

FAITH
AND
THOUGHT

1980
Vol. 107
No. 3

A Journal devoted to the study of the inter-relation of the
Christian Revelation and modern research

A.G. NEWELL

MODERN TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE AND THE
STATUS OF LANGUAGE

In this paper, delivered to the Victoria Institute on 24 May 1980, Dr Newell compares six modern translations of the Bible in common use with the AV. He deplores "the lucubrations of mid-Atlantic linguistic bureaucracies", the modern committee English, which spoils much recent biblical translation. Not one of the recent versions compares with the AV in literary quality or in its power to inspire worship.

The expression "lucubrations of mid-Atlantic linguistic bureaucracies" is a quotation from the 'Viewpoint' column in the *Times Literary Supplement* contributed by the poet and critic C.H. Sisson, who was himself quoting Professor David Martin, the sociologist of religion, on the controversy over modern versions of the Bible and the Anglican liturgy. It serves to draw attention to the fact that the trend within the churches and especially the Church of England towards the modernization of the traditional language hitherto used in congregational worship has given rise to widespread concern among people whose business is with the English language and its literature. I am not an Anglican, but I am glad to be able to point to such weighty support in order to prove that my paper is not simply the expression of an isolated and idiosyncratic personal opinion.

Professor Martin was speaking of modern committee English, the language of academe and newspaper, the common speech of government, officialdom and business world, as now brought to the rewriting of the Anglican liturgy and the translation of the Bible. His description suggests a preliminary characterization of our common speech as flat, unrhymic, unimaginative, enlivened if at all only with tired clichés. As Professor Brian Morris points out, there are various 'registers' of contemporary common speech: he gives examples from a law court, a Pakistani shop in Bradford, a building site, an election meeting, a local radio programme and a company

board room. All of them, however, resemble, more or less, the deliberately antirhetorical, unassertive, undramatic, unevocative prose of Samuel Beckett, so entirely suitable as the literary vehicle for his representative vision of contemporary humanity in the age of anxiety.^{1a} The literature of an age necessarily reflects, even in reaction, its prepossessions. They emerge, too, in its translations of the Bible.

The theory and practice of translation, which can be taught, as it is by the Summer Institute of Linguistics of the Wycliffe Bible Translators, is perforce included in the new scholarly discipline of linguistics. The sort of situation envisaged as the field where the *science* of translation can be exploited is one where a tribe needs to be supplied with the Scriptures in its own tongue. The *art* of translation seems to me an enterprise of a different order, and I can appeal to the author of a recent treatise for support. L.G. Kelly sees a historical distinction between translation as 'a literary craft' and translation as the creation of 'a text of equivalent meaning', which stems from a difference in purpose. "Those who translate merely for objective information, have defined translation differently from those for whom the source text has a life of its own", he says, and points out that "to the comfortable assumption that language is an instrument, there is opposed the concept of language as a creative entity, as *logos*". He concludes that 'dynamic equivalence' (the attempt to evoke from the reader in the receptor language the same reaction as the reader of the text in the source language) does not necessarily result in 'free' translation, while "few translators are so literal that they eschew dynamic techniques altogether."² On the other hand, I am compelled to admit that this balanced judgment differs from that of Rudolf Kassühlke, who believes that translation on 'formal correspondence' lines (seeking to preserve by literal rendering the word order, syntax, idioms and figurative expressions of the source language) is "largely not understandable and in many places actually misleading, while that on the principle of dynamic equivalence, although impossible because of the gap in time and culture between the Bible writings and ourselves, is the only method available to bring the original writers' intention to today's readers."³

'The status of language' appears in my title because I believe that contemporary English is debased and contaminated as befits a lost society; it reflects and reinforces the instability, endemic relativism and ironic fatalism of the age. Some years ago Professor A.C. Partridge wrote, "English speech at the present time is unstable, and a suitable language for the supernatural conceptions of Scripture is difficult to imagine".⁴ Professor Basil Mitchell concurred when he recently wrote, "The only sort of language that is entirely contemporary and widely available is the language of journalism, and this language inevitably lacks the range, depth, resonance and precision that is required for

translating the Bible or for liturgical use. ...How can language convey transcendence when the cultural assumptions underlying the language effectively deny it?"^{5a} So we arrive at the (to me) absurd situation of the heirs of two millennia of Christianity and of more than a thousand years of indigenous English belief, acting as though they can abandon literary in favour of linguistic translation, applying the science rather than practising the art, as if they were the pioneer evangelizers of some remote preliterate tribe, instead of the inheritors of a Christianized culture. As Andrew Louth puts it, "The modern translator, faced with a passage of the ... text, asks himself, 'What would this look like if I were to read it in the *Daily Telegraph* (say)?"^{5b} This seems to me a quite frightening abdication of historical and cultural responsibility.

