

# **A Gift From Heaven**

*Languages and Translations of the Bible*

*His Ascension*

*God Perseveres*

## **Lesson 15**

REFORMED  
EVANGELISM  
TASKFORCE

# The Languages and Translations of the Bible

Originally the books of the Bible were written in languages which are no longer spoken by many people. The greater part of the Old Testament is written in Hebrew, with a few parts in Aramaic. The New Testament is written in Greek. Hebrew was the language which was spoken by the Israelites at the time that the books of the Old Testament were written. Aramaic, among others, was spoken in Palestine in the time that Jesus was on earth. Finally, Greek was the universal language during the time that the apostles brought the Gospel to the world. The entire Bible is written in simple, everyday, colloquial language. But you may say, "Hold on, just a few lessons ago I was told Luke used a formal, dignified style when he dedicated his gospel to Theophilus (*Luke 1:1-4*). True, but as soon as he is finished his introduction he switches over to everyday Greek. The language of the Bible was therefore certainly not uncommon to the people of that time. The Bible was not written in code but was written so everybody could understand it.

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## Translations are Necessary

Since the Bible is not only written for the people of that time we must now translate the Bible into languages which are spoken today. On Pentecost, when "each one heard them speaking in his own language" (*Acts 2:6-11*), the start was given, so to speak, for the tremendous task of translating the Bible. As many people as possible must be given the opportunity to read this unique book.

More than 5,000 languages are spoken in the world. Although the Bible, or part of it, has been translated into many languages, there are still many people left who do not have this book in their own tongue. Fortunately, God is still using people to translate His Word. Scholars who study the old languages of the Bible and the languages of various peoples and tribes get together in order to translate the Bible into many different languages. As far as the Bible is concerned, there is no special, "holy" language. The uniqueness of the Bible does not lie in its language, but in its contents. It lies in the joyful message of this rich gospel. In the Bible God uses clear, simple language for common people like you and I. In this way you can correctly understand the promises God makes to you. The almighty Creator of heaven and earth comes very near to you in His Word. Whether you are educated or not, you can understand the Bible.

## But Do You Really Understand

The social customs, living conditions, climate, geographical and political situations in the time the Bible was written differ greatly from the present ones. This is the start of many difficult problems for translators. Many comparisons are used in the Bible to explain God's intentions. Sometimes we cannot easily relate to these comparisons anymore. What image does one who has lived his whole life in a big city receive when the Bible uses the picture of a shepherd who leads and protects his sheep? Such a person has probably never seen a shepherd or a sheep. Does that mean that the Bible should be translated more freely, more liberally? For example, should "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want" be substituted with "The Lord is my chauffeur, He brings me safely through the traffic"? (*Ps. 23*) Such a free translation does not in the least enhance the message which God gives in His Word. The comparison of a shepherd is broader and involves much more than any other image. Using loose translations is not the solution.

The other, and correct, option is that the reader of the Bible must do his best to understand the Bible as fully as possible. If he still does not understand what is written in the Bible he can have it explained by a knowledgeable person in the church (*Acts 8:26-40*).

That is also the way God wants you to learn about the Bible. He puts people to work who must explain and spread His Word (*Rom. 10:12-18, 1 Pet. 1:23-25*).

The Greek world also differed from the world in the time of Abraham, Moses, or of David, yet in that time the Old Testament was faithfully translated into Greek. The Bible originated in the eastern living conditions of long ago, but the translator must not tamper with that, otherwise he could easily change the real contents of Scriptures.

The manuscripts which are used as the sources for the translations of the Bible are not the original manuscripts. They are the product of many copies of the original. Although copying was done very carefully there are still copies of the Old as well as of the New Testament manuscripts which differ from each other. The copiers may have made some small errors in their difficult task. People who are occupied with text criticism try to retrace the original text.

However, as said in other lessons, the Bible is a unity. That is why even if there are discrepancies in sections of the several manuscripts, the Word of God still explains itself. Since it is a unity, the Bible itself corrects the mistakes people made in transcribing or translating it. God Himself insured that His Word was written, and He also insures that it is protected.

