Dr. David Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 5, Translations and Early Interpretation Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 5, Translations and Early Interpretation, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

This lecture excerpt from Dr. Mathewson's hermeneutics course examines the complexities of biblical translation and interpretation. It explores different translation philosophies (formal vs. dynamic equivalence), emphasizing that no translation perfectly captures the original meaning. The lecture then discusses early interpretive practices, including inner-biblical interpretation, Rabbinic Judaism's approaches (Mishnah, Talmud, Midrash, Targums), and the Qumran community's unique readings of scripture. Finally, it analyzes how New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament, often viewing it through the lens of fulfillment in Christ.

2. 15 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 5 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Introduction & Languages → Introductory Series → Hermeneutics).

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3. Briefing Document

Okay, here is a detailed briefing document summarizing the key themes and ideas from the provided lecture transcript on biblical translation and interpretation:

Briefing Document: Biblical Translation & Early Interpretation

I. Introduction

This document summarizes the key points from Dr. Dave Mathewson's lecture on biblical translations and early interpretation. The lecture focuses on understanding the complexities of translation, guidelines for using translations effectively, and how interpretation was practiced both within the Bible itself and in early Jewish and Christian communities.

II. Translation Philosophies and Challenges

- **Formal vs. Dynamic Equivalence:** The lecture begins by distinguishing between two main translation philosophies:

- **Formal Equivalence:** This approach prioritizes reproducing the form of the original text (word-for-word), even if it sacrifices some clarity.

- **Dynamic Equivalence:** This approach prioritizes capturing the meaning and intended impact of the text, sometimes altering the original form for clarity.

- **Gender-Neutral Translations:** Mathewson addresses gender-neutral translations, clarifying that they are not necessarily driven by a feminist agenda but aim to capture the meaning of the original text when masculine language was used to refer to humanity as a whole (male and female). He states that, "gender-neutral translations are an attempt to capture the meaning of the ancient text where the Hebrew-Greek language used, masculine language...But when they use those in a context where it was clear that all humanity is intended, both male and female, then a gender-neutral translation tries to capture that."

- **Inherent Limitations of Translation:** Mathewson emphasizes that no translation can perfectly capture the nuances of the original text. He states, "understand that no translation captures, completely captures, the meaning of the original text." This is due to:

- **Linguistic Differences:** Languages do not overlap perfectly, and cultural/historical context creates distance from the original audience.

- **Loss of Literary Devices:** Features such as acrostic structures in Hebrew poetry, figures of speech, and the intended emotional effect of the text are difficult to reproduce fully in another language.

III. Guidelines for Using Translations in Interpretation

Mathewson provides four key guidelines for using translations effectively:

1. **Know Your Translation:** Be aware of the type of translation you are using (formal vs. dynamic).

2. **Recognize Inherent Limitations:** Understand that no translation is exhaustive and that some nuances may be missed.

3. **Use Literal Translations as a Tool:** Non-Greek/Hebrew readers should use a more formal translation to get closer to the structure of the original language. He advises, "for non-Hebrew and Greek students, usually the standard advice is to use a fairly literal translation... that will at least to some degree be close to and expose you to the structure and expose you to the grammar."

4. **Use Multiple Translations:** Compare different translations to uncover nuances and identify interpretive issues. Mathewson argues, "Probably the best use of translations, in my opinion, is to use as many as you can... sometimes the differences in the translations can do one of two things... the differences might capture nuances...the other thing is that sometimes where translations differ will reveal an interpretive issue or difficulty that you need to deal with."

IV. The Importance of Interpretation beyond Translation

- **Translation is Not the End Goal:** Translation is a starting point, not the end goal of interpretation. He emphasizes that, "the goal of interpretation is not just to produce a translation." Exegesis, commentary, and explanation are crucial for capturing the full meaning.

- **Translations Can Highlight Interpretive Issues:** Differences in translations, such as paragraph breaks or word choices, can reveal areas where interpretation is complex. He gives the example of Ephesians 5:21 and whether it is connected to the prior verses or is the start of a new section. He states, "looking at a number of translations and where they divide Ephesians 5 reveals, I think, an interpretive issue in the text that you're going to have to deal with." He also uses the example of how the old and new NIV translate "sarx" in Galatians 5:16 (sinful nature vs flesh).

