translation? It says little directly. Nehemiah 8:8 may be an instance where leaders read the Hebrew text aloud and then explained the sense in Aramaic. But we do not know for sure. Nehemiah does not supply the details. It is unlikely that the explanation was written down. The earliest Aramaic targums are centuries later.

The New Testament quotes from the Septuagint,



a pre-Christian translation of the Old Testament into Greek. The Septuagint was providentially important in the spread of the gospel through the Roman Empire. It was known, and it was widely used. The New Testament authors clearly used it and quoted from it. But they did not in their writings directly *mention* it. It belongs to the invisible substructure of communicating the word of God.

The Bible does include as a significant theme the communication of the word of God. The communication starts in Genesis 1, when God speaks. He says, “Let there be light” (Gen. 1:3), “Let there be an expanse in the midst of the waters” (v. 6), and so on. God speaks to himself in verse 26, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness.” (The significance of the plural “our” is disputed. The best understanding is that it refers to a plurality in God, already anticipated in the distinction between God, the Spirit of God, and the Word of God in Genesis 1:2–3.) He communicates his word to human beings in verses 28–30. From then on, God’s words play a significant role in personally meeting human beings and directing their lives. This verbal direction includes judgment and condemnation for sin (3:16–19), and the hope of redemption (3:15). The arrival of the word of God not only in human ears but also in human hearts has a key role in the salvation of people from every nation.

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When God splits apart the human race into different languages at the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:1–9), God himself imposes a communication problem on the race. People cannot freely communicate across language groups in order to accomplish a prideful plan to build a tower to heaven. But neither may they freely communicate God’s saving word. So how will God spread his word? God chooses Abram and promises, “In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed” (12:3). The news about Abram and about redemption must go out to all the language groups.

## Instruction to the Nations

This multilingual plan becomes even clearer as God reveals that the nations will obey the Solomonic king: “May all kings fall down before him, *all nations* serve him!” (Ps. 72:11). And how will they serve meaningfully unless they hear his instructions in a language that they can understand? The psalm does not discuss translation explicitly, but translation is an implicit piece of the plan for God’s saving rule through the Messianic descendant of Solomon—through Christ the Lord.

The nations will themselves seek to be instructed from God’s law. Micah 4:1–2 prophesies that, “in the latter days,” when “the mountain of the house of the Lord shall be established as the highest of the mountains,”

... many nations shall come, and say:  
“Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord,  
to the house of the God of Jacob,  
that he may *teach* us his ways  
and that we may walk in his paths.”  
For out of Zion shall go forth the *law*,  
and *the word of the Lord* from Jerusalem. (v. 2)

The prophecy is fulfilled in the exaltation of Christ to the heavenly Jerusalem (Heb. 12:22), followed by the spread of the gospel from the earthly Jerusalem to the nations (Acts 1:8). The nations have to be instructed in their many languages. The instruction begins supernaturally with the gift of tongues on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:1–11). It continues by ordinary means, partly through the use of Koine Greek as the trade language of the Roman Empire. Bible translation is implied as part of the process.

## The Great Commission

The Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20 makes the same point. Jesus commands his disciples to “make disciples of all nations.” One aspect is “teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you.” The people of the nations have to be taught in languages that they understand. And what is taught includes, in its full expanse, the whole counsel of God, as laid out in the entire canon of Scripture. Teaching is *more* than translation, but not less. A permanent translation

of the Bible serves as a firm base for generations of teaching. The translation serves the church that rises up in each language group.

## The Goal of the Kingdom of God

**T**he eventual goal is a great multitude:

After this I looked, and behold, a great multitude that no one could number, from every nation, from all tribes and peoples and languages, standing before the throne and before the Lamb, clothed in white robes, with palm branches in their hands, and crying out with a loud voice, “Salvation belongs to our God who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb!” (Rev. 7:9–10)

Pointedly, Revelation says that the people belong to “all ... languages.” They are themselves saved, and they learn to praise God from the heart with full-throated voices in their languages.

Such an event will actually happen. God promises it. Well might we respond with the words of the angels: “Amen! Blessing and glory and wisdom and thanksgiving and honor and power and might be to our God forever and ever! Amen” (Rev. 7:12).

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Habakkuk promises that “the earth will be filled with the knowledge of the glory of the Lord as the waters cover the sea” (2:14). Some people are cut off and consigned to hell. But in the new heaven and the new earth, knowledge will fill the language groups, and the hearts of those in each of the language groups. God will be seen for who he is, and Christ honored as the only Savior. That goal will be achieved because of God. God is committed to it. It is for the sake of his glory and for the sake of his people, whom he has loved from the foundation of the earth. He achieves it through the



translation of the Bible—which is then taught, heard, and received in the heart, by the power of the Holy Spirit. Praise the Lord!



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