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Are Annotated Bibles Desirable?

BY C. E. B. CRANFIELD

WHEN the British and Foreign Bible Society was founded in 1804, its aim was defined as the wider distribution of the Scriptures 'without note or comment'. In 1968 the Society is seeking authorisation to amend its charter. At a special meeting of the Society's General Purposes Committee with additional representatives of churches and missionary societies in April 1967 the following resolution was passed: 'We, officers and members of the Churches and Missionary Societies based in this country, welcome the recognition by the British and Foreign Bible Society of the need to provide in its editions of Scripture sufficient aids to enable readers to understand the meaning and purpose of the Scriptures and would support the suggestions (i)-(viii) on page four of the submitted memorandum and the exploration of the possibility of prefaces and introductions similar to those in the Today's English Version of the New Testament (American Bible Society publication).' The eight suggestions referred to are:

- '(i) alternative readings
- (ii) alternative renderings
- (iii) explanation of proper names
- (iv) explanation of plays on words
- (v) historical backgrounds, including maps and illustrations
- (vi) cultural differences
- (vii) cross references
- (viii) section headings'.

It was further agreed that a copy of this resolution should be circulated to all present, so as to enable them to report back to their churches or societies and seek their endorsement of its terms. At least one denominational assembly has already passed a resolution approving the Society's proposal—without discussion. But this surely is a matter calling for the most careful and unhurried weighing up of advantages and disadvantages, and for thoughtful discussion engaging not just the members of various denominational assemblies but as wide a range of Christian people as possible.

It is necessary to distinguish at this point between some items of the proposal against which it is hardly possible to object on principle and those other items on which the discussion ought to concentrate. Items (i), (ii), (iii), and (iv), to begin with, seem unobjectionable. With regard to (v), one could scarcely object to the inclusion of maps; and illustrations of a geographical or archaeological nature need raise no anxiety; but the term 'historical backgrounds' could cover quite a lot. With regard to (vii), it may be noted incidentally that the Society included cross references in its Greek New Testament as long ago as 1904. While the liberty to print cross references could conceivably be abused (it would be possible by a careful selection of references to

force upon the reader particular interpretations of controversial passages), there should be no difficulty in defining cross references in a way that would make such abuse most unlikely, and the extraordinary value of such cross references as are commonly included in the AV and RV margins is of course undeniable. Item (vi) could no doubt also be so defined as to be unobjectionable. We are left then with the prefaces and introductions mentioned in the resolution and item (viii), that is, section headings, as the items on which discussion ought specially to concentrate. The words 'sufficient aids to enable readers to understand the meaning and purpose of the Scriptures' invite the question whether explanatory notes and comments of a more general nature are also envisaged. If they are, then this would certainly be a further matter for the most careful consideration. At the same time the desirability of more precise definition of what is proposed under (v), (vi) and (vii) may be underlined. Amendments of its charter, which are likely to direct the Society's work for many decades, can hardly be formulated too carefully.

Before we go on to consider more generally the advantages and disadvantages of annotated editions of the Bible, by whomsoever they are published, we must say something about the very special position of the British and Foreign Bible Society (and other similar Bible Societies). Its work, which has never paid for itself as a commercial undertaking, has been made possible by the zealous and often sacrificial support of Christians of very different theological and ecclesiastical viewpoints who have felt that they could give their money to the Bible Society in the assurance that it would never be used for the propagation of views they abhorred but only for making available to as many people as possible the text of Scripture 'without note or comment'. The Society has been above the suspicion of partisanship. In the past denominational partisanship was the obvious danger against which 'without note or comment' was directed, and it is probably felt by the General Purposes Committee of the Bible Society that, in view of the much better relations between the different denominations which are characteristic of the present time, it is no longer a serious danger. This may perhaps be true. But today there are deep theological divisions which cut across the denominational barriers, and these constitute a danger at least as serious as any presented in former days by denominational differences. In fact it is surely arguable that the differences dividing Anglicans and Presbyterians and Baptists from each other in the early nineteenth century, and even the differences between Protestants and Catholics in the sixteenth century, are relatively small when compared with the gulf which today separates those who believe that Jesus was truly raised from the dead from those who understand the Resurrection as merely a matter of the psychology of the disciples, or those who believe in the living God from those whose slogan is 'God is dead'. In a situation in which, paradoxically, in spite of great ecumenical advances and much fruitful co-operation by biblical scholars of different confessions, there are divisions which are even more radical than those of former days, there would seem to be a good deal to be said for the view that, even if it should be agreed that annotated editions of the Bible ought

