

Review Article of Paul D. Wegner: *The Journey from Texts to Translations*

By Ron Minton

Paul D. Wegner: *The Journey from Texts to Translations*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1999. 464 pp. \$33.99, cloth.

In *The Journey from Texts to Translations*, Paul Wegner has organized and summarized thousands of details about how the Bible came to us. The book does more, however, than just give numerous facts. There are more than 100 mostly photo graphic illustrations, more than 100 tables, and six maps. A twenty-one-page double column Subject Index and a good Scripture Index make the work a potentially useful reference tool. The book is laid out well and uses very clear type.

Another strength of this book is its many valuable short informational summaries. For example, pages 61–65 contain an excellent summary of the synoptic problem, encompassing all the details the average reader of this book is likely to need, yet the discussion is kept well within the book's theme of how we got the Bible. Each chapter of Wegner's book ends with a short and very helpful bibliography "For Further Reading."

After an introductory chapter on "The Bible as the Word of God," Wegner discusses the development of the Bible in five parts, each consisting of several chapters. Part One is "Preliminary Matters Regarding the Bible." Parts of these four chapters, for example the discussion of the Old and New Covenants (Chap. 2), apply only indirectly to the matter of getting the Bible from its texts to translations. On the other hand, Chap. 3, on "The Old Testament," is particularly valuable, with much helpful information, charts, and history. Chapter 4, on the New Testament, is likewise rich in interesting historical details.

Part Two, "The Canonization of the Bible," begins (Chap. 6) with information on ancient writing practices. This is followed (Chap. 7) by a description of the process of canonization of the Old Testament, making excellent use of primary source documents. Chapter 8 gives a nice overview of "Old Testament Extracanonical Books," a short but handy reference tool. Chapter 9, on the New Testament Canon, briefly but helpfully treats early Christian views of the canon.

Part Three, "Transmission of the Bible," has two chapters each on the Old Testament and the New Testament. These four chapters are good summaries of the evidence and history of the texts and could help deal with the misinformation being circulated by some groups today. Manuscripts Vaticanus, Sinaiticus, and Alexandrinus are discussed in his section on the LXX, not in the NT section. Therefore, his photo of Sinaiticus (195) showing John 21 rather than an OT page is a little unexpected.

The NT section is vitiated by some unfortunate ambiguities. On 208–11 he divides the "styles of writing" of Greek manuscripts into Capital Letters, Uncial Letters, Cursive Manuscripts, and Minuscule Manuscripts. Such a mixing of categories can be confusing. Further, his discussion is also imprecise at times. For example, he claims that "Only about one hundred of the earliest NT uncial manuscripts (dated between the early second to eighth centuries) have survived." He appears to be referring to papyrus manuscripts, but the term "uncial" is normally used of parchment manuscripts, some of which predate many papyri manuscripts which he calls "the earliest uncial mss." Some clarification occurs on 235–37, but by then the clarification simply adds to the confusion.

Another difficulty is his use of the term “fragment.” While the word can refer to large manuscripts with portions missing, it is normally used for manuscripts where only a small portion or separated portions have survived. For example, his “two of the more important fragments are P45 and P46” could have been better expressed.

Part Four, “Early Translations of the Bible,” quickly but helpfully covers Early Versions (Chap. 15) and First Printed Greek Bibles (Chap. 16). The brief discussion of the early printing presses was interesting and useful.

Part Five, comprising about one third of the book, is entitled “English Translations of the Bible.” Chapter 17 adequately covers translation efforts prior to the KJV, and is especially helpful in the pre-Wycliffe (before the 1380s) section (pages 271–79). Chapter 18 is on the KJV and its derivatives. Here Wegner includes his comments on the RV, ASV, RSV, NASB, KJII, NKJV, and NRSV. While he is technically correct that most of the above Bibles are revisions of the KJV, some of them resemble the KJV so little they really would be better placed in the next chapters with modern translations. His four pages on “The King James Debate” are rather tepid. He was, if anything, too conciliatory in his remarks, and he failed to note some of the most serious logical and factual errors of the “KJV-only” movement.

The next two chapters survey the most common modern translations, covering each translation’s history, translation philosophy, and an evaluation. Some seventeen translations are considered, the latest being the NLT of 1996. This was his strongest section; Wegner seems more in his element here than in the earlier sections. The final chapter, “Why So Many Translations?” is only five pages, but is helpful and could in my opinion have been profitably expanded.

