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incorporating the Transactions of the
BAPTIST HISTORICAL SOCIETY
EDITORIAL

WORLD sales of the new translation of the New Testament, published on March 14th last, have now passed 2,500,000. The joint publishers, the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, are still receiving orders for thousands of copies daily. More than four months after publication, the new translation—the first part to be published of the New English Bible—still figures in the best-seller lists.

First reactions to the new translation have, on the whole, been favourable, and it certainly received very great publicity. It cannot be said, however, that all the comments made of the translation were well informed, not even in the better papers. The writer of the leading article in the *Guardian* will surely one day blush with shame (if he has not done so already) when he realizes that what he has criticised is not the new translation but the words of Jesus in the Lord's Prayer; so also will the Bishop of Middleton, whose comment on the new rendering of *Romans*, viii. 28 seems to indicate that he has not read (or at any rate digested) a commentary on *Romans* written during the last couple of decades, whilst the *Observer's* general line that the new work could not succeed because it was not written by one man, and that the need for unanimity among the rival churches, some of them fundamentalist, had always prevented the translators from effectively modernising in the way they were commissioned to do, is a criticism that is not really worthy of reply.

Few responsible critics will have any doubt that what has been produced needed to be produced and has been well produced, though inevitably another group of scholars would have done some things differently.

There is no doubt that the new translation is more intelligible than the old. "Though so far without success" (*Rom. i. 13*) and "secret only for the present until . . ." (*2 Thess. ii. 7*) are both simplifications of the old English verb "to let," in the sense of "to hinder." Moreover, the translators frequently succeed in producing within the text the kind of rendering which previously could only be discovered by those who read Greek or good commentaries. "You are salt to the world" (*Matt. v. 13*), for instance, expresses the general New Testament picture of the disciple much more clearly than the older "Ye are the salt of the earth," and "did not think to snatch at equality with God" (*Phil. ii. 6*) is a great improvement on the more familiar, "thought it not robbery . . ." passage, though here it is hard to resist the conclusion that the marginal rendering is not an even more accurate and illuminating assessment of what was in the author's mind.

For those who like the lively or striking phrase there is plenty of satisfaction. The prodigal son "began to feel the pinch" (*Luke xv. 14*); the people who confronted John the Baptist were "on the tip-toe of expectation" (*Luke iii. 15*); and those who listened to our Lord's discourse on the Bread of Life felt it was "more than (they could) stomach" (*John vi. 60*). Not all attempts at such phrases, however, are as happy, and when we find reference to "another pair of brothers" (*Matt. iv. 21*), the liveliness has become pedestrian.

The faithfulness to the Greek, as one would expect from such a team, is almost flawless and sometimes particularly brilliant. The general statement that the Jews have no dealings with the Samaritans (*John iv. 9*) is transformed so as to bring out fully the meaning of the Greek, which is that Jews and Samaritans do not use the same things; the general phrase, "in ranks, by hundreds and by fifties" (*Mark vi. 40*) is transformed so as to give the clear picture of the Greeks that they sat down "in rows, a hundred rows of fifty each," and *1 John iv. 19* is faithfully rendered, "We love because he loved us first," omitting the "him" of the Authorised Version. One cannot help but wish, however, that the same faithfulness to the Greek had broken through to give us, "Pay what you owe," thus following the Revised Version and the Greek by omitting the "me" and turning the specific request into a general statement, in the story of the unforgiving servant (*Matt. xviii. 28*), and that the word "watch-tower" (*Matt. xxi. 23; Mark xii. 1*) and the word "tower" (*Luke xiv. 28*) had been rendered "a set of farm buildings," a rendering which undoubtedly improves the sense of the

passage and is legitimate in the light of Greek used in recently discovered papyri.

Inevitably, of course, there are aspects of this work which puzzle and sometimes distress. Sometimes one feels the translators have leaned over backwards to avoid the traditional phrase, and not always is the alternative an improvement. For example, are "splendour" and "attired" really better and more accurate than "glory" and "arrayed" in the reference to Solomon? (*Matt.* vi. 29). Sometimes, on the other hand, the traditional phrase is retained when it might profitably have been altered. "Belly" was a good English word in 1611, but the Revisers of 1881 recognized that it was no longer a good English word and adjusted accordingly. Why does it have to come back? Granted it is what the Greek says, but it has nevertheless crude associations in the 20th century and one would have thought that some alternative translation could have been produced. The same desire to portray the precise Greek is not found in *John* iv. 21 where the word "Woman" (or as it might more correctly be translated, "Madam") is omitted completely.

The Anglicanisation of weights and measures too is surely going to present problems in a world where standards and rates of exchange are in a state of flux. It is one thing when it is simply a matter of rendering "talents" by "bags of gold" (*Matt.* xxv. 15), or "ten thousand talents" by "(a) debt (that) ran into millions" (*Matt.* xviii. 24). It is a quite different matter to render the "three hundred pence" or "denarii" (*Mark* xiv. 5) by "thirty pounds." Unless the life of this new translation is shorter than any of us would wish, that figure is going to be dated long before the rest of the work.

The production of the book is one of which both publishers and translators may be proud. To print across the page instead of in columns, to divide according to sense rather than chapters, to save heading for sections, and then repeat the heading at the top of several pages instead of trying to summarise each page separately—all these are features that are worthwhile. So also is the classification of the material on the Contents page, the omission of the title "Saint," and the use of Paul's name in connection with *Hebrews*. Many will consider it unfortunate that there are no marginal references, as at the foot of each page in the Revised Standard Version, but this is a matter which may possibly be rectified in due course; perhaps when the whole Bible is complete.

What the future of this new translation is to be nobody can tell. Perhaps it will not be clear until the Old Testament is completed. It is surprising in a way that the publishers state so clearly that it is "intended and expected to supplement, not to replace, the Authorised Version." Certainly if it were to replace the Authorised

Version a number of problems would be presented. Most people would find it difficult to learn a new version of the Lord's Prayer, and new music would be needed for such passages as the Nunc Dimittis and the Magnificat, to say nothing of the book of Psalms and problems of re-pointing the chants. Yet at the same time there is nothing to be gained by having two versions, one old and one new, continually in use side by side. To fix a date, after which the new translation would become the standard or authorised version would certainly at this point be premature. One can only hope, however, that there will be such increasing veneration for it that the time for such recognition will not be far away.

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We understand that not all readers peruse the Review section of this journal. On the assumption (probably optimistic!) that more read the Editorial, we would draw particular attention to a stimulating review by Dr. Howard Williams on two important books to do with the Christian Sunday.

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