There are those who will believe that it is the opposite - that, in fact, it is a courageous recognition of the level of literacy and of knowledge in our post-Christian society, and a wholly laudable attempt to reach the ordinary people with the Word of God. At this point, then, I must enter my caveats. Nothing I say is to be construed as critical of biblical translators' intentions to make the text as clear as possible for as many readers as possible. I am not qualified to judge translations as translations: I have to rely on scholarly consensus for such understanding as I can possess of the original texts, so what I have to say will be from a literary viewpoint. But I believe my position to be a valid one and rejoice that so many others (strange bedfellows, some of them!) have recently voiced similar opinions. I propose simply to look at six successful modern versions of the whole Bible and analyze their characteristics in order to evaluate them as literature before trying to draw some conclusions from my findings. The six versions are the Revised Standard Version (RSV), the Jerusalem Bible (Jer.), the New English Bible (NEB), the Living Bible (LVB), the Good News Bible (GNB) and the New International Version (NIV). So much by way of introduction.

It seems best to begin with the story of origins in Genesis and to compare what the modern versions make of Gen. 3: 1-6, the account of the Fall. In Gen. 1 and 2 the scene is set: our first parents are installed in Eden with the beasts and birds and are employed in healthy and useful labour. Against this background we are introduced to the vital narrative of 'Mans First Disobedience'. The writer answers the reader's natural enquiry about the discrepancy between the original and the present condition of God's creation. Three details in the vocabulary of the Authorized Version (AV) in the first verse seem to have called for changes in the minds of some of the translators: 'serpent', 'subtil' and 'beast of the field'. Only GNB alters 'serpent' to 'snake', but its effect is merely to lose the mystery of 'serpent' in favour of the known species of snakes we can see at the zoo.

This particularization and its limitation of a word's penumbra of associations is a characteristic of modern versions. AV's 'subtil' is retained (as 'subtle') by RSV and Jer. NEB and NIV choose 'crafty' (LvB, 'craftiest'), and GNB 'cunning'. An immediate loss is the onomatopoeic alliteration with 'serpent'. More important, however, is the change in meaning: a repulsive snake can be 'crafty' or 'cunning', with their suggestion of shiftiness and underhand petty crime, but AV's 'serpent' is 'subtil'; the effect is to convey the impression of a formidable, stately, intelligent adversary and so to prepare us for the ease with which Eve capitulates. For 'beasts of the field' in AV, LvB has 'creatures', and RSV and NEB 'wild creature'; Jer prefers 'wild beasts', NIV 'wild animals' and GNB 'animal'. Assuming that 'beasts of the field' might be felt today to convey the idea of farm animals, what has been gained by the substitutions? GNB and LvB realize there is no need for the redundant 'wild' here. But 'animals' for us do not include reptiles like the serpent, while 'wild beasts' conjures up zoo cages, safaris and Roman circuses - certainly not the Garden of Eden.

The second half of Gen. 3: 1 begins in AV with its well-known formula, "And he said unto the woman" and is completed by the serious, "Yea, hath God said, 'Ye shall not eat of every tree of the garden?'" The modern versions delete the initial 'And' and convert 'unto' into 'to', while Jer and GNB change 'said' to 'asked'. With the direct speech of the serpent here - and, indeed, throughout the ensuing dialogue - the modern translations lose the majestic tone which is demanded by the crucial significance of the story for the human race. The mother of mankind, glorious, serene, innocent, is conversing with the serpent on terms, apparently, of near equality. The episode demands the appropriate high seriousness. But our post-war translations seem to prefer off-hand, unrhythmical, bald prose for their renderings. "Did God really say/tell", we find in NIV, Jer and GNB. LvB's penchant for simplistic colloquialisms produces, "'Really?' he asked. 'None of the fruit of the garden? God says you mustn't eat any of it?'" NEB strives for seriousness with "'Is it true that God has forbidden you to eat from any tree in the garden?'" Only RSV, predictably, retains the emphatic rhythm of "Yea, hath God said", but even so reduces it to "Did God say". Only RSV, NIV and LvB preserve the sibilants: 'say ... shall' (RSV), 'say ... must' (NIV, LvB).

Take the serpent's words here in conjunction with those at 3: 4,5. Jer renders his speech, "No! You will not die! God knows in fact that on the day you eat it your eyes will be opened and you will be like gods, knowing good and evil". NEB varies to, "Of course you will not die", while LvB has "That's a lie!" the serpent hissed. "You'll not die". GNB has, "The snake replied, 'That's not true; you will not die'", and is the sole

version to jettison 'evil' in favour of 'bad'. NIV tries to inject something of the savour of modern fiction by dividing the serpent's speech as LvB does: "You will not surely die," the serpent said to the woman. "For God knows ...", but why has it retained the AV's 'surely'? RSV knew better with its "You will not die". The modern versions seem to me to verge perilously close to the conception recently portrayed in a *Punch* cartoon, which depicted a very contemporary Adam and Eve as a couple of nudists strolling in an overgrown park who are suddenly confronted by a rather bored snake hanging from a branch and saying, "Hi there - I'm the Entertainments Director around here".⁶ Compare them with the stately, striking simplicity of AV's, "And the serpent said unto the woman, Ye shall not surely die: for God doth know that in the day ye eat thereof, then your eyes shall be opened, and ye shall be as gods, knowing good and evil."