to be published, it would still be expedient that the British and Foreign Bible Society at least, in view of its dependence on the support of Christians of widely and deeply differing viewpoints, should not depart from its original principle of 'without note or comment' (except perhaps to the extent of admitting those modifications which we suggested above may be regarded as unobjectionable).

We turn now to a consideration of the general question whether annotated Bibles are in fact desirable. (In this discussion we shall not use the word 'annotated' of an edition in which the additional matter is limited to alternative readings, alternative renderings, explanation of proper names and plays on words, maps, pictorial illustrations of a geographical or archaeological nature¹, and cross references, but only of an edition containing notes which go beyond these limits.)

In favour of the production of annotated editions it may at once be said that the Bible is a difficult book and, without help, many readers will find much of it incomprehensible; that many who come to possess, or have access to, a copy of the Bible or of a portion of it, are most unlikely ever to come by a separate commentary; that those who are perplexed by what they read in Scripture will be extremely fortunate if they chance upon a Philip to ask them 'Understandest thou what thou redest?' and able to open the Scripture to them. The pastoral and missionary considerations which have led the Bible Society's General Purposes Committee to want the amendment of the Society's charter are very apparent. Moreover, the production of annotated editions of the Bible has a long and honourable history. One thinks at once of such versions as the Geneva Bible of 1560 with its 'arguments', chapter summaries, and explanatory notes, and of Luther's German Bible with its prefaces and marginal glosses. Already in the fourth century Jerome's Vulgate was furnished with prefaces to individual books. That the additional matter in the various versions includes a wealth of spiritual treasure is not to be denied. The Church would be poorer, had it never been written. The chapter summaries of the Authorised Version, for example, have been deservedly dear to many who have been familiar with them. The suggestiveness of those on Isa. 52 and 53 ('1 Christ persuadeth the church to believe his free redemption, 7 to receive the ministers thereof, 9 to joy in the power thereof, 11 and to free themselves from bondage. 13 Christ's kingdom shall be exalted' and '1 The prophet, complaining of incredulity, excuseth the scandal of the cross, 4 by the benefit of his passion, 10 and the good success thereof'), for example, or of those on Rom. 12 and 13 in the fuller form as printed in 1611 ('1 Gods mercies must mooue vs to please God. 3 No man must thinke too well of himselfe, 6 But attend euerie one, on that calling, wherein he is placed. 9 Loue, and many other dueties are required of vs. 19 Reuenge is specially forbidden' and '1 Subiection, and many other dueties wee owe to the Magistrates. 8 Loue is the fulfilling of the Law. 11 Gluttonie and drunkennes, and the workes of darknesse, are out of season in the time of the Gospel') is obvious.

It is very clear, in view of the undeniable fact that over the centuries much benefit has been derived by many people from the additional

