In today's Reader's Mailbag I deal with a question that involves both the differences in the manuscripts of the New Testament AND the issue of English Bible translations. As many of you know, almost all scholars agree that passages such as the “Woman Taken in Adultery,” in John 7:53-8:11 and the last twelve verses of Mark (Jesus’ appearances to his disciples after the resurrection) were not original to the New Testament. (If you’re not familiar with this issue, see my book *Misquoting Jesus* and/or do word searches to find discussions on the blog). And yet most modern Bibles continue to include them, even if they put them in brackets with a footnote saying that they are missing from the best manuscripts we have.

But why aren’t translators consistent in applying this rule: keeping verses they know are not original with footnotes? Why in other, analogous cases, do they more often remove the passages completely and put them in the notes?

It’s a great question: here is how the reader phrased it, with very helpful examples.

- **QUESTION:**

  Some Bibles have omitted verses like the following –
  
  - Matthew 17:21, 18:11, 23:14;
  - Mark 7:16, 9:44, 9:46;
  - Luke 17:36, 23:17;
  - John 5:4; Acts 8:37.

  What is the reason for omitting these verses, but at the same time not omitting the longer ending of Mark?

- **RESPONSE:**

  The decision of Bible translators to be inconsistent is completely conscious. And it is important to stress that the decision in every case is not based on scholarship per se or historical evidence. The *main* reasons are theological, pastoral, and – this will surprise you – economic. The final reason, once I explain it, may well sound cynical (on my part). But I have solid reasons for thinking (or rather: knowing!) it.

  You can look up all the verses the reader cites in your Bible. If you have a modern translation such as the NRSV, you will see. Just take the first two examples. In Matthew 17 when the disciples can’t understand that they could not cast out a demon, in the King James and older English translations Jesus tells them that “This kind comes out only by prayer and fasting” (Matthew 17:21). But in the NRSV, the entire verse is taken out and put in a footnote. In the next chapter of Matthew when Jesus tells the parable of the lost sheep, in the KJV and other Bibles, he indicates that “The Son of Man came to save the lost” (Matthew 18:11). But again, the verse is removed and relegated to a footnote in the NRSV and other modern Bibles.

  The reasons are simple: a thorough study of the manuscripts of Matthew shows that these verses were inserted later by scribes; they were not original to the text. This came to be known only after the King James was published. So now the translators are more interested in publishing the text as it comes from the pens of the actual authors, without additions put in by later scribes.
But why then do the translators not do the same with the Woman Taken in Adultery and the Last Twelve verses of Mark? Also in those cases the same translators know full well that the passages were not original – often these very scholars have actually published articles or portions of books explaining why they are not original – and yet they include them in the text rather than placing them in a note. The note itself simply casts doubt on their originality.

Many of us appreciate the reasons for these decisions even though we find them a bit irritating.

I happen to know all of this personally from the inside, at least for the NRSV – the New Revised Standard Version, which is the standard translation advocated by the National Council of Churches in the U.S. My mentor and advisor, Bruce Metzger, was the Chair of the committee that produced the NRSV; as a young graduate student I worked for the committee for years, sitting in on their translation sessions, acting as a secretary, and having lunch with the members of the committee (some pretty amazing Hebrew and Greek linguists...). When I received my PhD, I worked full time for the committee in the last two years of their work, checking the translation for consistency and adherence to guidelines, and preparing it for publication for the publishers.

The matter of whether to include some “non-original” passages not in footnotes but in the text itself, was widely discussed by the committee and I had conversations with Metzger about it, and given the logic of the situation, I’m 99% certain that other translation committees had the same sentiments.

1. Passages such as Matthew 17:21 and 18:11 (and all the other examples of passages relegated to footnotes) are very short; most readers would not notice they are even missing. But without the Woman Taken in Adultery in John 8, readers realize they are really missing something significant (it is found nowhere else in the Bible); and without Jesus appearing to his disciples after his resurrection in Mark 16, very big questions are raised. Quite different from the short verses.

