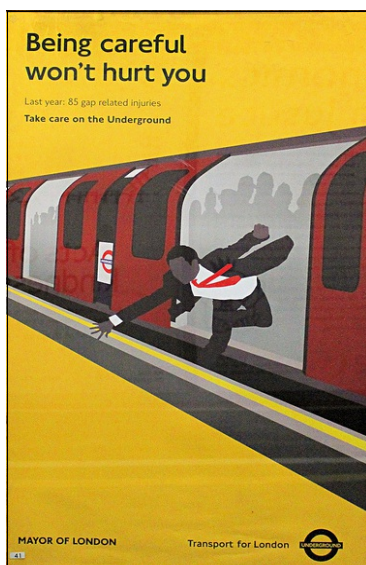


Addressing the Original Testament Gap

At least a portion of the Scriptures have been translated and published into about 3,500 languages. Of these only 20% of the languages include the translation of the Old Testament (which we will refer to as the Original Testament).¹ Readers who speak one of the other languages often experience a major gap in their encounter with the Scriptures, because the Original Testament is essential foundation to the New Testament. “For Jesus and the New Testament writers, these Scriptures were a living resource for understanding God, God’s ways in the world and God’s ways with us. Every part of them was useful ‘for teaching, reproving, correcting, and training in righteousness, so that everyone who belongs to God can be proficient, equipped for every good work’ (2 Timothy 3.16-17).”² For those of us who enjoy the benefit of having the whole Bible in our mother tongue, it is hard to imagine the “gap” felt by those who have only some of God’s word in their heart language. To help us understand, we have produced *The Gap Testament*, which visualizes how people experience the New Testament when they don’t have access to the Original Testament. In this side-by-side comparison, we see Mark 12 on the left as those of us who have the whole Bible see it. All quotations and allusions are visible and understood we have access to the Original Testament. It is not so, for those who don’t have the the Original Testament in their language. Their experience when they read the New Testament feels like the image on the right.

²⁴ Jesus replied,
 “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God. ²⁵ For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven.
²⁶ “But now, as to whether the dead will be raised—haven’t you ever read about this in the writings of Moses, in the story of the burning bush? Long after Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob had died, God said to Moses, “I am the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob.” ²⁷ So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error.”
²⁸ One of the teachers of religious law was standing there listening to the debate. He realized that Jesus had answered well, so he asked,
 “Of all the commandments, which is the most important?”
²⁹ Jesus replied,
 “The most important commandment is this: ‘Listen, O Israel! The Lord our God is the one and only Lord. ³⁰ And you must love the Lord your God with all your heart, all your soul, all your mind, and all your strength.’ ³¹ The second is equally important: ‘Love your neighbor as yourself.’ No other commandment is greater than these.”
³² The teacher of religious law replied,
 “Well said, Teacher. You have spoken the truth by saying that there is only one God and no other. ³³ And I know it is important to love him with all my heart and all my understanding and all my strength, and to love my neighbor as myself. This is more important than to offer all of the burnt offerings and sacrifices required in the law!”
³⁴ Realizing how much the man understood, Jesus said to him,
 “You are not far from the Kingdom of God.”
 And after that, no one dared to ask him any more questions.
³⁵ Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked,
 “Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah is the son of David? ³⁶ For David himself, speaking under the inspiration of

²⁴ Jesus replied,
 “Your mistake is that you don’t know the Scriptures, and you don’t know the power of God. ²⁵ For when the dead rise, they will neither marry nor be given in marriage. In this respect they will be like the angels in heaven.
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²⁷ So he is the God of the living, not the dead. You have made a serious error.”
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³⁵ Later, as Jesus was teaching the people in the Temple, he asked,
 “Why do the teachers of religious law claim that the Messiah is the son of David? ³⁶