Modern versions tend to eliminate initial conjunctions, update individual words and shorten sentences. We see this last operation at work in Gen. 3: 6. The single sentence of AV and RSV becomes two in NEB and NIV, three in Jer and GNB, and four in LvB. I suspect this ratio might perhaps offer a valid statistical comparison between the versions. NEB starts well with "When the woman saw that the fruit of the tree was good to eat, and that it was pleasing to the eye", but adds "and tempting to contemplate", thereby introducing a latinate trisyllable into an otherwise superbly simple sentence. As an after-thought, almost, we are told, "She also gave her husband some and he ate it." NIV virtually reproduces that anticlimactic sentence after tripping up as well over "and also desirable for gaining wisdom". It is a pity that in addition to doing the same, Jer should fall into the trap of rendering "The woman saw that the tree was good to eat", by forgetting that if you alter 'good for food' to 'good to eat' you have to add 'the fruit of' as well! The third statement adduced to account for our first parent's credulity is rendered by Jer clumsily as "and that it was desirable for the knowledge that it could give". GNB transposes the idea of the tree's attractive quality to the beginning of the sentence and uses 'how' throughout the tripartite explanation, presumably to get inside Eve's mind and to counter the difficulty of the third clause; but by utilizing 'beautiful' and 'wonderful' this version succeeds only in debasing the level of the narrative. By transferring 'also' to "he also ate it" GNB perhaps avoids evacuating this essential clause of necessary emphasis as NIV, Jer and NEB do. LvB's idiosyncratic paraphrase succeeds here by preferring "and he ate it too". RSV's "and he ate" does the best that modern English can do to preserve AV's solemn and enormously emphatic "and he did eat". The balance of AV's progression to this climax remains unequalled: "And when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was pleasant to the eyes, and a tree to be desired to make one wise, she took of the fruit

thereof, and did eat, and gave also unto her husband with her, and he did eat." The mastery of this measured yet simple prose, its restraint and economy in the telling of the cosmic disaster, must be preferred to the account in the modern versions.

Comparisons of other biblical passages yields similar findings. Israel's flight from Egypt, for example, is translated by AV in a style entirely suited to the event's historical and theological significance. The antique English at once invests the narrative with the air of epic, while the prose rhythm reinforces the heightened tone, and slows down the pace with its deliberate repetitions and ritual phrases. It is ideal for reading aloud, compelling careful phrasing and preventing unseemly haste. By comparison, the modern versions for the most part are no better suited for public reading than the newspaper reports that some of them seem to want to imitate. All of them except RSV lose the choice ambiguity of AV's "the heart of Pharaoh . . . was turned" (Ex. 14: 5) with their uniform "changed their minds", when surely we must allow for the possibility that God was once again 'hardening Pharaoh's heart'. AV's 'servants' is preferable to GNB's and NIV's bureaucratic 'officials'. NEB and Jer try to achieve an epic tone in this passage, but LvB, GNB and NIV typically lapse in their translation of direct speech. The inaccuracy of NEB's 'slipped away' needs no comment.

As a translation of documents of other cultures distant in time as well as geographically, the Bible contains exotic elements. The mere mention of place-names such as Pi-ha-hi'roth, Migdol and Baal-zephon in Ex. 14 imparts a sense of strangeness and mystery to the English reader. A much more exotic eastern atmosphere is conveyed in Esther 1, where it is interesting to see how the various modern versions treat the rich description of the pagan monarch's lavish splendour. Their concern for accuracy presumably lies behind renderings which speak of "a mosaic pavement of porphyry, marble, mother-of-pearl and precious stones" (RSV, Jer; NIV 'other costly stones'), or "malachite and alabaster, of mother-of-pearl and turquoise" (NEB), or "a courtyard paved with white marble, red feldspar, shining mother-of-pearl and blue turquoise" (GNB). AV's "pavement of red, and blue, and white, and black marble" does not expect the reader to be a geologist or a specialist in fine arts in order to understand the author's description. The modern versions here remind me of that kind of 'realism' favoured by the late Ian Fleming, where everything is precisely categorized and price-tagged. Or, to suggest another analogy, the technique seems to be that of the Victorian painters Leighton, Alma-Tadema and Poynter, with their pedantic devotion to supposed historical detail. Just so the gorgeously rich colours of AV here, conveyed by its characteristically measured rhythmic prose, are transmuted in the modern versions into details of value. Perhaps this is a comment on our culture. Another significant weakness displayed in contemporary renderings of this chapter is an inability to

express Vashti's beauty with suitable dignity. NIV, in its effort to avoid cliché, falls into a worse trap by translating "she was lovely to look at", which, by its immediate reminiscence of the popular song, effectively deflates the literary tone of the account. Once again it is left to RSV to retain AV's simple but dignified "she was fair to look on" with "she was fair to behold".