- **Paragraph and Verse Divisions are Human Inventions:** Paragraph and verse divisions are modern additions by translators and not part of the original text and they can sometimes point to important interpretive decisions made by translators and not to a divine message.

- **Capitalization in Translations is an Interpretive Choice:** Original Greek texts didn't use capitalization, therefore, when a word such as "spirit" is capitalized in a modern translation, it is an interpretive decision of the translator.

V. Early Biblical Interpretation

- **Interpretation within the Bible Itself:** The lecture emphasizes that interpretation is not a modern invention. The Bible itself contains examples of "inner biblical interpretation," where authors take up and reinterpret earlier texts. He explains, "biblical authors, and as you're already aware of, the Bible is produced over quite a span of time, so that often biblical authors will pick up earlier texts, biblical texts, and interpret them and apply them for their own day and age."

- **Examples:** The reinterpretation of events in Chronicles compared to Kings, the use of unfulfilled prophecy by later prophets (Haggai reinterpreting Isaiah and Ezekiel).

- **Rabbinic Interpretations:** The lecture also discussed interpretive methods from early Rabbinic Judaism. He focused on:

- **Mishnah:** The written codification of oral interpretation of the law by rabbis.

- **Talmud:** Further commentary and explanation on the Mishnah.

- **Midrash:** Running commentary on the biblical text, quoting and unpacking verses with rabbinic interpretations and other relevant Old Testament texts.

- **Targums:** Aramaic translations and paraphrases of the Old Testament.

- **Middow:** The rules or patterns of rabbinic interpretation, such as arguing from the lesser to the greater or using similar wording/vocab from other texts for interpretation.

- **Qumran Literature (Dead Sea Scrolls):** The Qumran community used the Old Testament to justify its own existence and interpret scripture in light of their situation.

- **Example:** The commentary on Isaiah 54, with the community allegorizing the stones and structures of the new Jerusalem to their own members.

VI. New Testament Interpretation

- **Reading the Old Testament Through Christ:** The New Testament authors interpreted the Old Testament through the lens of fulfillment in Jesus Christ. He states, "the New Testament authors...read the Old Testament through the lenses of fulfillment in Jesus Christ."

- **Range of Interpretive Methods:** New Testament authors used both literal interpretations and analogical/typological approaches.

- **Jesus' Own View:** Luke 24:27 provides an example of Jesus interpreting the Old Testament as pointing to himself. Luke records, "beginning with Moses and all the prophets, he explained to them, Jesus explained to them what was said in all scriptures concerning himself."

VII. Conclusion

The lecture concludes by reiterating that we are not the first interpreters of the Bible and we stand in a long tradition of attempting to understand and make sense of it. The need to use and compare multiple translations as well as look at historical interpretations helps the modern reader be a better interpreter of the text.

4. Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 5, Translations and Early Interpretations

Biblical Translation and Early Interpretation Study Guide

Quiz

Instructions: Answer each question in 2-3 complete sentences.

1. What are the two major philosophies of translation, and how do they differ?

2. What is the main goal of gender-neutral translations?

3. Why is it important to use multiple translations when interpreting the Bible?

4. Why can't any single translation fully capture the meaning of the original biblical text?

5. According to the lecture, what is the primary goal of interpretation when working with the original languages?

6. What does the lecture mean by "inner-biblical interpretation"?

7. Why did the Qumran community use allegorical interpretation?

8. What are the Mishnah and the Talmud, and what is their relationship to each other?

9. How do New Testament authors view the Old Testament, and why is that important?

10. How does the example of the NIV translation of "sarx" demonstrate the challenges of translation?

Quiz Answer Key

1. The two major philosophies of translation are formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence focuses on replicating the form of the text as closely as possible, while dynamic equivalence prioritizes clarity and ensuring that the modern reader understands the text in the same way that the original reader did.

2. The goal of gender-neutral translations is to capture the meaning of the original text when masculine language was used to refer to all of humanity, both male and female, without implying an exclusive reference to males.

3. Using multiple translations is essential because different translations may capture nuances that a single translation might miss and because differences between translations can reveal interpretive issues that need to be addressed.

