

# Scholars and Translators

I have preached with the help of a translator in two languages. I have also preached in English to my own congregation when someone suggested a translator would have helped!



**Michael Olmsted**

After a lifetime of preaching and teaching I continue to deepen my understanding of Scripture with the help of gifted teachers and scholarly writings. 2 Timothy 3:16 tells us, “All Scripture is inspired by God (God breathed) and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness” (NASV). We draw on two stories today that remind us how we all need help discovering the direction and strength God offers us through understanding his Word.

Nehemiah 8:1, 5-8 marks Israel's return from captivity to the Persian province of Judah in the middle of the fifth century BC. For two generations they had been in exile when they came home to a broken Jerusalem and a destroyed Temple. Interpretation of their sacred texts was necessary because they were written in Hebrew, and the Jews had spoken Aramaic, the common Babylonian language, during the exile. The scene is moving as Ezra reads the “instruction scroll from Moses” (v. 1, CEB) that we know today as Torah or the first five books of the Old Testament.

Think of it: For two generations they have lived in a foreign land, with no Temple, and even their scriptures are written in a strange language! The people stand in awe and worship, raising their hands and saying “Amen” while 13 Levites walk among them translating and explaining the Word of God! The result was joy and worship.

Thank God for scholars and translators who make the Bible understandable in our time. By the time of Jesus, the common language in Palestine was Aramaic, which he spoke, but scholars studied the texts in Hebrew. Because there were so many Jews scattered across the Roman Empire, the Old Testament had been translated into Greek (The Septuagint), the common universal language. Between AD 382-405, the Christian scholar Jerome translated the Latin Vulgate (still in use today).

Portions of the Bible were translated into English before 1000 AD, but not until 1382 did some of John Wycliff's students complete a “rough” English version of the Vulgate, followed by an improved version in 1526. Tyndale produced the first printed edition of the English New Testament in 1526. He was hard at work on the Old Testament when he was executed as a heretic. But Tyndale's work stirred more translations in English so laypeople could read the Bible for themselves.

As the Reformation spread and new manuscripts were discovered, it became inevitable that the Bible would become accessible in common languages instead of Latin or the original Hebrew and Greek. The King James Bible of 1611 was written when English was in its highest form, but today that language seems stilted and our shelves overflow with an amazing variety of versions. Gratefully, scholarship continues as new discoveries are made and technology improves.

We are not unlike those exiles who came home from Babylon, hungry for the Word of God so they could walk in the way of truth and worship God. We are privileged to have access to scholarly writings and a Bible in our own language.

Acts 8:26-31 dramatically shows the importance of studying the Word and helping others have a sound understanding. Philip was one of seven Greek-speaking Jewish believers in the early church who were set aside to resolve the conflict between widows who had come home to Jerusalem from outside Palestine (Greek-speakers) and those widows who resided in Jerusalem all of their life (Aramaic-speakers) (Acts 6:1-7). Philip's commitment and language ability resulted in his becoming an effective witness and evangelist. This story shows how God causes the unlikely crossing of the paths of two very different people.

The Spirit places Philip next to an Ethiopian government official who has been in Jerusalem and is headed to Gaza on his way far beyond Egypt to the upper Nile. We suspect that as a eunuch this man saw in Judaism a faith different from the religions he already knew and came to Jerusalem only to be rejected because he had been castrated (see Deuteronomy 23:1 and Leviticus 21:17-21). Perhaps

## Formations

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Scripture: Nehemiah 8:1, 5-5;  
Acts 8:26-31

his condition was not known to the authorities, and he had purchased scrolls to study as he returned to his work at the Ethiopian royal court.

He was reading Isaiah but, without any background, did not understand. Philip was a capable interpreter. In this we see how Philip carefully makes the connection between the Old Testament and Jesus as the fulfillment of Isaiah's words. There is a hint here of our responsibility to study the scripture and recognize that you cannot interpret any single text separate from the whole of scripture. The written Word must be understood through Jesus, the Word become flesh.

Since we live in a world far removed from the first century we must be careful to study the cultures, varied religious beliefs, political realities and Jewish thinking of those ancient times if we are to interpret accurately. Given Philip's background in the secular world, his sound grasp of the Jewish Bible and his understanding of Jesus, he was equipped to help this important political figure from another country to understand the gospel and accept Christ as Savior.

Philip is both scholar and translator. He is not a “scribe” or member of the Sanhedrin, but Philip has studied and incorporated God's truth into his life. Do you have a strong desire to learn more about the Bible? Get involved in a reputable Bible study program, connect with others in your church who share that desire and ask your church staff about books to read or opportunities for study.

Research various versions of the Bible. It is often helpful to read a traditional version, then compare a more modern version. Resources are abundant. Be grateful for those who research and write so we can learn and grow in faith. Let's be as excited about the Word of God as those returned exiles in Nehemiah's day. Who knows, as you deepen in faith, you may even cross paths with an Ethiopian seeking Christ!

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*Retired after 45 years in pastoral ministry, Michael K. Olmsted enjoys family, supply preaching and interim work, literature, history, the arts and antiques.*