To better illustrate how serious this Biblical Gap is, let’s consider the London Underground. Commonly known as “the Tube,” it is famous for the iconic warning to “mind the gap” between the train and the subway platform. This phrase is a pithy exhortation to exert caution when getting on or off the subway train. The poster on the left soberly admonishes the traveling public, “Take care on the Underground.” Why? Because during the previous year there had been “85 gap-related injuries”! Ignoring the gap can be injurious to your health. Or worse. Recently, the British Rail Accident Investigation Branch reported not only an injury, but a tragic gap-related fatality: “... on 26 May 2020, at Waterloo Underground station in London, a passenger fell into the gap between the northbound Bakerloo line platform and the train from which he had just alighted. A large gap existed between the train and the platform because of the track curvature at the location of

the passenger's fall. The passenger was unable to free himself and the train departed with the passenger still in the gap, crushing him as it moved off."³ Not heeding the admonition to "mind the gap" was deadly.

The same could be true for us if we ignore the Original Testament Gap. Over 90% of the languages spoken on earth do not have a single word of the Original Testament translated and published in their language. If we fail to use the Original Testament as God intended, it will prove to be injurious to our spiritual and societal health. Therefore we must dedicate ourselves to

- **MIND THE GAP**, and to make every effort to
- **BRIDGE THE GAP** until we are able ultimately to
- **ELIMINATE THE GAP**.

These three steps are crucial to see the fullness of God's good purposes accomplished among all the peoples and languages of the world.

Mind the Gap

As noted above, if we are unaware of the gap, it could lead to our undoing. The gap currently facing the Body of Christ could undermine its efforts to complete the Great Commission. The gap has to do with the *Tanakh*, the Hebrew Scriptures, the First Testament or what we prefer to call the Original Testament. "Calling it the 'Old Testament' can make it sound something antiquated and out-of-date that has nothing much to do with Christian faith. Actually it's utterly up-to-date and hugely significant for Christian faith."⁴ When we use the word "Original" rather than "Old" it reminds us that the first Testament gives us our foundational legacy. It gives us the essential insight and relevant wisdom that we need as people of faith. It provides for us the crucial context that helps us be faithful in the present and fruitful as we look to the future. We dare not lose the transformational heritage of this God-breathed Testament.⁵ For this reason, it must be made available to all people.

Mind the Translation Gap

There are over 7,200 living languages spoken on earth today. But the whole Bible (the sixty-six books of the Original and New Testaments) has been translated into just over 700 languages. The New Testament has been published in an additional 1500+ languages. We need the context of the Original Testament to understand meaningfully the writings of the New. This is because one of every four verses in the New Testament make a direct reference to the Original Testament. "Without exception, every New Testament author wrote about the new work of God on earth while looking through the prism of the earlier or 'old' work."⁶ Their words are built on what had been revealed in the earlier Scriptures. So if people read in New Testament about Abraham, Moses and David; or Babylon, Nineveh and Sodom; or the exodus, the law and the prophetic promises of Messiah, how can they possibly understand the author's intent if they do not have the Original Testament?

Mind the Usage Gap

Even among those who have access to the Original Testament in their mother tongue, the usage gap is undermining their understanding of how God wants to redeem every individual and

transform every society. The thirty-nine books of the Original Testament have been called “the neglected three-quarters of the Bible.”⁷ The impact can be devastating on the life of the Church. It has been noted that “for many contemporary Christians ... the Old Testament has ceased to function in healthy ways in their lives as sacred, authoritative, canonical literature.”⁸

Mind the Understanding Gap

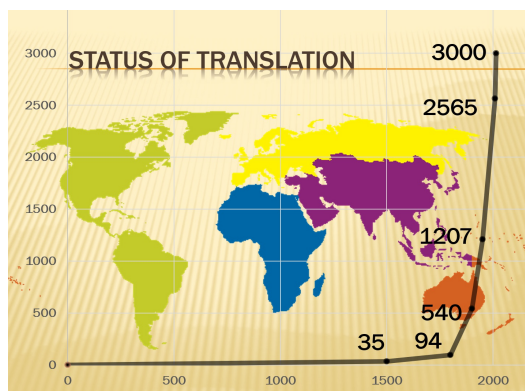
“For Jesus and the New Testament writers, these Scriptures were a living resource for understanding God, God’s ways in the world and God’s ways with us.”⁹ “Most assuredly we cannot understand the New Testament apart from the Old.”¹⁰ If we want to have a full understanding of the transformative impact of the Gospel, it is imperative that we recover the rightful place of the Original Testament in the life of every follower of Jesus. We need to address this issue before it is too late. It is time to mind the gap!