4. No single translation can capture the full meaning because languages don't overlap perfectly, and aspects like poetic structures, figures of speech, and the overall motive of the original text can be lost in translation.

5. The primary goal of interpretation when working with Hebrew and Greek is not just to produce a translation, but to use exegesis, explanation, and commentary to capture the full meaning and nuances of the text.

6. "Inner-biblical interpretation" refers to the way biblical authors reinterpret and apply earlier biblical texts within the Bible itself for their own time, circumstances, and unique situations.

7. The Qumran community used allegorical interpretation of the Old Testament to justify their own existence, their beliefs, and the practices of their community by interpreting Old Testament prophecies as being fulfilled in the Qumran community itself.

8. The Mishnah is the written codification of the oral interpretations of the law by rabbis, while the Talmud is further commentary on the Mishnah itself, providing additional explanations and interpretations.

9. New Testament authors tend to read the Old Testament through the lens of fulfillment in Jesus Christ, seeing him as the climax and fulfillment of Old Testament prophecy and revelation.

10. The example of the NIV translation of "sarx" illustrates the challenge of translating a single word into English, as both "sinful nature" and "flesh" carry different connotations and can affect the understanding of the text.

Essay Questions

Instructions: Choose one of the following questions to develop a thoughtful essay.

1. Discuss the spectrum of translation philosophies, using specific examples, and analyze the potential impact these different approaches have on biblical interpretation.

2. Explain the role of "inner-biblical interpretation," providing examples from both the Old and New Testaments and consider how it impacts the understanding of the Bible.

3. Compare and contrast the interpretive methods of Rabbinic Judaism and the Qumran community, and analyze how their approaches reveal their unique perspectives and goals.

4. Analyze the way New Testament authors utilize the Old Testament and illustrate the variety of ways, both literal and typological, in which they view the Old Testament and what this implies for the meaning of the Old Testament.

5. Discuss the importance of considering the historical and cultural context of the biblical texts when making interpretive decisions, as well as the challenges of bridging the distance between the ancient world and our modern context.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Formal Equivalence:** A translation philosophy that seeks to replicate the form and structure of the original text as closely as possible, often resulting in a more literal translation.

- **Dynamic Equivalence:** A translation philosophy that prioritizes conveying the meaning of the original text in a way that is clear and understandable to the modern reader, sometimes sacrificing literal form for clarity.

- **Gender-Neutral Translation:** A type of translation that attempts to accurately capture the meaning of the original text where masculine language is used to refer to all of humanity, not just males.

- **Inner-Biblical Interpretation:** The reinterpretation and application of earlier biblical texts by later biblical authors within the Bible itself.

- **Mishnah:** A written codification of the oral interpretations of the Law by rabbis in Rabbinic Judaism.

- **Talmud:** Further commentary and explanation of the Mishnah, providing additional insights and interpretations. There are two, the Palestinian and Babylonian.

- **Midrash:** A form of Jewish biblical interpretation that involves a running commentary on the text, unpacking its meaning and often drawing on other biblical texts for interpretation.

- **Targums:** Aramaic translations or paraphrases of the Old Testament that often reflect early interpretive traditions.

- **Middow:** The rules or characteristics that defined rabbinic interpretive activity.

- **Allegorical Interpretation:** Interpreting a text by treating its symbols or figures as representative of a hidden or deeper meaning.

- **Qumran Community:** A Jewish sect that secluded themselves near the Dead Sea and produced the Dead Sea Scrolls.

- **Pesher:** A type of biblical commentary used by the Qumran community, applying biblical texts to their own community and situation.

- **Typological Interpretation:** A method of interpretation that sees a correspondence between Old Testament events, people, or institutions and their fulfillment or parallel in the New Testament.

- **Sarx:** The Greek word often translated as "flesh" or "sinful nature," used in the New Testament to describe the human condition apart from the Spirit.