Unfortunately, there are a number of problems in the book, some of which have already been noted. There are a few typos (e.g., 184 which has “a least” for “at least”), and some tables are left un-numbered (e.g., 25 and 27), but of much greater concern are the mistakes and/or misleading statements. Of course, in a book of so many details, it is exceedingly difficult to be error free, but closer attention in editing might have caught some of the following *faux pas*:

On page 51, the date of Herod’s death is given as 6 B.C. rather than 4 B.C. On 54 his “Books of the NT,” including a list of General Epistles (in Table 4.1), omits Hebrews and on 57 he again mentions “the seven General Epistles” without Hebrews. But on 137 the General Epistles includes Hebrews, but (strangely) omits Jude. On 148 the Mormon prophet is named “John” Smith instead of Joseph. Page 151 refers to the *agrapha* as “sayings of Jesus that were not recorded in the NT” (the following page correctly implies that it is Jesus’ words not found in any of the four Gospels). On 174 Wegner says, “someone has quipped that [Stephen] Langton made the chapter divisions while riding his horse from Paris to Lyons; every time his horse hit a bump, he made a chapter division.” Actually, the story pertains to Robert Stephanus and the verse divisions in his 1551 Greek NT, not chapter divisions in 1225.

Pages 209–10 report that “about 20% of the NT manuscripts that exist are palimpsests.” Actually, Metzger, to whom Wegner is referring, says 52 of 250 *uncials* are palimpsests. This means that only around 1% of the NT Greek manuscripts are palimpsests.

Abraham Elzevir was Bonaventure Elzevir’s nephew, not “brother” as reported on 215, 268, and 434. On 220, “one manuscript” should probably read “one family” or “one text-type.” The chart of “Text Families and Their Sources” (226) omits such important manuscripts as P46 and P49. He seems to have followed an older chart such as is found in Greenlee’s first edition. Page

233 says there are only a “few hundred” OT manuscripts (on 309 he says 800), but actually there are thousands. A photo on 234 of a leaf from P46, showing the “floating doxology” of Rom 16:25–27 as appearing at the end of chapter 15, should be identified as “Rom 16:25–27 and 16:1–3,” not “16:25–27:3.” On 235, P52 is “one of the earliest” extant manuscripts of John. He should just say “the earliest” unless he is privy to new information.

On page 253, the 1592 Clementine Latin Vulgate “remained the authorized version of the Roman Catholic Church until the Authorized Version of 1611.” This is certainly not correct. The Clementine Latin Vulgate is still (as far as I know) the official Roman Catholic Bible. The time from Purvey’s revised Wycliffe Bible (c. 1390) until Tyndale (1526) was about 135 years, not “about two hundred” as is stated on 281. On 301, we read: “Douai-Rheims Bible (1593).” This Bible is correctly dated 1582 (NT) and 1609/10 (OT) on 302. Page 310 states that the KJV error of Matt 23:24 “strain at a gnat” was “retained nearly until the present day.” Actually, it is still retained by almost all KJV publishers. The NASB (322–25) is said to render Jehovah as “Lord,” but it is actually rendered as LORD. The 58 “anonymous” translators of the NASB are not now anonymous.

Page 328 states that Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia was the primary text for the NKJV OT and that the 1516 Rabbinic Bible was used for comparison. Part of this information is stated in the preface to the NKJV, but in actuality, when BHS differed from the Rabbinic Bible enough to affect the translation (only a few places), the Rabbinic Bible (2nd Bomberg edition of 1524/25) was followed. (The best source for information on the NKJV is Art Farstad’s *The NKJV in the Great Tradition*, but Wegner’s discussion (327–29; 333, 424) does not refer to it. On 337, “334–35” should be “334–45.”

There are also a few general weaknesses that make the book less useful and lower its value as a reference tool. One immediate problem is that there are no page numbers in the lists of figures, maps, and tables, making them difficult to find. The book is beset by that darling of publishers and bane of readers, the endnote scheme. The fact that Wegner’s 940 notes are numbered by chapter makes checking an occasional reference burdensome.

Another general weakness already hinted at is inconsistency. The same item is sometimes stated differently when consistency could help avoid confusion. For example, the heading on every left page is the title of the book and the right page heading is always the chapter or index title. Yet the right page headings in chapter 17 are always the title of Part Five “English Translations of the Bible” instead of the actual chapter title.

With regard to more substantive issues, I felt there was too much bias toward the Alexandrian text-type. Most NT scholars favor that text and its important manuscripts, but Wegner sometimes goes beyond normal expectations for this allegedly superior group of manuscripts. For example, on 229 he says, “Earlier evidences from P46, Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, each of which are [*sic*] very accurate, favors [*sic*] omitting the phrase in Ephesus.” Every textual scholar knows that these three manuscripts are very old and very valuable, but to say they are “very accurate” is rather misleading. Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, for example, are both Alexandrian texts, but in important variations, these two manuscripts may disagree with each other more times than they agree (just check the UBS4 notes in the Epistles that both contain). In the Gospels they disagree more than thirty-three times per chapter. This is far from what most readers would call “very accurate.”

Lest I appear to be more negative than I am toward this work, let me observe that this work

does achieve its stated purpose, “to provide a general survey of how the Bible we use came to be in its present form” (17), and Dr. Wegner and Baker Book House are to be thanked for undertaking this project. And I admit I have not found a book on this type of subject that does not contain mistakes. However, the publisher should probably have had the work examined by a few more scholars. As it is, although it has great potential, I think a corrected edition is called for and would suggest that readers wait for it. When, as I hope, such a corrected edition does appear, it will be highly useful for either classroom use or collateral reading.

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