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Bible boom presents many choices for the modern reader

Bill Tammeus | Jul. 26, 2014 NCR Today

On Sept. 15, 1966, the American Bible Society scored some points for clarity. The society published a modern speech Bible translation with the gender-exclusive title *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version*. Just a year later, a second edition with various improvements was published, and that version now is on the list of Bible translations that the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops has approved for American Catholics.

The business of translating the Hebrew Scriptures and the Greek New Testament (both with a bit of Aramaic thrown in) into English versions of the Bible has boomed since the primary revision of the 1611 King James Version into the Revised Standard Version, the New Testament of which appeared in 1946, with the complete Bible out in 1952.

This explosion, in fact, led to publication in 1975, with a revised edition in 1983, of a book called *So Many Versions?: 20th Century English Versions of the Bible*. It was a soon outdated attempt to help Protestants and Catholics understand what versions were available and how they were translated. Were they, for instance, quite literal translations, such as the New American Standard Version (1963 New Testament, 1971 entire Bible)? Were they looser "meaning for meaning" translations? Or were they, like Eugene H. Peterson's *The Message* [1] and Kenneth N. Taylor's *The Living Bible*, paraphrases that are so purposefully full of idiosyncrasies that they should not be read as Scripture in worship services?

For Catholics, one question became whether the new translations were rooted in the ancient Vulgate, which was a Latin version done mostly by St. Jerome, or whether they were new translations from the original languages.

Some translations seek to be widely inclusive of both Protestants and Catholics, such as the New Revised Standard Version, which is published either with the books of the Apocrypha for Catholics or without those books for Protestants.

When the King James Version was published in 1611, only a handful of manuscripts were available for translators. Today, thanks to recent discoveries, there are thousands. So translators today are having to go back through the older manuscripts of Greek and Hebrew (neither of which use what we think of as punctuation) to find the best version of what the original writers of the texts might have meant.

[Bill Tammeus, a Presbyterian elder, writes *NCR*'s A small c catholic [2] column.]

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