

Views from the Pews: a Translator's View on changes in meaning

The oldest sources we have for the Old Testament are in Hebrew and Aramaic, and for the New Testament Greek. However, already in ancient times, the Old Testament was translated into Greek and the whole Bible into Latin. For many centuries, the Latin version was THE Bible of the Western Church. It is interesting to note that these translations occasionally include subtle changes in meaning, with sometimes quite far reaching effects.

The Virgin Birth

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For example, the 'Virgin Birth', and later the idea that Mary remained a virgin throughout her life. By the time the Gospels of Matthew and Luke were written, there was a tradition that Jesus had no earthly father, that Mary was a virgin at His conception. It is incidentally striking that Paul, despite his fascination with virginity and celibacy, does not refer to it. Matthew, as he often does with other events to enhance their significance, tries to show that the Virgin Birth is the fulfilment of an Old Testament prophecy, and quotes Isaiah 7:14 'the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.' Unfortunately, the Greek text he quotes is an inaccurate translation. The original Hebrew uses *Ḥalmah*, which means 'a young woman of marriable age', and the whole verse is thought to refer to the birth of King Hezekiah. The Greek version uses *parthénos*, which has 'virgin' as its primary meaning. This became *virgo* in the Latin, and in many English translations 'virgin'. Hebrew had a quite different word for 'virgin', *bətholah*, which occurs widely in the Old Testament but not in this verse in Isaiah.

Penance – change of heart?

Another example, in the New Testament, is the many references to 'repentance' and 'repent'. These are usually from a Greek word *metanoía*, which means 'a change of mind'. The Latin version however often uses *paenitentiam agere* 'to do penance', which shifts the emphasis from a change of mental state, a 'renewing of the mind' as Paul says, to physical acts. This shift was very much a factor in the history particularly of the Western Church, where for many centuries sometimes quite extreme forms of penance were prescribed for the faithful, and where guilt and an obsession with 'sin' seemed to outweigh the Christian trust in God's boundless mercy and love.

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