matter of the various annotated Bibles and in view of the earnest desire of missionaries and others today for fresh annotated editions of the Scriptures, that there rests on the shoulders of the man who opposes the further production of annotated Bibles a heavy responsibility indeed. But, while we are fully aware of this and frankly admit that to hinder the production of such editions must involve hindering some readers of the Bible from obtaining much-needed assistance, we feel bound to state our conviction that the disadvantages and dangers inherent in the publication of annotated Bibles greatly outweigh the advantages. We may sum up succinctly what we see as the disadvantages and dangers by saying that, for all but the most sophisticated, it necessarily tends to invest matter which is essentially temporary and provisional with the semblance of an authority which it does not possess. While a commentary which is bought as a commentary is easily recognised as being simply a particular person's understanding of a portion of Scripture, the commentary which is actually included in a volume bought as a copy of Scripture will naturally seem to have special authority. Only the most sophisticated will recognise it for what it is—just a commentary like any other. In the past this disadvantage of the annotated Bible has generally been considerably reduced by awareness, more or less vivid, on the part of those using a particular Bible of the existence of other Christians for whom its additional matter had no authority at all. In some cases it was quite clear that both the translation and the additional material were the work of a particular individual. But the dramatic improvement in relations between the Roman Church and other Churches in the last few years has made the production of an edition of the Bible furnished with prefaces, sectional headings and explanatory notes which might plausibly claim a truly ecumenical authority a practical possibility. This possibility will certainly seem to many people exciting and attractive. But, while we welcome wholeheartedly the increasing co-operation between Roman Catholic, Orthodox, and Protestant biblical scholars, we see in this possibility a particularly dangerous temptation. Precisely because such additional matter would seem to have far greater authority than that of any earlier annotated Bible, it would also, we believe, be far more harmful. It would constitute a particularly serious assault on the freedom of Scripture, and would therefore be an extremely serious disservice to the Churches and to mankind. We regard any inclusion of prefaces, sectional headings and comments in an edition of Scripture as inexpedient, because tending to obscure the temporary and provisional nature of the added material; but we believe that the more plausible its claim to authoritativeness, the more dangerous such material is.

At this point it is necessary to acknowledge that one cannot draw an absolute distinction between additional interpretative matter and a translation of Scripture or indeed an edition of the Greek New Testament. The addition of punctuation to the Greek text is itself a first step in interpretation. But a good edition of the Greek New Testament will of course attempt to indicate possible alternative punctuations wherever a significant difference of meaning is involved. That a translation involves interpretation is even more obvious.

But again it must be emphasised that a responsible translation (particularly when it is in any way official or authorised and not just the undertaking of an individual or informal group) will indicate in the margin the more significant possible alternative renderings, and where the original is ambiguous, will reproduce that ambiguity in translation. We may mention the RV rendering of Rom. 10: 4, in which 'the end of the law' reproduces the ambiguity of the original (the substantive 'end' being able to bear both the sense of goal and the sense of termination) as an instance of responsible translation, and the NEB rendering of the same verse ('Christ ends the law') in which one possible meaning of the Greek is excluded, as an instance—in our view—of irresponsible translation. While it is true that an absolute distinction cannot be drawn between the production of a punctuated Greek text or a translation on the one hand and on the other hand such additional matter as prefaces, section headings, running headlines, and explanatory notes and comments, there is nevertheless a real and valid distinction between them. For one thing, while the Bible cannot be made available at all except to a tiny minority of scholars, unless the Greek text of the New Testament is printed with punctuation and the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek of the Bible translated into the various modern languages, it certainly can be made widely available without the inclusion of the additional matter. For another thing, there is an obvious difference of degree between them in the extent to which particular interpretations are fixed upon the biblical text—a difference which is the more marked, the more responsible the edition of the Greek text or the translation is.

It remains now to spell out one or two things which we have so far taken for granted or merely hinted at. We begin with the matter of sectional headings, which might at first sight seem harmless enough. It is true that in the narrative parts of Scripture they will usually be innocuous. But in other parts the inclusion of such headings involves taking sides in controversial issues. We may illustrate the dangers from the United Bible Societies' edition of the Greek New Testament, prepared by an international team of four scholars of outstanding excellence and published in 1966. (The British and Foreign Bible Society participated in the publication in spite of the fact that its charter has not yet been amended.) Romans 13 provides two notable examples of the dangers involved. Verses 1-7 are headed 'Obedience to Rulers'. But, as Professor Gerhard Delling has noted in the *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament*,² ὑποτάσσεσθαι does not necessarily carry the idea of obedience. If St. Paul did not mean that, however perverse and wicked the command of the civil authority may be, the Christian subject is in Christian duty bound to obey it (and at any rate some New Testament scholars are quite certain that he did not mean this!), it is surely a singular disservice not only to the Church but to humanity in general to fix this interpretation upon the biblical text. The next three verses are headed 'Brotherly Love'. This presumably denotes love for one's fellow Christians (cf. the New Testament use of the Greek word φιλαδελφία). But it is not at all certain that Paul intended by 'love' here love for the fellow Christian