2. Most of these short passages aren’t missed so much because they can be found in *other* parts of the New Testament; for example, the words of Matthew 17:21, even if taken out of Matthew, can be found still in Mark 9:29. So they are still in the Bible and can be turned to if anyone wants them. The Bible itself has not suffered a loss. That is not the case with the long passages of John 8 and Mark 16.

3. Therefore readers would be upset if they could no longer find these familiar passages in their Bibles, and it might cause them to have doubts, or at least it might prove unsettling to them — and there is no reason to rock the boat. (This is the point at which other scholars like me start getting uncomfortable; I get it – I too don’t want to upset people – but why should people base their comfort and religious views on fictions instead of facts? If a translation claims to be presenting the “original” words of the Bible, is it really right not to present the original words to make sure no one’s feelings get hurt?

I should point out that the same people take offense at in lots of other ways by these same modern translations – for example, when they translate Isaiah 7:14, the alleged prediction of Jesus’ virgin birth, as “The young woman is with child and shall bear a son” instead of the traditional, but incorrect “A virgin shall conceive and bear a son.” In that older traditional (i.e., King James) translation the woman is a virgin and it is predicting a future event. But translators now render it correctly, even if it makes waves. Is it OK to do that with the Old Testament (Isaiah) but not the Gospels (Mark or John)? If so, that is a theological or pastoral reason, not a historical or linguistic
Some translators comfort themselves and justify their decision by saying that even though the passages of the woman taken in adultery and the longer ending of Mark are not original, they represent very old and probably historical accounts. Metzger was famous for saying that the story of the adulterous woman wasn’t originally in John but was probably an event that actually happened. There is almost no evidence for that, and I don’t know that he ever made an actual argument for it, other than saying that seemed consistent with the kind of thing Jesus would do. But that’s not how one establishes the historicity of an account. I don’t recall just now if Metzger thought that Jesus indicated that his followers would be able to drink poison and handle deadly snakes without being harmed (the longer ending of Mark is the only passage that says so). (I need to clarify in case you’re wondering: Metzger was not just my advisor, he was my much beloved mentor and a father figure for me, for years; and he was almost certainly the greatest textual scholar of the 20th I still revere his memory, deeply. But that doesn’t mean I agreed with him on everything).

Finally, the brute reality: it is expensive to produce Bible translations. Very expensive. At least the NRSV was. The National Council of Churches was footing the bill. They were very much hoping that sales of the Bible would help offset their losses, as church membership, and therefore church donations, was seriously dropping. They were banking on it. Other translations in our day are in a similar situation. There are lots and lots of translations out there, and it is a finite market. Most people who purchase Bibles are Christian believers who treasure the Bible and find deep comfort and solace in it. Translations, literally, cannot afford to alienate readers. Translations that are not comforting and do not provide solace will not sell. People prefer the familiar. They will accept some changes, if they have to, but not other ones. Rightly or wrongly, it is widely believed that some changes in the Bible would seriously undermine sales. Putting a positive human interest spin on the matter, translators are so convinced of the superiority of their translations as a whole and the good they can do that they are not willing to sacrifice all their beneficent (volunteer!) work because of an issue that ultimately is not that important to them, whether a passage is in the text or in the footnotes. Putting a more economic hard-nosed spin on the same topic, translation committees have to do their work with an eye to the market. Some decisions are driven by economic concerns in a system where the produce is a pure commodity and there is a lot of competition. This was not the concern of Bible translations in pre-capitalist societies.

So it’s a kind of long explanation. My preference in historical scholarship is that it be consistent. But in many ways biblical scholarship is not purely historical, even if some of us wish it was and do our best to ensure it is when we do it. But most of the time, for most scholars engaged in it, biblical scholarship has theological and pastoral facets as well. And in the dominant economic system of modernity, financial considerations creep in as well.

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Readers’ Mailbag