

## *The New English Bible*

**F.F. Bruce**

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14 March 1961, was the most important day in the history of the Bible in Britain since 19 May 1885, when the Revised Version of the Old and New Testaments was published in one volume. The Revised Version was an enterprise in which representatives of the Churches of England and Scotland and several other British Churches took part. Since its appearance we have had many other versions of the Bible, in whole or in part, produced by individual translators or by committees, but now once again we have a version sponsored by the principal Churches of Great Britain and Ireland. The New Testament in this new version has just appeared, in two editions—a library edition with full translators' notes and introduction, selling at 21s., and a popular edition with a minimum of notes and a shorter introduction, selling at 8s. 6d. The publishers are the Oxford University Press and Cambridge University Press. For the Old Testament we shall have to wait a few more years.

When the Revised Version was launched, the initiative was taken by the Anglican communion—more precisely, by the Upper House of Convocation of Canterbury. The initiative in regard to the New English Bible was taken by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland in 1946, in response to an overture from the Presbytery of Stirling and Dunblane. The ministers and elders of Stirling and Dunblane may well take some pardonable pride in contemplating the effect of their overture! The Church of Scotland approached other British Churches, and a Joint Committee of the Churches was set up to direct the work. It was recognised from the beginning that what was required was no mere revision of one or more earlier versions but a completely new translation.

The Joint Committee, on which the Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, the British and Foreign Bible Society and the National Bible Society of Scotland were represented in addition to the Churches, set up three panels of translators—one for the Old Testament, one for the Apocrypha and one for the New Testament. They also set up a panel of literary experts whose task it should be to review the work of the translators and suggest improvements in style and diction. This last provision was a wise one, in the light of the many

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(and not unjustified) criticisms that had been made of the Revised Version on this score.

The panels for the Old Testament and Apocrypha are still pursuing their course, under the convenership of Professor G. R. Driver and Professor G. D. Kilpatrick respectively. The convener of the New Testament panel was Professor C. H. Dodd, who is also Director of the whole enterprise. Professor Dodd is, by general consent, the most distinguished biblical scholar in the British Isles today, and it is both gratifying and encouraging to know that such an important work as the New English Bible is being carried on under his direction. But he is director, not dictator; here and there in the New Testament version one comes upon renderings which would probably not be his personal preference, to judge by what he has written elsewhere. While individuals have contributed in many ways to the translation, their contributions have been subject to the judgment of the whole panel, whose members accept corporate responsibility for the work. The New Testament version was finally approved by

the Joint Committee at a meeting in the historic Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey in March 1960.

One thing that biblical translators have to make up their minds about before they start translating is the text that they are going to use. The men who gave us the Authorized Version of 1611 did not concern themselves about this; so far as concerns the New Testament, they simply followed the text of the early printed editions of the Greek Testament. The Revised Version, largely under the influence of Westcott and Hort, paid chief respect to the ancient Alexandrian text, represented principally by the Sinaitic and Vatican Codices. This policy marked a great advance on the Authorized Version; and one of the abiding virtues of the Revised Version of the New Testament is the great superiority of its underlying Greek text over that which underlay the older version. Today, however, the Alexandrian text, reliable as it is, would not be accorded the same solitary pre-eminence as was given it by Westcott and Hort. The Introduction to the New English Bible says: 'There is not at the present time any critical text which would command the same degree of general acceptance as the Revisers' text did in its day. Nor has the time come, in the judgment of competent scholars, to construct such a text, since new material constantly comes to light, and the debate continues. The present translators therefore could do no other than consider variant readings on their merits, and, having weighed the evidence for themselves, select for translation in

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each passage the reading which to the best of their judgment seemed most likely to represent what the author wrote. Where other readings seemed to deserve serious consideration they have been recorded in footnotes.' This decision in favour of an eclectic text is inevitable and wise in the present situation; although one might wish that the footnotes sometimes, instead of merely saying that 'some witnesses read' something different from what appears in the text, could have given a little indication of the relative support given to variant readings. But then it was no part of the translators' responsibility to provide an *apparatus criticus* to their text.