only and not quite generally love for one's fellow man. Again, this seems to us a most unfortunate fixing of one particular interpretation upon a passage the meaning of which is disputed by competent scholars. And even in narrative passages the insertion of sectional headings can be dangerous. The title given in this edition to Mark 11: 1-11, 'The Triumphal Entry into Jerusalem', is, we know, traditional; but it may well be argued that the word 'triumphal' here is misleading and likely to obscure for the reader the true nature of the event recorded. We may mention just one other example, this time from the Jerusalem Bible of 1966. In it Romans 5: 12- 7:25 is headed, 'Deliverance from sin and death and law'. The natural inference to be drawn from this heading is that St. Paul regarded the law as, equally with sin and death, an enemy from which men need to be rescued. But this is a highly controversial interpretation, and we can only describe the Jerusalem Bible's heading as tendentious. There is a further point with regard to sectional headings, namely, that the inclusion of headings has the effect of emphasising the demarcation of the sections. But the exact demarcation of sections is quite often a controversial matter. The conclusion we draw from the evidence of such examples as those we have just cited and from the point about the demarcation of sections is that, for the sake of the freedom of Holy Scripture and for the sake of a proper respect for the Lord who wills to speak to us through Scripture, we must oppose the inclusion of sectional headings in editions of the Bible.

When we turn to the question of prefaces to individual books and explanatory notes and comments, the dangers are much more obvious. In view of the difficulty of Scripture, it is understandable that Christian people should be prone to hanker after an authoritative interpretation or a source of authoritative decisions on the problems of exegesis. Professor Eric Fenn has written: 'One of the central tasks in the reformation of Christendom may well be the development of an organ of interpretation common to all the Churches which will be sufficiently flexible to respond to the deepening insights of biblical scholarship and at the same time strong enough to bring a greater coherence to the varied understandings of the Bible which are current among Christians.'³ But neither an authoritative interpretation nor an authoritative 'organ of interpretation' is compatible with a truly free Bible. On this ground alone such hankerings should, we believe, be firmly renounced. But it must also be said that they take frail and fallible biblical scholars far too seriously and ignore the lesson which Scripture itself teaches us, that we have always to reckon with the possibility that God will reveal unto babes things which are hidden from the wise and understanding. The sober biblical scholar, aware of his own fallibility, will wish his contribution to the interpretation of the Bible to be received as one contribution among many, and not to be invested with an undeserved solemnity by being bound up in the same volume as Holy Scripture.⁴ He will know that a good commentary is not written in the hope that it will be accepted as authoritative, but in the humble hope that it will stimulate and assist others to write still better commentaries. The obvious danger here is that fools will be only too willing to rush in where angels fear to tread.

Theologians of the calibre of St. Thomas Aquinas and Karl Barth have realised very clearly their weakness and littleness (though even such as they have sometimes failed in self-criticism), but theologians of this calibre are indeed rare birds. Of the rest of us it must be said that many are extraordinarily bad at self-criticism and that the less perceptive we are, the more ready we are to dogmatise.

The burden of this article, then, is an earnest plea that biblical scholars should continue their work of biblical interpretation with all diligence and should write commentaries on Holy Scripture and other aids to its study, at all levels including the simplest; that denominational and missionary agencies should make possible the sale of simple commentaries and other aids at very low prices and even, where circumstances demand it, their free distribution; but that nothing should be done to invest any of them with the appearance of an authority which they do not possess, and, in particular, that (for the sake of the freedom of Holy Scripture and the respect due to Him who wills to speak to men through it) no section headings, prefaces or introductions to individual books, explanatory notes or comments, should be included in volumes which are to be sold or distributed as copies of the Bible or of a portion of it.

NOTES

¹Imaginative pictorial illustrations, while often, of course, harmless and sometimes of very great artistic value, may be objectionable, since they can serve to fix a particular interpretation in the mind extremely effectively.

²VIII, p. 41.

³In S. L. Greenslade (ed), *The Cambridge History of the Bible: the West from the Reformation to the Present Day* (Cambridge, 1963), p. 406.

⁴We are not, of course, objecting to the printing (for the convenience of the reader) of the biblical book, which is being commented on, in a volume which is quite clearly a commentary.