## **Research**

In translating the books of the Bible translators and theologians gratefully use the knowledge of biblical geography. This discipline deals with the regions where the history of the Old and the New Testament took place. This involves Palestine in particular but also the surrounding countries in Asia Minor and Egypt. Biblical geography searches out the location of the places mentioned in the Bible. It tries to answer questions such as: How was the climate? What kind of plants and animals were there? The results of ancient geology and archaeology are also important for the reading, interpretation and translation of the Bible. The knowledge of living conditions, money, weights and measures, water supply, as well as knowledge of ancient customs can be of great assistance in reading the Bible and can also aid in making a better translation.

## **Known Translations of the Bible**

### **The Septuagint**

As far back as the third and second century before Christ the books of the Old Testament were translated into Greek, the most widely spoken and understood language in Asia Minor. A well-known legend relates that this translation was made by 70 Jewish scribes (Septuagint is Greek, meaning 70). Thus the Septuagint was not the work of one but of many translators. The Septuagint was meant for the Jews who lived abroad. Afterwards, the Septuagint, together with the New Testament which was originally written in Greek, became the Bible of the Greek world. In the first centuries after Christ this translation was used by the preachers of the Gospel.

### **The Vulgate**

Already very early on, Latin translations were made of the Bible. The most famous and best translation was the one of Jerome, made around A.D. 400. It was an entirely new translation of the Old Testament taken directly from the original Hebrew text. The translation of Jerome received the name "Vulgate" which literally means, the common or popular one. During the Middle Ages the Vulgate was distributed in numerous copies and formed the only basis for Bible study. The Vulgate was and still is a very good translation, but it is contrary to God's intention to call the Vulgate an "inspired and therefore unalterable translation".

### **The King James Version**

In the 17th century the King James Version came into being at the command of King James of England. The language of the KJV is now somewhat old-fashioned but at the time this translation was made in common everyday English. The KJV gives a very trustworthy translation of the original text, but even this translation is not unalterable.

### **The Revised Standard Version**

The Revised Standard Version appeared in 1952. This translation is used in many churches. The texts quoted in this series of lessons are taken from this Bible translation. Those who still have some trouble with the language of the RSV can, for comparison's sake,

use the "Good News for Modern Man". It is a paraphrase more than a translation. As a result it is written in popular, easy to understand English; however, it is less trustworthy than the KJV or RSV.

## **The New International Version**

One more version deserves to be mentioned and that is the New International Version (NIV) published in 1978. It is the work of an extensive team of Bible scholars who believe in the authority and infallibility of the Bible. They stressed both accuracy and clarity in their translation. The NIV is one of today's most widely used translations in the English speaking world.

Good explanations of the Bible and of the separate Bible books are available. With the help of these, one can understand the Bible. Moreover, there is the church, where the doors are open every Sunday for anyone who wants to have the Word of God explained fully. If this church is faithful and does not place the opinions of men above the Word of God, you will hear God's good news there.

# His Ascension

## *Article 6*

Forty days after Jesus rose from the dead He went with His disciples to Bethany, a little town close to Jerusalem. The group of twelve men arrived at the Mount of Olives. And there something tremendous happened. The eleven disciples saw Jesus leave the earth. He left the ground, and ascended, higher and higher, until a cloud obscured Him from their view. Eleven totally confounded disciples stayed behind and kept looking upward.

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### **Jesus Ascended into Heaven**

The eleven disciples witnessed Jesus' ascension. However, they did not see where He went, but they were told. "...Behold, two men stood by them in white robes, and said, 'Men of Galilee why do you stand looking into heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven' " (*Acts 1:10,11*).

Those two men dressed in white garments were angels. The followers of Jesus now knew where Jesus went. If a fact is firmly established on the testimony of two or three witnesses, then Jesus' ascension, which was witnessed by eleven, is a certain fact. What the apostles knew as a certainty, both from their own eyes and from the angels, they made known to all people.