Rarely if ever has conjecture been resorted to. There is one reading which used to be called the only certain conjecture in the New Testament. That is the reading 'javelin' for 'hyssop' in John xix. 29. The advantage of adopting this reading in such a context is fairly obvious. It was first suggested by a scholar in the sixteenth century, on the ground that an original *hyssoperithetes* might have become *hyssopoperithentes* by the accidental dittography of two letters. More recently the reading *hyssos* ('on a javelin') has been identified in the first hand of a mediaeval manuscript, in which however a later hand changed it to *hyssopo* ('on hyssop') in accordance with the general text.

This reading was examined by Professor G. D. Kilpatrick in a paper which he read to the VICTORIA INSTITUTE some years ago on 'The Transmission of the New Testament and its Reliability' (see *Journal of Transactions of the Victoria Institute* **89** (1957), pp. 98 f.) He pointed out that, for all its attractiveness, 'this plausible conjecture lands us in improbabilities and difficulties greater than those of the text of our manuscript'. His main reason for saying this was that the Greek word *hyssos* was used as the equivalent of the Latin *pilum*, not of any kind of javelin without distinction. Now the *pilum* was the weapon of Roman legionary troops, not of auxiliary troops; but until A.D. 66 no legionary troops were stationed in Judaea. In that case, no *hyssos* would have been available at the time of our Lord's crucifixion to be used for putting the vinegar-soaked sponge to His lips. Yet the New English Bible gives the rendering: 'they soaked a sponge with the wine, fixed it on a javelin, and held it up to his

lips.' A footnote on 'javelin' says: 'So one witness; the others read "on marjoram".' In preferring 'javelin' in the text the new translation follows Moffatt, the Basic Bible, Goodspeed, Rieu, Phillips and Kingsley-Williams; but on Dr Kilpatrick's showing this reading cannot be accepted, unless indeed we hold that John used the word in a looser sense than any other Greek writer who uses it.

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As regards the translation, it must be reiterated that it is an utterly new translation, not a revision of any existing version. This being so, it does not lend itself to comparison with, say, the Revised Standard Version, which was simply a revision and therefore retains much of what the English-speaking world has come to regard as 'Bible English'. Still less does the new version lend itself to comparison with the Authorized Version, although its sponsors make it plain that it is not intended to supersede the Authorized Version, but rather to be used alongside it. Yet, because throughout the English-speaking world the Bible is best known in the Authorized Version, the New English Bible is bound to be compared with it, and many people will come to their own conclusions about the new version in the light of such a comparison, and express their 'like' or 'dislike' of it accordingly.

The sonorous English of the Authorized Version, which in essence we owe to William Tyndale, and which makes the Authorized Version so eminently suitable for public reading, will probably be missed from the New English Bible. Yet the new translators have achieved some noble passages. The canticles in Luke's nativity narrative, for example, do full justice to the poetic quality of the original; here is the beginning of the *Magnificat*:

Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord,  
rejoice, rejoice, my spirit, in God my saviour;  
so tenderly has he looked upon his servant,  
    humble as she is.  
For, from this day forth,  
all generations will count me blessed,  
so wonderfully has he dealt with me,  
    the Lord, the Mighty One.

In some respects the new translation follows the Authorized Version rather than the Revised Version: for example, it does not imitate the Revised Version in using the same English word, as far as possible, to represent the same Greek word throughout the New Testament. This feature of the Revised Version is one which makes it so admirable as a student's version, and no doubt exact students of the New Testament, who wish to have the vocabulary of the original represented as precisely as possible by English equivalents, will continue to value the Revised Version for this reason. The Greek word *xylon* (literally meaning 'wood') is used five times in the New Testament in reference to the cross (which elsewhere is indicated by another Greek word, *stauros*). For those five occurrences the older versions have 'tree';

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the New English Bible has 'gibbet' in Acts v. 30; x. 39; xiii. 29; 'tree' in Galatians iii. 13 (quoting from Dent. xxi. 23); 'gallows' in 1 Peter ii. 24. (The other word, *stauros*, is regularly rendered 'cross'.)