5. FAQs on Mathewson, Hermeneutics, Session 5, Translations and Early Interpretations, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

FAQ: Biblical Translation, Interpretation, and Historical Context

1. **What are the main philosophies behind biblical translations, and how do they impact the final product?** Biblical translations generally fall on a spectrum between formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. Formal equivalence aims to reproduce the original text's form (word-for-word, grammar, and sentence structure) as closely as possible. This can sometimes result in a less readable or understandable translation in the target language. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, focuses on conveying the meaning and intent of the original text to modern readers in a way that is clear and resonates with them, sometimes sacrificing some of the original form. Neither approach is perfect, as languages do not fully overlap and cultural nuances can be lost. This difference in approach impacts how readers understand and interpret the Bible.

2. **What is the significance of gender-neutral language in biblical translations?** Gender-neutral translations attempt to accurately capture the meaning of the ancient text when masculine language (e.g., "he," "him," "man") is used in contexts where all of humanity, both male and female, is clearly intended. These translations aim to clarify that the original text refers to both genders, avoiding the potential for misunderstanding in modern-day society, where masculine language is often interpreted as referring exclusively to males. The goal is to reflect the inclusive intent of the original text, rather than promoting a specific gender-related agenda.

3. **Why is it essential to use multiple translations when interpreting the Bible?** No single translation can fully capture all the nuances of the original text due to the inherent limitations of language and translation philosophy. Using multiple translations helps uncover different shades of meaning and reveals interpretive issues that might not be apparent in one translation alone. When translations differ significantly, it often highlights places where the original text is ambiguous or presents interpretive challenges that require closer scrutiny. Additionally, the way translations divide paragraphs or sentences can sometimes reveal a difference in how interpreters are understanding the flow of thought.

4. **How do paragraph and chapter divisions in modern Bibles influence the interpretation of the biblical text?** Paragraph and chapter divisions found in modern Bibles are not part of the original text; they are additions made by translators to make the text easier to read and understand. However, these divisions can sometimes influence interpretation. Different translations may divide the text differently, revealing interpretive decisions made by the translators. For example, whether a passage is included with a preceding passage or starts a new section can impact how the passage is interpreted and understood in relation to other parts of the text.

5. **Why are elements such as capitalization and punctuation in modern Bibles considered interpretive decisions?** Original biblical texts lacked capitalization, punctuation, and spacing between words, making these additions by translators an interpretive decision. For example, when a translation capitalizes the word "spirit" or "Spirit" it is often an attempt by the translators to signify whether the text refers to the human spirit or the Holy Spirit. These seemingly small details can significantly affect how a text is understood. Recognizing this helps us to see the interpretations that are embedded in translations and not necessarily from the original source.

6. **What is "inner-biblical interpretation" and why is it significant?** Inner-biblical interpretation refers to how biblical authors themselves interpret, reinterpret, and apply earlier biblical texts for their own time and unique situations. Authors would pick up earlier texts, reformulate them, and reinterpret them in their current context, seeking to demonstrate that the word of God was still relevant to later generations. This practice demonstrates that interpretation is not a new development, but was done by the authors themselves. Understanding this provides insight into how the Bible has been understood from the beginning of its writing and transmission.

7. **What are some examples of early Jewish interpretative approaches to the Old Testament?** Early Jewish interpretative approaches included the development of the Mishnah (a written codification of oral interpretations of the law), the Talmud (further commentary on the Mishnah), the Midrash (a running commentary on the biblical text, often explaining it verse by verse), and the Targums (Aramaic translations or paraphrases). These various interpretative approaches sought to unpack the meaning of the Old Testament and demonstrate how these texts remained relevant for the people of God. Rabbinic rules of interpretation included such rules as arguing from the lesser to the greater, and interpreting a text in light of other texts using the same or similar wording.

8. **How did the Qumran community interpret the Old Testament, and what did they find?** The Qumran community, known for producing the Dead Sea Scrolls, interpreted Old Testament texts as justifications for their own existence and their community. They often allegorized or typologically interpreted prophecies and descriptions of the temple and Jerusalem as referring to their own community as the true people of God. This led to them taking texts out of their original context, but still applying them to their current situation. For example, Isaiah's prophecy about the rebuilding of Jerusalem with precious stones was interpreted as referring to the founding members and various groups within the Qumran community, using allegory to assign symbolic meanings. This is significant because it demonstrates that the interpreter often makes meaning from a given text based on their current historical context.