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Christian Perspectives

?Why is the Bible so complicated??

When I considered this question, I came to the conclusion that the explanation could get really complicated too. I will try to keep it as straight forward as possible.

First, none of the books of the Bible were written in our language ? English. What we have to read is translated from other languages. Words and phrases from one language don't always have an exact equivalent in another language. For example we say we like to eat ?seafood.? In French the expression is ?fruit de mer? or fruits of the sea. If we said ?fruits of the sea? in English many people might think of the fruit of plants that grow in the ocean.

The Bible read on Sundays at church is usually a recent translation. That means that people who are living right now or recently, took the oldest copies of the Bible scrolls that are still around and used their understanding of them to confirm or correct earlier translations. Many people prefer the English Bible from 1611 called the King James Version. It sounds the same as the plays written by William Shakespeare because that was the way English sounded at that time. Our English sounds very different now. The problem with the King James Version is that it was translated from a Latin translation of earlier translations. The more translations you make from one language to another the greater the chance you will change the original meaning of what was written. It is better to go back to the first language used whenever possible.

Secondly, the languages of the Bible ? Hebrew for most of the Old Testament books and Greek for most of the New Testament ? are the ancient versions of those languages. Modern Greek is quite different because language changes over time. Think of all the words we have in English that have to do with airplanes and flying, or with computers. Those words were not even invented one hundred and fifty years ago. The reverse is also true. Some words for things people used to use in former days are unfamiliar to us now. In the temple of ancient Israel, the priests had some things called the urim and the thummin. It is not clear whether these were apparel or used for some kind of divination. The meaning of the words has been lost over time.

Thirdly, in English we organize our words into sentences that start with capital letters and end with periods. We end with question marks if we want them to ask something or we use an exclamation mark for emphasis. We use commas, semicolons and colons inside long sentences to make them easier to read. Spacing letters and using punctuation are new inventions. The ancient Greek and Hebrew writing didn't have punctuation so, sometimes it is hard for the translators to know which words belong to which thought when they are trying to organize them into English sentences. We use certain patterns for organizing nouns, adjectives and verbs in English sentences. These patterns are different in other languages. Here is a little example to show the importance of word order - compare ?Throw mother from the train a kiss? and ?Throw mother a kiss from the train.?

Finally, the Bible is a collection of books and not really one book at all. Some of those books tell the history of the Hebrew people, some are books of poetry and some are lists of sayings that pass on wisdom. Other books are fables and parables, stories meant to teach us something. Some books are letters sent from a teacher, often but not always St. Paul, to a particular church, to encourage or instruct the people of that community. Some books are the record of dreams or visions that appeared to prophets who interpreted those dreams as messages from God. The gospels tell the story of the life, work and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth. The books ?sound? different from each other because they had different purposes and also because some of the writers were better writers than others. In English, it would be like putting comic books, science fiction stories, poems, novels, jokes, and university texts altogether in the same volume and expecting everyone to read them all equally well!

It is this wonderful diversity that inspires many people to say that if they were stranded on a deserted island and could have only one book to read, it would be the Bible.

By Reverend Stephanie Pellow