

The Danish Translation That Removes Israel From the New Testament

By now you may have heard about the shocking, new Danish “translation” of the Bible that virtually wipes out “Israel” from the New Testament. Well, the truth is actually worse than the headlines, since the Danish Bible Society is downplaying the seriousness of its actions.

First, the simple facts: Whereas in the Greek New Testament, the word “Israel” occurs more than 60 times, it is found only once in the new Danish version called Bibelen 2020. That’s right, just once, and at that, simply because it is a direct quote from an Old Testament verse. Otherwise, “Israel” is gone.

In some cases, “Israel” is changed to “land of the Jews.” In other cases, it disappears entirely, as in Matthew 2:21, where “the land of Israel” (to which Joseph, Mary and Jesus are returning) simply becomes “home.” Yes, Joseph, “Go back home” vs. “Go back to the land of Israel.” What kind of “translation” is this?

Not surprisingly, the new translation has sparked a firestorm of international criticism, especially in the Jewish world. And how did the secretary-general of the Bible Society, Birgitte Stoklund, respond?

She wrote, “Basically, I think they find it hard to understand that the average Dane does not understand that reference is made to a people, and not geography when it says ‘Israel’ in the New Testament. Messianic Jews see the state of Israel as fulfilling God’s promises.

“However, in Denmark, few people want to formulate themselves

like this, and that is also why the criticism of our practice comes from a very small minority in the church.”

Ah yes, that very small minority, probably quite fundamentalist and largely uneducated. At least that’s the impression you get from her disdainful comments. And, she is saying, few Danish Christians see any connection between modern Israel and the Israel of the Bible. How very sad.

The bottom line for these translators is simple: Christian readers must not connect “Israel” in the New Testament with the nation of Israel today.

How, then, does the Danish Bible Society state that it is “false information” to claim that “Israel” has been removed from their new translation?’

Their website states, “False information about the new Danish Bible Translation. The Contemporary Danish Bible 2020 has been going around. Some news media states that the word Israel and the words Jew and Jewish have been omitted from the translation and also claim that the reason for this would be political and anti-Semitic. Nothing could be further from the truth. The words Israel and Israelites occur in the translation more than 2000 times and the words Jew and Jewish occur more than 500 times.”

But this is outright deception, since the charge was not that “Israel” had been removed from the entire Bible. Rather, the charge was that it was removed from the New Testament. And there certainly is something political and anti-Semitic in this decision.

How, then, does the Bible Society justify doing this?

They explain, “In the New Testament the word ‘Israel’ has been translated into ‘the Jewish people,’ ‘the Jews’ or ‘the people’ because when the Greek text uses the word ‘Israel’ it is referring to a people with whom God has a special

relationship—Jacob's descendants. However, for the secular reader, who does not know the Bible well, 'Israel' could be referring only to a country. Therefore the word 'Israel' in the Greek text has been translated in other ways, so that the reader understands it is referring to the Jewish people."

Why, then, are other countries, like Egypt, still called Egypt in the New Testament? As pointed out by Jan Frost in his Danish video (which can be watched with English captions), Egypt today is hardly identical to Egypt in biblical times. Yet the translators had no problem with calling it Egypt. Why not the same with Israel, especially when it applied to the geographical territory?

And so, Egypt is mentioned repeatedly in Matthew 2:13-20, where Joseph and his family go down to Egypt, yet when Israel is mentioned, they just go home (see Matt. 2:21). This is beyond inconsistent. This is hypocritical. And this smacks of a political agenda. So much for "translating" the Bible.

Not only so, but why do these translators have no problem translating "Israel" with "Israel" in the Old Testament? Won't the Danish readers be just as confused? Won't they equate Israel in the Old Testament with the land and people of Israel today? Why, then, is this OK for Old Testament texts but not New Testament texts? Can you see how terribly wrong this is?

Strikingly, the article on the Danish Bible Society website is titled, "Fake news about new Danish Bible." It should have read, "Fake News About the True News About the New Danish Bible."

Yet there's something else that has not been sufficiently emphasized about this egregious new "translation" decision. It breaks the continuity between the Old Testament and the New Testament, since the very term that occurs more than 2,000 times in the Old Testament (speaking of the land and/or the people of Israel) now disappears from the New.

Remember that the Bible Society told us, "The words Israel and Israelites occur in the translation more than 2000 times" (meaning, in the Old Testament), which would then connect with the 60+ times the words Israel or Israelite are found in the New Testament.

Except now they are not there. The promises to Israel and about Israel now end in the Old Testament. And, when the New Testament speaks only of "the Jews," the people are now disconnected from their land.

There are other significant problems with this translation, including the removal of words like "sin," which becomes watered down to a mere "mistake." As the Bible Society explained, "it does not use the usual Danish words for sin, grace, mercy, covenant and many other typically biblical words, which an average Danish reader would not be familiar with the meaning of."

But was there no better way to communicate the aspects of rebellion, disobedience and defilement involved in human sin? Is committing a sin simply making a mistake?

The positive news is that the uproar is causing significant embarrassment for the Bible Society. Consequently, in their "Fake news" article, they state, "The New Testament in Contemporary Danish was first published in 2007. It has been slightly revised up to the publication of The Contemporary Danish Bible 2020. In this revision the question of Israel has not been discussed. In light of the critique raised The Danish Bible Society will carefully consider if specific verses in The New Testament need a revision."

I would urge the translators to be very careful. They are treading on dangerous (and sacred) ground.