It is a fact; it truly happened. Jesus, who died and was buried, ascended into heaven.

### **The Importance of His Ascension**

The Bible mentions Jesus' ascension twice. In both cases Luke is the author (*Luke 24:50-53; Acts 1:6-11*). Luke wrote two Bible books: The Gospel according to Luke and The Acts of the Apostles. In his first book Luke describes what Jesus did and said during His life on earth. It tells us all about Jesus' humiliation for our sake. Luke's first book ends with the description of Jesus' ascension. Luke wants to show his readers that the humiliation of Jesus ended with His ascension. This was the reward He had earned for His labour (*Phil 2:9-11*).

In the second book which Luke wrote he records what Jesus did on earth while He is in heaven. This book, therefore, begins with the ascension of Jesus. Jesus is not "taking it easy" in heaven. On the contrary, He is very active. When He entered heaven, Jesus received the place of honour at God's right hand. To be seated at the right hand of God is the highest position God can give anyone. Jesus is celebrating in heaven, but He wants to celebrate with His people. That is why this place of honour is, at the same time, a "workshop" to Him.

Jesus is at God's right hand. This means that He has received the throne from which God governs the universe. Whenever the Bible mentions "God's right hand", it refers to God's governing. The Bible passages which contain this expression are too numerous to mention. In the Psalms alone, the right hand of God is mentioned twenty-four times. For instance:

"The right hand of the Lord does valiantly, the right hand of the Lord is exalted, the right hand of the Lord does valiantly!" (*Ps. 118:15-16*)

Since Jesus' new role as governor is so important the Bible mentions it often. The ascension of Jesus was, indeed, a great event. Paul writes about this in a most impressive and encouraging way in his letter to the believers in Rome. It is as if he is shouting out in jubilation:

"Is it Christ Jesus, who died, yes, who was raised from the dead, who is at the right hand of God, who indeed intercedes for us? Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword?" (*Rom. 8:34-35*)

Since the Lord Jesus is seated at the right hand of God, He now has the power to do what God did for many centuries: reign over all the earth. That means He is ruling over everything and everyone, including you and me.

## Subjected to Him

Shortly before His ascension, Jesus said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to Me" (*Matt. 28:18*). The Bible strongly emphasizes this. God "placed all things under His feet" (*Eph. 1:20-23*). This means: everything is subjected to Jesus. God has ordained that "He is the head of the body, the church" (*Col. 1:17-23*).

In all of world's history, in everything that happens on earth, in great and small matters, the church is the pivot on which everything turns. That is why it is such a great thing to be a member of the church of Jesus. The church is His "body". The church has come alive through Him. Outside the church there is no life. There is existence, but no life. Jesus takes care of the people in the church, from heaven. And He makes the church the centre of all things on earth.

If you truly want to live, you have to be a member of His church. Outside the church one can expect nothing, but an empty life. Therefore, all people who do not know the gospel yet, or have rejected it, have to be brought into contact with this gospel so that they may start to truly live. That is the task of the people who belong to His church. Jesus Himself commanded them to do, "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you" (*Matt. 28:19*).

Since His ascension, Jesus governs all of the world's history from heaven. This government has a twofold purpose. First, it serves the saints and is aimed at their salvation. Secondly, His government is also a warning to the unbeliever. If they do not repent, Christ's government will become a terror for them.

## Celebrating with Jesus

If you believe in Jesus, you will one day celebrate together with Him in heaven. Jesus is busy in heaven right now preparing for that feast. In the meantime He has not abandoned His church. He has called specific people to the task of caring for His church. These people are called office bearers. At first these office bearers were the apostles. But after they had passed away, He gave the people in His church ministers, elders, and deacons (*Eph. 4:11*). They are like ambassadors. They have the privilege and responsibility of taking care of Christ's congregation.