Bridge the Gap

It is now of utmost importance for godly leaders across the Body of Christ to address this issue. It is time to act intentionally and intensely to bridge the gap that exists between today’s followers of Jesus and the text of the Original Testament. It is time to galvanize our efforts to connect the ancient accounts of God’s past dealings with the people of faith, with those who are now facing critical contemporary issues to know, love and serve God in these tumultuous times.

Bridge the Translation Gap

As we look at the history of Bible translation it is clear that we are living in a time of accelerated focus on this crucial missional goal. In the first 15 centuries the Bible was translated into a little less than forty languages. Then, with the Reformers’ fervor for *Sola Scriptura*,¹¹ a new era of translation began. Whereas a new language had been translated and published on average once every 40 years in the first millennia and a half since Christ, there were more than a dozen language translations in the 40 years following Luther’s 1522 translation of the Bible into



German. They included Czech, Danish, English, French, Hungarian, Icelandic, Polish, Russian, Serbo-Croatian, Spanish, Swedish, and others. However, the progress was still slow. By 1800 the Bible had been translated into only 94 languages. But with the birth of the modern missions movement, that number exploded to 540 languages by 1900 (a 575% increase in one century) – thanks to the inspiring work of William Carey and a generation of intrepid, pioneering missionaries. The speed of translation increased exponentially in the 20th century, turning the growth

chart into an amazing ‘hockey stick.’ Between 1900-2000 a new translation was completed on average once every 3 to 4 weeks! And the pace has picked up since the start of this new century: a portion of Bible is now being published in a new language once every 3 to 4 days!

Though this represents a remarkable acceleration, the need is still great. The fact remains that

more than 90% of the 7200+ living languages spoken on earth, still do not have access to a complete Bible. At the present rate it will be decades more before every language has a published portion. God is to be thanked for the sacrificial and skillful efforts of the myriads of individuals and organizations that have gotten us this far. But, we must exert renewed effort to bridge the Original Testament gap that is still experienced by the vast majority of languages. This will require focused resolutions as church leaders, agency executives, marketplace leaders, denominational visionaries, philanthropists, pastors, translators, missionaries, intercessors, technologists, and others – so that no one on earth will be spiritually impoverished because of the Original Testament gap in their mother tongue.

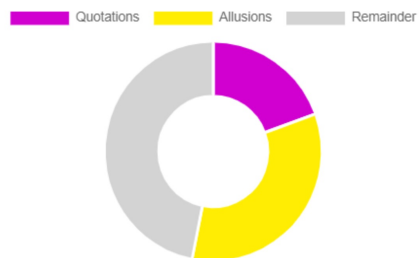
Bridge the Usage Gap

Some 2,600 languages have published a New Testament or portions thereof. As we complete the work of translation and bridge the Original Testament translation gap, we also need to bridge the usage gap. Recent surveys of Scriptural usage in sermons, show that there is “a ratio of 2.32 New Testament sermons to every Old Testament one; this ratio seems odd when one recalls that the Old Testament constitutes 78.1% of the Protestant Christian cannon ... one should expect sermons from the Old Testament to be at least three times as frequent as those from the New Testament.”¹² In many of our churches the Original Testament is gravely underutilized. Even when the Original Testament is available, its usage is “dying.”¹³

Remember that Paul exhorted Timothy to, “Preach the word of God. Be prepared, whether the time is favorable or not. Patiently correct, rebuke, and encourage your people with good teaching.”¹⁴ When Paul wrote these instructions to Timothy, the “word of God” was none other than the Original Testament. In 1Co 10:10 Paul recounts key passages from the Original Testament. He tells us why in verse 11: “These things happened to them as examples for us. They were written down to warn us who live at the end of the age.” Paul understand the stories contained in the Hebrew Scriptures were of vital importance to the church. So too it is with us today. We must restore the place of the Original Testament in the ministry and the practice of the church. Our orthodoxy will suffer if we do not embrace an orthopraxis which includes a healthy helping of the Original Testament in our Scriptural diet.

