

“A Well Founded Translation”: Charles Thomson’s Translation of the Bible

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Tucked in the back corner of the Dunham Bible Museum lies a row of display cases in which different Bibles rest. Each copy of the Scriptures has their own story. I let my gaze wander from cover to cover, from nameplate to nameplate. I came to a halt when my eyes passed over one unassuming volume, not drawn to the artifact, but to the inscription on its plaque. “Charles Thomson, translator (1729-1824)” it read, further down it continued, “Thomson, a former Secretary of Congress, spent 20 years working on this Bible translation.” The woman guiding my class through the museum explained that the Bible in front of us is a first edition print of the first translation completed in America. The seemingly unassuming book piqued my interest, not because of its physical appearance, but because of its significance. My interest in politics and commitment to my faith had both been engaged, all by a small unassuming text printed two hundred and ten years ago by a man who is all but forgotten by the average American.

Charles Thomson is a man whose name is little known, but whose impact is widely felt. He served as the secretary of the Continental Congress for the entirety of its existence and resigned from his role when the Constitution was ratified. He spent the next twenty years translating the Bible, specifically the Greek Septuagint into English. Charles Thomson’s dedication to the Christian faith, shown in his efforts to translate the Bible, should have a profound effect on how we understand the founding of America.

Charles Thomson (1729-1824) was born to Scots-Irish parents in Maghera Parish, Ireland. When his mother died in 1739, his father, John Thomson, decided to set out for

America with his sons. John never saw America because he died at sea, and the boys were left penniless due to the theft of all their belongings. Despite humble beginnings, Thomson was able to thrive in America. After being educated in New London, Pennsylvania he became a Latin tutor in Philadelphia where he was also the leader of the Sons of Liberty. The pinnacle of his political career was his post as Secretary of the Continental Congress, a pivotal job through which much of the debate from different conventions are recorded and stored for future generations to understand what transpired during the founding of our nation.

As Secretary of the Continental Congress, Thomson's signature was the only signature, aside from John Hancock's, to appear in the original publications of the Declaration of Independence. Thomson held the post of Secretary for fifteen years, and he was the only person to ever hold the post. He performed all the normal clerical duties of a Secretary, such as transcribing the minutes of the sessions. Sometimes fights would break out on the floor of the Congress over perceived discrepancies. It was disagreements like this one along with other political differences which led Thomson to retire from public life after the Constitution was ratified. Aside from his clerical duties, his job included many of the responsibilities of the modern-day Secretary of State, and Thomson was described by Fred S. Rolater as the "Prime Minister of America." John Jay, the first Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, wrote to Thomson saying, "I consider that no Person in the World is so perfectly acquainted with the Rise, Conduct, and Conclusion of the American Revolution, as yourself," (quoted in the greatseal.com). He also was a principal designer of the Great Seal. Thomson was indisputably vital to the organization and function of the Continental Congress and early America.

This man who was such a pivotal player in the birth of America did not stop working when he stepped down from his office; instead, he shifted focus to a matter close to his heart: his faith. After his retirement from the office of Secretary he spent the next twenty years translating the Bible into English. While other English translations existed, none of them drew from the Greek Septuagint as a source, and there had been no translations made in America. The printing of Bibles was still in its infancy as well due to English laws that banned the practice, necessitating their purchase from England.

Thomson's translation was the first English translation to use the Greek Septuagint, the first translation of the Bible completed in America, and was printed by the first woman to print the Bible in America: Jane Aitken. He published his translation in four volumes, the last containing the New Testament. He accompanied his translations with a synopsis of the four gospels that was published in 1815. Many scholars laud Thomson's translation as an elite work of scholarship. Scholars creating the "Revised Version" in England (1881) used his translation as a reference (Daniell). Not only was Thomson formational in the politics of America, but he also facilitated immense growth in the Christian faith as well.

Although his translations came after his tenure in public service, the implications of his faith are clear even in his early involvement in politics. Thomson was a faithful Christian and dedicated nearly a quarter of his life to the monotony of translating scripture because he desired the spreading of God's word. This type of faithfulness can only be developed over time. Many argue that the founders were mostly deist and that America was not founded on Judeo-Christian principles, but when confronted with a man like Charles Thomson their arguments seem to weaken. Some of the founders, such as

Jefferson and Franklin, were deists, but many were faithful Christians, and some were even ministers. Thomson was deeply committed to his faith.

His dedication to his faith, evidenced in his translation of scripture, indicates a deeply religious side of early America that is lost on many today. The implications of the man who first translated the Bible in America also being the man who was described as the “Prime Minister of America” (Rolater) are vast. There is no doubt that his work and handling of the affairs of the young nation were affected by his convictions and it is through his translations that we can understand how deep his convictions were.

Thomson’s dedication to serving America was surpassed and informed by his dedication to his Christian faith.

Charles Thomson is not heralded as a hero of the American Revolution. He never had his visage affixed to currency and never led troops against the British. Yet he filled a role that was needed as much as any general during the revolution, helping the Continental Congress operate effectively from his desk of the Secretary. His convictions about faith and freedom fueled the revolutionary fire within him. After this fire had done its work, Thomson rekindled it for a life of biblical scholarship. The result was a translation that served as the foundation for later English translations due to its superb quality and depth of scholarship. His translation stands as evidence not only of Thomson’s dedication, but also to what he was dedicated: God and his country.

Works Cited

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