Paul writes about the connection between the ascension and office bearers in *Ephesians 4:7-13*. That is a difficult section of the Bible. Somewhere else the Bible even mentions that Paul often writes things "that are hard to understand" (*2 Pet.3:15,16*). This applies to the passage in Ephesians. That is not because Paul's writing is so difficult, but because he has to write about such tremendous things. To write about the ascension of Jesus and about the gifts He presents from heaven, is a very difficult task for a man. It is all so overwhelming, so precious.

In this letter to the Ephesians, Paul writes that the ascension was already symbolized by an event that took place in the Old Testament.

The symbol of God's throne, the ark of the covenant, was captured by Israel's enemies (*1 Sam. 4,5*). But God took these enemies "prisoner" (*1 Sam. 6*). God totally overpowered them, so they didn't have any choice but to release the ark. Years later, King David finally took the ark of God back to Jerusalem (*2 Sam. 6:15-19*).

Jerusalem is situated on top of Mount Zion. In this way the ark's journey to the city represented, in a sense, a kind of ascension. When the ark had ascended to Jerusalem on Mt. Zion, a celebration took place. King David then gave all the people of Israel a gift.

In the name of the Lord, David blessed the people and "distributed among all the people, the whole multitude of Israel, both men and women, to each a cake of bread, a portion of meat, and a cake of raisins" (*2 Sam. 6:19*).

In this connection Paul quotes *Psalm 68* in which the ark's ascension is celebrated in song. He then writes that the congregation of Jesus is enriched by office bearers in the church, who want to proclaim the gospel of the risen and ascended Jesus to whoever wants to hear it.

That is the way Jesus takes care of His church from heaven. A person must join the body of Christ, the church, to experience the wealth that is there. Whoever remains outside the church will remain poor.

The ascension of Jesus means that He will give to us too the glory which He had with God before the world began (*John 17:5*).

## Heaven Stands Open

Jesus went up from earth to heaven in a most remarkable way. "Then He led them out as far as Bethany, and lifting up His hands He blessed them. While He blessed them, He parted from them, and was carried up into heaven" (*Luke 24:50,51*). Jesus said farewell to His disciples in His capacity as a priest, because this lifting up of His hands as described here, was something which only priests did in the Old Testament. After having made the sacrifice, they would lift up their hands and bless the people.

Jesus had offered His perfect sacrifice. He then lifted up His hands, blessed His disciples, and ascended into heaven. From that moment on, no more sacrifices needed to be offered to blot out sins. By dying on the cross, He offered the perfect sacrifice once and for all. His blessing is permanent.

From His throne at the Father's right hand, Jesus, the Priest blesses all people for whom He has brought His sacrifice.

"Who shall separate us from the love of Christ?" (*Rom. 8:35*)

The man Jesus could enter heaven. Of course, He is God's Son, but His entrance symbolized that heaven was once again open to man. No longer is heaven closed to people. For the members of His church, heaven stands open.

# God Perseveres

## *Judges 6-8, 13-16*

After wandering through the desert for forty years, the people of Israel arrived in the Promised Land. They conquered most of the peoples that lived in this country and took their cities. Finally there was peace and rest. Time could be taken to divide the land among themselves. They were allowed to live in houses they had not built themselves and to eat from fruit trees they had not planted. The people soon enjoyed a normal, daily routine of living. They had a good life in a good land.

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### **He is Our God**

Before his death, Joshua makes a farewell speech to the leaders of his nation (*Jos. 23*). He reminds them of the faithfulness of the Lord who had fulfilled His promises and had given His people the promised land as a possession. He also warns them. If they will not continue to serve the Lord in the future they will be forced to leave again (*Jos. 24:14*). This warning was very timely. From the speech Joshua gives in Shechem, it is clear that no sooner had the people received Canaan from their Lord, and they started worshipping the gods of the heathens (*Jos. 24:23; Amos 5:25,26*). They had worshipped other gods in the desert and even God's conquest of Canaan did not totally reform them. Joshua emphatically asks the leaders of the people to continue in the service of the Lord. He told them that was the only condition for a happy and joyful life, and for a time Israel accepted this condition. They said, "...we also will serve the LORD, for he is our God" (*Jos. 24:18*).