The Psalms provide the obvious place for a comparison of the modern versions' translation of biblical poetry. It seems to me an extraordinarily significant point that most of them choose to render the old blessed by 'happy'. The history of English 'bless' and 'blessed', 'blessing' and 'blessedness', is rich indeed, and the words convey a whole complex of meaning. 'Happy' signifies a clutch of ideas mainly connected with circumstances, luck or fortune. To reduce 'blessed' to 'happy' in contexts closely associated with God Himself is to forfeit most of the true significance of the concept. 'Happiness' is a transient, fragile feeling, a mere matter of passing emotional wellbeing. 'Blessedness' is, for the Bible, a state conferred by God which brings one into a peculiarly special relationship with Him. I am glad to discover that others share my distress at this crucial change in the modern versions.^{1b} Having said this, I propose to compare Ps. 1: 1a and 4a. NIV pushes RSV's modernization process further by regularizing the earlier version's retained inversion. Not one of the others keeps the image of walking, while GNB destroys the imagery altogether by its flat positive abstract statement "reject the advice". Because they cannot leave 'the wicked' without adding 'men', unlike the more literary versions, LvB and GNB have to make the subject plural to avoid repetition. Jer intensifies the simple negative into 'never'. In the other half-verse, the influence of the other modern versions seems to have forced NIV into inversion, omission of the verb, and the addition of an exclamation mark, so often the sign of inadequate verbal emphasis. NEB adds 'men' to 'wicked', which it did not do so in 1a, and by changing 'so' to 'like this' weakens the force of the assertion, as does the simple but garrulous rendering of GNB. LvB, granted its paraphrastic nature, is in keeping with its general style, unlike Jer's repetitive and semi-hysterical wording.

Comparative analysis of many of the Psalms would reveal confirmation of these characteristics of the modern versions' handling of biblical poetry. What emerges most strikingly is GNB's consistent levelling down of varied literary forms and styles to a grey uniform featurelessness by its use of an identical 'common English' style throughout the entire Bible. A good example is found in Ps. 124: 6, where the image of the predatory wild beasts is lost, together with the beautiful "Blessed be the Lord" of AV, RSV, Jer, NEB and LvB ('Praise be to the LORD', NIV), by GNB's "Let us thank the LORD, who has not let our enemies destroy us." All the impact of "a prey to their teeth" (AV, RSV,

NEB) or "torn by their teeth" (NIV) or "a victim to those teeth" (Jer) or even 'devour' (LvB) is thrown aside. It is the same in the Song of Solomon, where the poetic delicacy of "I am sick of love" and "his right hand doth embrace me" of AV is followed by the other versions with appropriate modernizations, but is translated by GNB with the explicit, prosaic statements "I am weak from passion" and "his right hand caresses me" (2: 5,6). It manages to subject even Job to its 'common English' process, rendering "Man that is born of a woman is of few days, and full of trouble" (14: 1, AV) by "We are all born weak and helpless. All lead the same short, troubled life." Similarly the image of "giving up the ghost" (14: 10) is translated into an imageless journalistic two-part sentence in order to retain the rhetorical question: "But a man dies, and that is the end of him; he dies, and where is he then?" For GNB, the ideal of dynamic equivalence appears to involve the destruction of the poetic: the famous description of the virtuous woman in Prov. 31: 10-31 becomes a piece of newspaper prose.

* * *

So far we have looked only at the Old Testament, a procedure justified by the length and literary richness of that section of the Bible. But it is the New Testament which receives more attention and to this I must now turn. First, let us glance at its narrative, still an important mode in the NT's reporting of the essential facts of an historically-based religious faith, with the account of Christ's encounter with Legion in Mk. 5: 1-9. Ambiguous pronouns are avoided, the vocabulary is modernized, and the long sentences of the Greek are broken into shorter units by most of the modern versions, although RSV retains AV's structure for the most part. Jer actually enlarges its initial sentence and LvB displays a pleasing variety in sentence-length. GNB allows itself to add explanations: 'they' becomes "Jesus and his disciples", "the sea" is expanded to "Lake Galilee", 'tombs' is clarified into "burial caves there"; its 'common English' also permits colloquial redundancy: "the man had an evil spirit in him", "chained up". The modern versions have damaged or destroyed the familiar rhythmic sonority of AV's sense units, which are so splendidly adapted to public reading. "Neither could any man tame him" is rendered "no one had the strength to subdue/control him" (RSV, Jer), "no one was strong enough to subdue/master/control him" (NIV, NEB, LvB), and "He was too strong for any one to control him" (GNB). Despite their agreement about the contemporary English idiom, their efforts smack of journalese, while their wording denies itself the exactly apposite associations of AV's verb 'tame'. The final outrage is GNB's substitution of 'Mob' for 'Legion' as the poor man's name.