Bridge the Understanding Gap

In Hebrews 11 we read the phrase “by faith” or its equivalent 21 times.¹⁵ The first “by faith” is the faith we are to have in God because “we understand that the entire universe was formed” by him. The author of Hebrews builds on the Original Testament. In fact, 53.1% of the verses in Hebrews contain either a direct quotation or an intentional allusion of the Original Testament (as



seen in the chart below). The faith declared in Hebrews is based on the words of Scripture written long before. In fact, God’s work as Creator is affirmed in 293 chapters in 34 books of the Original Testament.¹⁶ Hebrews 11:4-14 then details the faith of 20 Biblical individuals or groups. They are: Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Sarah, Joseph, Moses’ parents (Amram & Jochebed), Moses, the people of Israel (of the Exodus generation), the people of Israel (of the Conquest

generation), Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, Samuel, and all the prophets. Their stories are the subject of 730 chapters in 34 books of the Original Testament.¹⁷

When you add these two lists together, we discover that just in Hebrews 11, the author alludes to 789 chapters (that’s a whopping 84.9% of all the chapters in the Original Testament) found across 38 of the 39 books of the Original Testament.¹⁸ Hebrew’s author certainly understood that the “the word of God is alive and powerful”¹⁹ and was to be used as a foundation for building faith. Like Hebrew’s author, we too must build bridges of understanding linked to the faith in the ancient Scriptures. We must work so that all God’s people today may build their lives of faith on the whole of the Biblical text.

Eliminate the Gap

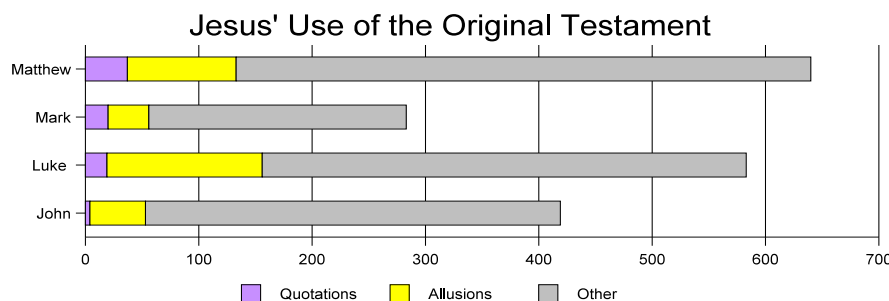
A call to embrace a new commitment to translate the Original Testament; to use it and press in to understand it will only be sustainable if we devote ourselves afresh to love the Word of God as a means to grow in our love for the God of the Word.

Eliminate the Translation Gap

To the best of our knowledge, “1.51 billion people, speaking 6,661 languages, do not have a *full Bible* in their first language.”²⁰ Some of these languages already have some Scripture translated, but we must not stop until the whole world has the whole Bible in a language and format that is most suitable to them. The “All Access Goals” of Every Tribe Every Nation aim “to see all people gain access to God’s Word in a language they can clearly understand by 2033.”²¹ Imagine that! We dream that a dozen years from now – for the first time in history – a significant portion of the Scriptures will be available in every language on earth. However we will need to press on until all people have all of the Scriptures they desire. We must hold on to the dream of zero; a dream of zero Bibleless languages. We must see the Bible as a whole, indivisible unit and therefore we must not stop until the whole world has access to the whole Bible. The translation gap must be totally eliminated.

Eliminate the Usage Gap

Peter exhorts us to set Jesus as our “example” and to “follow in his steps.”²² Similarly, Paul tells us to “imitate Christ.”²³ So, how did Jesus make use of the Original Testament? Jesus frequently quoted it directly or alluded to it intentionally. In the three gospels that have Jewish authors, 18.03% of the verses that contain Jesus’ words include him quoting or making an allusion to the



Original Testament.