### **The Lovelessness of God's Nation**

The Israelites of those days were not much different from the people of today. As long as Joshua, their strong God-fearing leader, was alive things went well for the people of Israel. As soon as he died this quickly came to an end.

Mankind is like that. People forget easily. Affluence can grab hold of people quickly and before long a person puts confidence in himself instead of in God. However, whatever comes from our heart is not good, but bad. It is easy to follow the road of least resistance, but it is also very dangerous.

In Judges, the continuation of the book of Joshua, Israel heads out on this dangerous road. "The Israelites did what was evil in the eyes of God" is the constant refrain. And the book climaxes with the lamentation, "every man did what was right in his own eyes" (*Jud. 21:25*). The nation that was so richly blessed, soon fell very low. The people no longer remembered the exodus from Egypt. The fight against the Canaanites was abandoned (*Jud. 1:2 7-35*). They had had enough of it. In spite of God's command to capture the entire country and defeat all the Canaanites, they did not do this (*Jos. 23:5*). It was much easier to remain at home than to go out and enter combat again.

On nearly every page of the book of Judges one encounters disobedience, cowardice, and lovelessness. The people of Israel forgot their God, and chose to serve the gods of the Canaanites. "And the people of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals" (*Jud. 2:11*). These Canaanite idols promised many of the same things as God, such as fertile land and healthy herds. But it is impossible to serve God and idols. Whoever puts his trust in another gods, deserts the only true God. There is no way around that.

The Heidelberg Catechism, an old and trusted textbook of the church gives a very good definition of idolatry. "Idolatry is having or inventing something in which to put our trust instead of, or in addition to the one true God Who has revealed Himself in His Word" (Q & A 95). Israel was guilty of exactly that. When Israel worshipped idols, it demonstrated that it no longer loved and trusted God. That is the great sin: lovelessness. Israel was like someone in a marriage who despises his partner, and has an affair with someone else. Idolatry is adultery. The Bible often makes that analogy to bring home the seriousness of idolatry.

## Sinful, Yet Saved

God punishes His people. *Judges 2-3:4* describes what happened. God's love, which was hurt, stirred up His anger. The Canaanite nations which the Israelites should have destroyed, robbed the country and took all its possessions (*Jud. 2:12-14*). Yet, God also remains merciful. He does not let go of His people. In spite of their sins, God perseveres. The people are, and remain His people, so He remains faithful to them. Every time again when the Israelites were humbled and turned back to God, He gave them a man who saved them from their enemies. But when that man dies, the people return to their old sinful ways (*Jud. 2:19*).

The following can be seen time and again in the book of Judges. Certain themes keep recurring: Israel sins, God punishes, and God saves. So often you come across the phrase, "But when the people cried to the LORD, He raised a deliverer for the people of Israel..." (*Jud. 3:9, 3:15*). These deliverers were commonly called judges. A judge is a magistrate, someone who administers justice. And in this Old Testament context he was also a saviour, someone who delivered people from distress.

Starting with *Judges 3:5*, the history of Israel's fifteen judges, is recorded. Let's look at the lives of two of the best-known ones: Gideon and Samson.

## Gideon and Samson

God called Gideon in a very special way to free Israel from the Midianites, a desert-dwelling nation which lived to the east of Canaan. Gideon had gathered a huge army for his fight against the Midianites, but God had other plans. God told him to send the whole army back home, except for 300 men. For God that was sufficient to fight the battle. The enemy was defeated by this small number of men and the people again entered a period of rest (*Jud. 6-8*). It was clear Gideon had not given the people this victory. God delivered His people. The judge Gideon was not yet the true saviour. Later on in life he also turns to idols (*Jud. 8:26,27*). And after his death, the people relapse into idolatry (*Jud. 8:33-35*).