Sometimes the new translation goes back to even earlier models than the Authorized Version. The translators of the Authorized Version claim to have avoided 'the scrupulosity of the Puritanes, who leave the old Ecclesiastical words, and betake them to other, as when they put... congregation instead of Church'. But whether it was Puritan scrupulosity or some other consideration that moved the new translators, they have shown a preference for 'congregation' over 'church' where a local church is in view. In Matthew xvi. 18 they make Jesus say, 'on this rock I will build my church'; but in Matthew xviii. 17 we find 'report the matter to the congregation, and if he will not listen even to the congregation, you must then treat him as you would a pagan or a tax-gatherer'. So Tyndale comes into his own again.

Some books on the English Bible have quoted for its quaintness the rendering of 1 Corinthians xvi. 8 in most of the older English versions from Wycliffe to Geneva: 'I will tarry at Ephesus until Whitsuntide.' Now the New English Bible can be added to the list: 'I shall remain at Ephesus until Whitsuntide.' When the reviewer saw this, he looked up Revelation i.10 in pleasurable anticipation, hoping that (after Tyndale and Coverdale) John plight say that he was in spirit 'on a Sunday', but no: 'It was on the Lord's day.' Nor has Passover reverted to Easter in Acts xii. 4. The preceding verse says: 'This happened during the festival of Unleavened Bread.' But the translators' propensity for using now one phrase and now another to represent the same original appears when we compare Acts xx. 6; here 'after the days of Unleavened Bread' is relegated to a footnote as the literal rendering, while the text reads: 'after the Passover season.'

Great care is taken to distinguish between the present and aorist tenses of such a verb as 'believe' by the use of such phrases as 'have faith in' and 'put faith in'; phrases like these have the additional advantage of making the relation between the verb 'believe' and the noun 'faith' immediately apparent. This is specially helpful in the Epistle to the Romans.

The unit in this translation is not the individual word but the clause or sentence; sometimes, indeed, it may be more extensive still. In following this principle the new translators have followed one of their earliest English predecessors, John Purvey, who edited the second Wycliffite version in 1395. John Purvey had a sound grasp of the

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principles of translation, and he laid it down that the good translator will 'translate after the sentence and not only after the words'. It may be that by 'sentence' Purvey meant what we should call the meaning; but it makes little practical difference; a translator who aims at reproducing the meaning of the original in the idiom of his own day will make the clause or sentence and not the single word his working unit.

A review which is written so soon after publication must, of course, be a provisional one. The usefulness of the new version for use in church can only be proved by experience. For private use it can confidently be said that it will commend itself to many. Not only the language but the format draws the reader on; he cannot be content with a small portion as enough to be going on with, but finds himself reading further to see what comes next. At present, no doubt, this is partly due to the novelty of the version. How have they translated this? What will they make of that? From time to time he is pulled up with a jerk. The last clause of John i. 1 reads: 'what God was, the Word was.' Is that what the clause really means? Or have the translators perhaps been moved by an unconscious desire to give a rather different rendering from the Authorized Version? Sometimes the idiom is positively homely: 'This is more than we can

stomach!' say the offended listeners to our Lord's discourse about the bread of life (John vi. 60). 'Why listen to such words?'

There is nothing in the way of denominational or sectional bias in the New English Bible; that really goes without saying, in view of the many Churches represented on the panels, not to mention the reputation of the individual translators. The great verities of the historic Christian faith come to clear expression; that too is only what was to be expected in a version whose sole aim is to let the biblical writers convey their own message in mid-twentieth century English.

The reviewer comes across things now and then which he is tempted to think he could have rendered better himself. But he reflects that in the multitude of counsellors there is safety; and, having occasionally tried his hand at Bible translation in the way of private enterprise, he is the less inclined to criticise other translators. It is, however, not people who do some translating themselves who will have the last word to say about the New English Bible. The man in the street (with rare exceptions) cannot make shoes, but he knows whether shoes fit him or not. And it is the common reader who will decide the fortunes of the New English Bible. If in this version he hears the Word of God addressing

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itself to his heart and meeting his need, he will give it a welcome that will surpass the translators' most sanguine hopes. The reign of Elizabeth II will then be looked back upon as an epoch in the history of the English Bible no less glorious than the reign of her great namesake of four hundred years ago.

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