Surprisingly, Luke, the one Gentile writer who did not grow up with the Biblical text records an even higher frequency of Jesus’ use of the Hebrew Scriptures. He obviously felt it was important for

the Gentile church to familiarize themselves with the Jewish Scriptures as seen in the chart.

Looking at it in another way, the direct quotations and intentional allusions of the Original Testament made by Jesus as recorded in:

- Matthew reflect 550 verses in 145 chapters in 25 books of the Original Testament.
- Mark reflect 175 verses in 69 chapters in 20 books of the Original Testament.
- Luke reflect 594 verses in 180 chapters in 30 books of the Original Testament.
- John reflect 127 verses in 70 chapters in 19 books of the Original Testament.

In summary, we see that in more than one fifth of all the verses that contain his words, Jesus directly quotes or intentionally alludes to a passage from the Original Testament. Shouldn't at least one fifth of our words likewise be rooted in these Hebrew Scriptures?

Eliminate the Understanding Gap

One of the most compelling stories about the Bible in the Bible occurred in the days of King Josiah of Judah.²⁴ His father and grandfather were idolaters, having strayed from the ways of God. However, early in his reign this young king charged the Levites to restore the temple in Jerusalem to its rightful purpose as a place of worship for God. As they were getting the temple in order, they made an unexpected discovery. Filled with excitement, the high priest Hilkiah, called Josiah's court secretary, Shaphan, to break the news, "I have found the Book of the Law!"²⁵ Apparently the scroll of Deuteronomy had been lost for decades! Its discovery set in motion a series of transformational events. When the book was read to Josiah he wept in profound repentance and called the leaders of the nation together. Political leaders. Religious leaders. Business leaders. Clan leaders. Cultural leaders. And when they came together and heard the words of this book from the Original Testament, they all repented and renewed covenant with God. This led to one of the greatest spiritual awakenings in the multi-century history of the kingdom of Judah.

Later on, in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, there was another great spiritual awakening among the returned exiles. This also occurred when they read out loud in public the Hebrew Scriptures. As Ezra read, we are told that the Levites "clearly explained the meaning of what was being read, helping the people understand each passage."²⁶ When the Word of God was brought before all the people, all the people experienced the blessing of God.

Imagine what might happen if the events that happened in the days of Josiah and Hilkiah, or in the days of Ezra and Nehemiah, were to happen again. But not just in one nation or amidst one people. What if every people could discover the whole Word of God, each understanding God's gracious communication in their own mother tongue? This is certainly God's dream, for "he does not want anyone to be destroyed, but wants everyone to repent."²⁷ So this should be our dream as well. Because we have the hope that one day people from "every nation and tribe and people and language"²⁸ will be before the throne of the Lamb, let us make sure that all the people of the world in all the languages spoken on earth can have full access to the whole Bible. In order to fulfill that heavenly vision, let us do all that we can to eliminate the Original Testament Gap, so that all can hear and understand the whole counsel of God. Then we will see a redemptive move of God's Spirit across nations, and the earth "will be filled with the knowledge of the LORD as

the waters cover the sea.”²⁹

Endnotes:

