



Provided by the Church of the Lutheran Confession - Board of Missions

How to Understand and Interpret the Bible (Hermeneutics)

Lesson #8

Six Principles of Biblical Interpretation

Principle Three: The Only Text That Is Determinative Is the Original

The prophets wrote the Old Testament in Hebrew and the apostles wrote the New Testament in Greek. The original copies that they no longer exist. God has chosen to give us His Word through copies of the original texts that many different scribes have copied by hand through the hundreds of years since the original texts were written. Some people argue that since we do not have the original texts, we no longer have the Word of God. But this is not true, for it is written: **“The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God stands forever”** (Isaiah 40:8).

Our God, who gave us the words of Scripture, is also able to preserve the words of Scripture for us. We can be sure that the Bible we have is truly the Word of God. Jesus did not have the original texts of the Hebrew Bible. He had flawless copies of the original, like we do. So, Jesus quoted Scripture and said: **“The scriptures cannot be broken”** (John 10:35). The apostle Paul also said: **“To them (the Jews) were committed the oracles of God”** (Romans 3:2).

The Jewish scribes were very careful when they made copies of Scripture. They even counted the letters to make sure they copied every one. There are some small variations in the copies we have, but none of these differences change any teaching found in the Bible.

We do not have the autographs (original copies) of the books of the New Testament either. But we have many very old copies, and many copies of copies. We have translations of the original into other languages. In the writings of the church fathers we have many quotations from the Scriptures. With all of this evidence it is quite possible in almost all cases to determine what the original text of Scripture must be. There are no variations that affect the meaning substantially or alter any Bible teachings. David Kuske summarizes: “In the passages of the one percent of the text that require a study of variants, none of the passages are ones which affect any doctrine of Scripture. So no matter which wording in a variant retains the autograph, no doctrine of Scripture is changed or altered in any way” (p. 49).

Most Christians cannot read Hebrew or the Greek. We depend on translations of the Bible into languages that we can understand. Some of the Bible translations are almost as old as the Bible itself, like the Syriac. The work of translating the Bible into modern languages continues even today. The most famous English translation of the Bible was published in 1611 and is known as the King James Version. Since language changes during the course of years, the King James Version is no longer the easiest translation to understand. Confessional Lutherans today usually use one of three English translations: the New King James Version - NKJV (this is what is being used in this Bible study); the New International Version – NIV; or the English Standard Version – ESV.

Other famous translations include the Latin *Vulgate* of the church father Jerome and the translation into the German language made by Martin Luther and his associates at the time of the Reformation.

Translators have a difficult job. They want to follow the original language in meaning as much as possible and, at the same time, write in a way that is easy to understand for the modern reader. It is preferable that translators use the Hebrew and Greek texts as the basis for their translation. When

there is a question as to how something should be translated, it is always best to go back to the original text. That is why we say that the original text is the determinative text, that is, the text that represents the final authority for what God's word says and means. But an accurate translation is also the Word of God.

Questions

1. What has happened to the original texts written by the prophets and apostles?
2. How has God preserved His Word for us living today?
3. Why can we still trust the Bible, even though we see some differences in the copies of the original Greek and Hebrew that we have today?
4. How can we be sure that the meaning of the Bible has never been changed?
5. Why is it so important to translate the Bible into different languages?
6. Why is translation a very difficult task?
7. Which translation of the Bible do you use for your Bible reading?
8. What is the final authority for what the Bible says and means?