Again the Lord has compassion on His nation and sends them one of the most well-known judges, Samson. His birth is announced by a messenger from God, an angel of the Lord.

The angel told his parents to dedicate Samson as a Nazarite (*Jud. 13:5,7*). A Nazarite was someone who dedicated himself to God for a certain period of time by making a vow. He had to keep certain rules. He was not allowed to drink wine and could not cut his hair (*Num. 6*). Usually the promise of a Nazarite was temporary, but the Bible also mentions people who were Nazarites their whole life through. Samuel, John the Baptist, and Samson were all life-long Nazarites (*1 Sam. 1:11; Luke 1:15; Jud. 16:17*).

Samson was different than all other Nazarites though. He received supernatural powers when "the Spirit of the Lord" came over him. He took on the entire neighbouring Philistine army single handedly and won.

To their shame the Israelites ignored Samson's special gifts (*Jud. 15:9-13*). Even worse, though, he went his own way, a way that lead him away from God. He married a Philistine and when that marriage failed, he sought the company of prostitutes (*Jud. 14,16*). Eventually, he betrayed the secret of his supernatural power to one of those whores, Delilah (*Jud. 16:17*).

His special calling did not impress him any longer. While he was asleep Delilah cut his hair. The Nazarite symbol was desecrated, and God's Spirit deserts him. The Philistines had no trouble capturing their formidable enemy now because he was easy to overpower without his supernatural strength.

While in a Philistine prison in Gaza Samson's hair grew back, but so did his trust in God. For one final time his strength returned. During his final appearance before the Philistines he killed more enemies than during his entire lifetime. He pulled the roof down on a party of Philistine dignitaries and took his own life in the process. In this unique way God delivered His people. Still, Samson was not the true saviour.

In the remainder of the book of Judges you can read about the sins Israel committed. The tribe of Benjamin was almost completely destroyed by the other tribes because the inhabitants from Gibeon were just as godless as the people of Sodom used to be. And just like before, through all the stories of sins there is God's unfailing care for His people. God acquits the sinful Israelites because He has His eye on the coming Messiah who will pay for all sin. Thank God that the Christ did come!

# Questions 15

## Languages and Translations of the Bible

1. Are archaeological excavations necessary to prove the truth of the Bible? Give reasons for your answer. What purpose may excavations serve?
2. Is it right to maintain an old translation of the Bible only because that translation is old and sounds more respectful? (In the Roman Catholic tradition the Vulgate was accepted for centuries as the only licensed translation.) Give reasons for your answer.
3. In *Ex. 17:14* we read that Moses had to write something in a book. What was the appearance of such a book? (*Jer.36; Ps. 40:7; Rev. 5*)

## His Ascension

1. Before Jesus left the earth He promised His disciples that He would send someone else in His place. Who? When was this promise fulfilled? (*John 14:16,17, Acts 2*)
2. During Jesus' life on earth, angels acted as messengers and witnesses. On what occasions? (*Matt. 1:20, 2:13; 28:2; Luke 1:11; 2:9*)
3. In the Old Testament, the high priest entered the tabernacle with the blood of a ram. Also this event finds its fulfillment in the ascension of Jesus. Why? (*Lev. 16:15; Heb. 9:11-14; 9:20-28*)

## God Perseveres

1. Read *Judges 4 and 5*. Chapter 5 contains the beautiful song of Deborah, the only woman judge. In what way did the Lord confuse the enemy's army? (compare *4:15* to *5:20,21*)
2. Why did Samson become powerless when Delilah cut his hair? (*Jud. 13:5 and 16.19*)
3. *Judges 2:17* describes how the Israelites prostituted themselves by serving other gods. Read *Deut. 4:24-29* and *Hosea 2*. Explain why idolatry is called "adultery". (Remember that the church in the Old and New Testament is often compared to a "bride". See *Jer. 2:2; Rev. 22:17; Eph. 5:22-23.*)