1. Throughout this article we refer to the Old Testament as the Original Testament. See <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/> (Accessed September 28, 2021).
2. John Goldingay, “Introduction” to *The First Testament*. In this quotation, the phrase “these Scriptures” refers to the Original Testament.
3. Rail Accident Investigation Branch Report 05/2021 published on 7 September, 2021 (<https://www.gov.uk/raib-reports/report-05-slash-2021-fatal-accident-at-waterloo-underground-station>).
4. John Goldingay, “Preface” to *The First Testament*.
5. When Paul wrote the oft-quoted words of 2Ti 3:16-17, the “Scripture” he referred to was the Original Testament. It is no less inspired than the words of the New Testament.
6. Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*.
7. Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*.
8. Brent Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying*.
9. John Goldingay, “Preface” to *The First Testament*.
10. Philip Yancey, *The Bible Jesus Read*.
11. This was one of the five “Sola” statements that marked the 16th century Reformation:
 - *Sola Gratia* SAVED BY GRACE ALONE
 - *Sola Fide*. THROUGH FAITH ALONE
 - *Solus Christus*. . . . IN CHRIST ALONE
 - *Sola Scriptura*. . . . ACCORDING TO SCRIPTURE ALONE
 - *Soli Deo Gloria* . . FOR THE GLORY OF GOD ALONE
12. Brent A Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying*.
13. Brent A Strawn, *The Old Testament is Dying*.
14. 2Ti 4:2.
15. Heb 11:3,4,5,7a,7b,8,9,11,17,20,21,22,23,24,27,28,29,30,31,33,39.
16. Gen 1-3,5-9,12,18,21,24,28,32,41-42,50; Exo 1,3,6,8-9,12-15,18-20,31-34; Lev 26:16; Num 11,14,16,23,28,33; Deu 1-5,7,9-11,24,26,29,31-32; Jos 3-4,7,9-10,23-24; Jdg 2,6,10-11,13, 21; Rut 1; 1Sa 3,6,11-12,14,19,20,22,25,28; 2Sa 2-3,7,10,12,19,22-24; 1Ki 2-3,8-9,11; 2Ki 6-7,

10,19-20; 1Ch 4,16-17,19,21; 2Ch 1-2,6-7; Neh 9; Job 4-5,9-10,12-14,23,25,28,31-33,35,37,40-42; Psa 2,9,18,22,33,37,39-40,51-52,66,71-72,74,77-78,83,86,88-89,94-96,98-100,102-106,109,111,115,118-119,121,124,126,134-136,139-140,145-149; Pro 8,14,17,20,22; Ecc 3,7,11-12; Isa 5,9-10,12,17,22,25,27-29,33,37-38,40-46,48-49,51,53-55,57,63-66; Jer 1,4-5,7,9-10,14,18-19,21-23,26-33,36,38,40,42,46,51; Lam 1-2,4; Eze 5-9,11-12,14,16-17,20-25,28,30-31,35-37,39-40; Dan 9,11; Hos 6,8,11; Joe 2; Amo 3-5,7,9; Jon 1,3; Mic 5-7; Nah 1; Hab 1; Zep 1,3; Zec 1,10,12; Mal 2-4.

17. Gen 4-37,39-50; Exo 1-40; Lev 1-27; Num 1-36; Deu 1-34 Jos 1-24; Jdg 1-21; Rut 1,4; 1Sa 1-31; 2Sa 1-24; 1Ki 1-22; 2Ki 1-25; 1Ch 1-7,9-29; 2Ch 1-3,5-14,16,20-21,23-25,27-28,30,32-35; Eze 3,6-8; Neh 1,3,8-10,12-13; Psa 3-9,11-41,47,51-65,68-70,72,75-78,81,84,86,89-90,99,101,103-104,106,108-110,114,122,124,131-133,135,137-145; SoS 4; Isa 1-66; Jer 1-52; Eze 1-48; Dan 9; Hos 1-14; Joe 1-3; Amo 1-9; Oba 1; Jon 1-4; Mic 1-7; Nah 1-3; Hab 1-3; Zep 1-3; Hag 1-2; Zec 1-14; Mal 1-4.

18. The only book not alluded to in Hebrews 11 is Esther.

19. Heb 4:12.

20. <https://www.wycliffe.net/resources/statistics/> (Accessed September 28, 2021).

21. <https://eten.bible/> (Accessed September 28, 2021).

22. 1Pe 2:21.

23. 1Co 11:1.

24. 2Ki 21:23–23:30; 2Ch 33:24–35:27.

25. 2Ki 22:8; 2Ch 34:15.

26. Eze 8:2-8.

27. 2Pe 3:9.

28. Rev 7:9.

29. Isa 11:9; Hab 2:14.