The parable of the rich man without sufficient storage space for his bumper crops is a good example of both parable and satire. What do the modern versions make of Lk. 12: 13-21? AV's translation is again updated and expanded by interpretive, explanatory additions which seem to me, in fact, to restrict the meanings contained in RSV's and NIV's simple modernization of AV. GNB's 'person' here, together with instances of its preference for the plural, possibly suggest some accommodation to 'anti-sexism'. RSV and Jer retain AV's 'soul', but the others choose 'myself', with some variation in the form of self-address: 'You' (NIV), 'Man' (NEB, as though the rich man were an American negro or trendy youngster), 'Lucky man:' (GNB) and 'Friend' (LvB). RSV, Jer and NEB translate the man's internal monologue at the literary level, but NIV, GNB and LvB fall into colloquial contracted forms. His confident imperative of "Take thine ease, eat, drink, and be merry" in AV is rendered variously as "Take life easy" (NIV), "Take things easy, eat, drink, have a good time" (Jer), "Take life easy, eat, drink, and enjoy yourself" (NEB, GNB), and "Now take it easy - wine, women and song for you!" (LvB). The familiar solemn conclusion and brief application cause difficulty to modern translators. 'Soul', with its implicit assumptions of immortality and accountability, cannot be fully replaced by 'life', which loses much of the threatening content of the divine warning. NIV forfeits the solemn urgency of RSV's adaptation of AV, Jer at one point verges on officialese, while NEB's suitably restrained tone finally lapses into the colloquial. LvB's incisive "Fool! Tonight you die. Then who will get it all?" is effectively economical, however, and is capped by the pungent "Yes, every man is a fool who gets rich on earth but not in heaven". GNB ends, "And Jesus concluded, 'This is how it is with those who pile up riches for themselves but are not rich in God's sight'", thereby both adding an unnecessary introductory comment and committing the repetition which every other modern version adroitly avoids.

Our Lord's teaching was couched in vivid, memorable words to aid its oral transmission and preservation until it came to be permanently recorded. To see how the modern versions translate oratory, then, I have chosen a few verses from the Sermon on the Mount, Mt. 5: 13-20. Immediately we are struck by LvB's interpretive expansion of "You are the world's seasoning, to make it tolerable" and by GNB's decision to transform the metaphor into a simile, "You are like salt for all mankind". Similarly, GNB alters the rhetorical question, "how shall its saltiness be restored?" (RSV) into a statement and incorporates a now familiar Americanism, "there is no way to make it salty again". "You are the light of the world" (RSV, NIV, Jer) receives the same treatment from GNB - "You are like light for the whole world". All the versions except RSV find it necessary to emphasize our Lord's application of His illustration, "Let your light so shine..." (AV). All the versions except GNB and LvB assume understanding of "the law and the prophets". Jesus's emphatic "For verily I

say unto you" (AV) becomes a more or less unsuitable form of words in every modern version, from GNB's "Remember that" to NIV's "I tell you the truth", with its suggestion that occasionally our Lord did otherwise. All the versions show sufficient sensitivity to euphony in their renderings of AV's "scribes and Pharisees", if necessary by resorting to inversion, but GNB retains the AV order while expanding 'scribes' to produce "the teachers of the Law and the Pharisees". The hard saying of our righteousness having to exceed that of the scribes and Pharisees is paraphrased by Jer, NEB, GNB and LvB into modern English which lacks any forceful impact.

For my final example of close comparative analysis of our six modern versions I want to glance at the epistolary mode of 1 Thess. 5: 12-22. AV's series of brief injunctions is assumed by all the versions to be sufficiently unusual to warrant alteration, so we find a rare instance of AV's sentences being lengthened. AV's "know them which labour among you" produces six different translations: all perform the expected modernization to "those who", but AV's 'know' is variously rendered as 'respect' (RSV, NIV), "be considerate to" (Jer), 'acknowledge' (NEB), "pay proper respect to" (GNB), and 'honour' (LvB). These seem to give an unbalanced emphasis to the apostolic command, for AV's 'know' surely conveys both recognition and respect. NEB, Jer and GNB weaken 'admonish', and every modern version reduces the force of 'unruly'. AV's simple image, "ever follow that which is good" is replaced by another, "aiming at", in both NEB and GNB; presumably the latter did not recognize the tired cliché as an image at all. Both NIV and Jer fail to discover happy substitutes: "try to be kind" (NIV), "you must all think of what is best" (Jer). Only NEB rejects the vivid language of spiritual reality by translating AV's "Quench not the Spirit" as "Do not stifle inspiration" in its course of amalgamating AV's final four staccato imperatives into one smoother but infinitely less emphatic sentence. Only RSV and Jer do not restructure the passage.

I come now to try to summarize briefly the characteristics of the modern versions we have looked at.

RSV remains close to AV and the Revised Version (RV), being a revision of the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901. Its committee criticized both RV and ASV for their 'formal correspondence' technique, but nevertheless kept in view AV's aim of revising the existing tradition of English Bibles. So the language was carefully modernized, the Semitic idiom "And it came to pass" disappeared, the text was divided into sense paragraphs, poetry was printed as such, although not consistently, and LORD or GOD was preferred to ASV's Jehovah. Literary criteria were recognized as important in the committee's admission that RV and ASV "are more accurate than the [AV], but have lost some of its

beauty and power as English literature".⁷ RSV makes easy the transition from AV to a modern version because it remains firmly in the same tradition, often retaining identical wording and syntactic structure, and appears to prefer modernizations which try to keep the basic prose rhythm of the parent version. Because of its adherence to AV, it is now felt by some that RSV itself is old-fashioned, despite its post-war date of publication and subsequent slight revision.

The Roman Catholic Jer has attracted its share of attacks from literary critics opposed to the liturgical revolution in the churches,⁸ but has received a better press from biblical scholars - a not unfamiliar occurrence! It is freer than RSV, opts for Protestant-sounding biblical names, prints a good deal of the text as poetry, and - its most obvious distinguishing feature - uses Yahweh for the divine name in the OT. While some of its renderings in the OT seem particularly happy, its NT has been criticized for excessive and progressively increasing freedom, sometimes at the expense of changes to the meaning.^{7b} Kubo and Specht claim to have demonstrated "the inaccuracy of a translation that is meant for serious study of the Word".^{7c}

NEB, once again, has been welcomed by biblical scholars, at least for its NT, but attacked by literary critics. T.S. Eliot described it as "an active agent of decadence"^{9a}, and the present furore over liturgical change and the use of modern versions for the public reading of Scripture has singled out NEB as the object of considerable hostility. On the other hand, the theologically conservative Kubo and Specht accept it, with certain provisos, as suitable for public worship along with RSV and NIV.^{7d} NEB departs from the AV tradition with a completely new translation, being governed by a freer principle, and is not committed to a literal word-for-word technique; it works from an eclectic text constructed by the translators. Its renderings oscillate from the colloquial to the pedantic, while its thought-by-thought principle allows it sometimes to incorporate interpretation into its text. It has been criticized as not only liberal but also ritualistic in its tendencies.¹⁰ As literature, NEB suffers from weaknesses similar to those displayed by Jer - an insensitivity to the sound and meaning of English.

There is little to be said about LvB. Although it is suitable for introducing children to Bible-reading and helpful for private devotional reading, it is totally insupportable for public use. It flaunts all the faults to be expected from a free one-man paraphrase into colloquial American English. LvB is a product of contemporary American culture - the world of powerful advertising, strip cartoons, comic papers, popular TV, muzak - the whole monosyllabic, cliché-ridden vulgar mixture. It speaks to this generation, and God bless its use. But it simply is not literature, and it cannot compare, for example, with the revised Phillips.

GNB has been heralded as *the* Bible for today, immediately intelligible to anybody able to read English. In addition to its ready accessibility, it has been recommended also for its accuracy in translation, especially as compared with NEB.¹¹ Like NEB, it follows the principle of dynamic equivalence, and aims to convey the message of the Bible to modern readers, both Christians and unbelievers. It goes further in trying to bridge the cultural gap by using what it considers to be modern equivalents for biblical ranks, time, distance, capacity and money, and by avoiding technical religious terminology. Long sentences are divided into shorter units. Imagery is frequently translated into abstract statement. Rhetorical devices are shunned. Topical captions are printed at the head of paragraphs. But by aiming at the lowest common denominator, GNB uses a 'common English' which, although not so free and idiomatic as LVB's, is the product of the same culture. The quality of its language can be gauged from its illustrations. They are charming and frequently apposite - but they reflect the translators' expectation of their readership and possess a clear affinity with the world of picture books designed to encourage reading. These spare line drawings reinforce the impression given by the GNB (equally with LVB) that the sacred text has been reduced to a level at which it has to compete on equal terms with popular paperbacks and comics. This effect is particularly strong in the conversations recorded in Scripture, where the desire to be idiomatic, to copy contemporary speech patterns, has manoeuvred the translators into the frequent employment of unseemly and inappropriate language utterly at odds with the overall tone of the narrative. This endemic literary failure is related to a grave methodological weakness. If dynamic equivalence is to evoke from the modern reader the response aroused in the readers or listeners to the original text, then it must distinguish between its literary forms and styles. GNB does not: stylistic differences in the original are obscured by the abandonment of the literary for the colloquial. As Professor Bruce comments wryly, "Where the goal of 'common English' is incompatible with the ideal of dynamic equivalence, the former has prevailed".^{9b}

I come to NIV of 1978. It is obviously much more literary and designed for public reading. The signs are that it may have chosen the right time to appear, for secular cultural pressure and the translation's evangelical auspices together seem likely to persuade Bible readers who have never yet favoured a modern version to take to NIV. Our examples will have made it clear that NIV has returned to the AV, RSV tradition, and has tried to capitalize on its literary strength. Its Preface declares that the translators "sought to preserve some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English", and the publishers make large literary claims on its behalf. By and large, NIV's narratives retain something of the majesty of AV's,

with some updating of vocabulary and syntax, while availing themselves of greater freedom than RSV's. It is the poetry of NIV, however, which seems to me its strongest point. There are even places where it improves on AV. The Psalms are presented in a dignified, restrained translation, unlike some of them in Jer, NEB and GNB. It is particularly pleasing to find 'blessed' retained in preference to most modern versions' 'happy'. NIV seems also to understand the function of the NT letters as passionate written utterances designed to convince when read aloud to the church. It proceeds further along the road of sentence-shortening and regularization of word order than RSV, and so to that extent proves a flatter, more pedestrian version than the AV tradition. It is weak on rhythm, moreover, and, with other modern versions, fails signally to render direct speech in a fitting fashion. With GNB and LvB, NIV is fond of abbreviating 'is', 'am' and 'not' to the colloquial 's', 'm' and 'n't' while the same modernistic reduction occurs in its future tense auxiliary 'will' (to 'll'), which seems, on the American model, to be consistently preferred to 'shall'. NIV also shares with GNB an overworking of 'get'. Occasionally NIV is guilty of a lapse of taste in descriptive passages. These failures may be summarized as NIV's inability to maintain a consistent tone. The fact that the committee found it impossible to achieve the unflinching dignity which it set out to attain appears to confirm the conclusion which it seems one is compelled to draw from modern versions as a whole, that the English language today is culturally incapable of supporting a sacred text.

It has been argued that modern versions display not so much the decline of our language as the state of our theology. The difficulty which contemporary people experience in believing the Bible stories is certainly related to the rise of a common speech which rejects subtlety and ambiguity. Cultural change has therefore disabled English from expressing thought forms which are felt to be primitive. As Stephen Prickett says, "It is simply not possible, in the words of the GNB's Preface, 'to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous', because religion is *not about* things that are natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous".^{12a} So he suggests that "the most important feature of the language of the AV for us is not that it is more archaic or obscure than the modern versions, but simply that it is much more subtle *theologically*".^{12b} In similar vein, Geoffrey Strickland claims of modern translators that "Their way of retelling the Bible story makes it obvious that they don't believe it".^{13a} He ought to have qualified this sweeping generalization by noting the situation of the translators in a post-Christian, unbelieving society whose language is the medium they have to employ, but he puts his finger on the essential importance of the *style* of biblical translation when he writes, "It is that ring of authenticity whose audibility or absence makes all the difference in the world to what one is saying and this is why the question of

belief turns inevitably not only on what one says but the way one says it."^{13b} Certainly in the public reading of the Bible it is the fitting style which possesses the power to please, teach and move the listener: impact and conviction spring from the literary quality of the version used.

Obviously we must distinguish between Bible translations used for private study or devotion and those used for public worship. We might find ourselves looking at RV for study (as Professor H.F.D. Sparks strongly recommends¹⁴), reading Phillips or NEB in our private devotions, and listening to RSV in church and following the passage in our own copy. Our children might be started on LvB, while we may give a GNB to an interested neighbour. The many available versions of the English Bible promote purposes of evangelism, communication and edification.

There are, however, inherent in this seemingly ideal situation certain very real disadvantages, which I have set out elsewhere.¹⁵ The ready availability of a variety of modern versions has introduced confusion, discouraged the following of public reading, undermined committal of Scripture to memory and spread doubt where none existed when there was in the AV a universally recognized standard text. If we believe in inspiration, it is never sufficient to read a translation: we have to get as near as we can to the original text, even if it is only through an interlinear Greek NT and commentaries. The existence of so many alternative translations in itself, that is to say, is not such a great boon: we could derive the same benefit from fewer versions. Those versions would need to be more literal and more literary, for the more idiomatic translations, I firmly believe, make for the trivialization of Scripture. This charge derives, of course, from the importance of style. Evangelicals have always been open to criticism for not reading much outside their own narrow area of publications. If they read only those versions of the Bible that are couched in idiomatic and colloquial 'common English' - GNB, LvB, of those we have considered - or even only those translations which try but fail consistently to achieve a more literary level - NEB, Jer, NIV - then they will have lost touch with the great tradition of AV and will be effectively incapacitated from reading good secular literature. The educative potential of the AV tradition will have been forfeited. What these colloquial versions do is to deprive the Word of God of an appropriate medium for its essentially serious message. Issues of life and death - which is what we believe the Bible to be about, surely - must be expressed in suitable English, fitting to their claims. Content cannot be separated from style; as Strickland pointed out, *what* you say is determined by *how* you say it. Committee English from the board room and the corridors of power cannot sustain the weight of Scriptural communication; it is simply inappropriate, and therefore fails to carry conviction. Finally, this process of trivialization debases our appreciation

of Scripture itself. A narrative style that teeters on the brink of anticlimax, a method of rendering dialogue or direct speech which equates it with today's common colloquial English, a deliberately antirhetorical translation in passages where literary devices are demanded for the effective transference of the full message of the original - these features not only fail to enhance our understanding of what it was the original writers were trying to communicate, they positively debase its literary level and therefore reduce our appreciation of its intrinsic importance. The flat, unmusical tones of Clement Attlee could not have stirred a nation as did the deliberately rhetorical, emotional, carefully orchestrated speeches of Winston Churchill. The unrheterical is neither moving nor memorable. That is why AV can be memorized; that is why AV still conveys the Bible message with a palpable authority and conviction; that is why AV, in my view, cannot and should not be replaced by a modern version in the public reading of Scripture during the worship of the church. If it were ever to be totally superseded, we should have lost not only one of the two priceless jewels of English literary culture, but also the only adequate translation of the Bible into English which is immediately sensed to be of the appropriate kind.

"In the Bible", remarks Calvin D. Linton, "the reader gets at least a glimpse of the beauty of God".^{16a} I am not, however, pleading for the retention of AV as some beautiful monument or the best available frame for some ancient portrait. The astonishing complexity of *King Lear* can't be grasped by summarizing its 'thought'; a precis or paraphrase of *Emma* or *Middlemarch* or *Nostramo* or *The Rainbow* is no longer the work of art itself; and the 'message' of the Bible is not abstractable from the words in which it is formulated, as the history of doctrinal controversy bears witness. Our English Bible is, of course, a translation from ancient Hebrew and Greek documents; and what either the Aucas Indians or a multi-racial inner-city church in contemporary Britain require from their versions of the Bible is not in the first instance great literature. For most major constituencies of potential Bible-readers there exists a suitable version.

But I believe that by confining their scope to modern versions only, readers of the English Bible of whatever background are depriving themselves not only of their cultural birthright, but also of a richer rendering of the sacred text which is there for them in the AV. As Professor Partridge concluded from his examination of the NEB, "It is evident that some of the cherished religious themes are not adaptable to the tones and rhythms of contemporary speech."⁴ Recent research has suggested that the General Meeting of the AV translators carefully reviewed the work of the various translation companies and that its revisions "functioned primarily to improve style".¹⁷ The result, in George Steiner's words, is that "in the history of the art [of translation] very probably the most successful domestication is

the King James Bible": readers "find a native presence in what is ... a remote, entirely alien world of expression and reference." He insists that "this 'ingestion' and transmutation of Hebrew, Greek and Latin sources into English sensibility ... would not have occurred had the scholars and editors of 1604-11 laboured to be 'modern'."¹⁸ The holy demands appropriate utterance. By all means let us make use of idiomatic modern versions. But let us not use them exclusively, and but rarely or never in congregational worship, when we need all the assistance afforded by the most sublime language Englishmen have been capable of writing if we are truly to raise our minds to God and to present our united praise before Him. With Professor Brian Morris, I believe that "the greatest truths can only be mediated in the greatest language."¹⁹

NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 B. Morris, "Liturgy and literature", in B. Morris, ed., *Ritual Murder: Essays on Liturgical Reform*, Manchester, 1980; (a) pp. 58-73; (b) A. Gomme, "The new religious English", pp. 92-95.
- 2 L.G. Kelly, *The True Interpreter: a History of Translation Theory and Practice in the West* Oxford, 1979, pp. 2, 4, 26, 132, 134.
- 3 R. Kassühlke, "Linguistic and cultural implications of Bible translation", in R.W. Brislin, ed., *Translation: Applications and Research*, NY, 1976, pp. 280-82.
- 4 A.C. Partridge, *English Biblical Translation*, 1973, p.220.
- 5 B. Mitchell, "Common consent", *PN Review*, 1979 13, (a) p.7; (b) A. Louth, "The 'Our Father'", p.21.
- 6 *Punch*, 16 January, 1980, p.114.
- 7 Quoted from S. Kubo & W. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth Century Versions of the Bible*, Grand Rapids, Mich., 1976, (a) p.44; (b) p.127; (c) p.128; (d) pp. 159-160.
- 8 E.g., A. Gomme, ref.1b.
- 9 Quoted by F.F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English* 3rd ed. 1979, (a) p.239; (b) Bruce, p.262.
- 10 H. Dennett, *Graphic Guide to Modern Versions of the New Testament*, 1965, p.67.
- 11 V. Perry, "Two modern versions compared", *Evangelical Quarterly*, 1977, 49, 206-219.
- 12 S. Prickett, "What do the Translators think they are up to?", *Universities Quarterly*, 1979, 33, (a) p.263; (b) p.266.
- 13 G. Strickland, "The Holy Bible: Translation and Belief", *New Universities Quarterly*, 1979, 3, (a) p.273; (b) p.277.
- 14 H.F.D. Sparks, *On Translations of the Bible*, 1973, p.12.
- 15 In an article entitled "Too many modern Versions?" to appear in *Evangelical Quarterly*.
- 16 C.D. Linton, "The Bible as Literature", in F.E. Gaebelain & J.D. Douglas, eds., *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, Vol.1, 1979, p.131.

- 17 E.C. Jacobs, "Two stages of Old Testament translation for the King James Bible", *The Library*, 1980, Ser 6, 2, 39.
- 18 G. Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* 1975, pp. 347-49.
- 19 B. Morris, "The public's prayer for liturgical continuity", *Times Higher Education Supplement*, 7 December, 1979, p.13.