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Bible Translation Today

BY R. W. F. WOOTTON

THESE are very exciting days for all those who are concerned with Bible translation. The New English Bible is approaching its completion in 1970; a revision of the Welsh Bible is in progress; and outside the United Kingdom there is an unprecedented spate of translation and revision going on, so that the British and Foreign Bible Society alone is in touch with some 320 translation projects in as many different languages. At the same time the whole approach to Bible translation is undergoing a revolution such as has not been seen in the period of over 2,000 years which makes up its history. Let me illustrate this by some examples of more traditional and more recent translations in English:

1. In it [the gospel] the righteousness of God is revealed through faith for faith. Rom. 1: 17 RSV.

I see in it God's plan for imparting righteousness to men, a process begun and continued by their faith. Rom. 1: 17 J. B. Phillips.

2. Blessed are the poor in spirit. Matt. 5: 3 RSV.

How blest are those who know that they are poor. Matt. 5: 3 NEB.

3. John the baptiser appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins. Mk. 1: 4 RSV.

So John appeared in the desert, baptising people and preaching his message. 'Change your ways and be baptised,' he told the people, 'and God will forgive your sins.' Mk. 1: 4 Today's English Version.

4. Have this mind in you which was also in Christ Jesus. Phil 2: 5 RV.

Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. Phil. 2: 5 NEB.

5. Of him are ye in Christ Jesus, who was made unto us wisdom, and righteousness and sanctification, and redemption. 1 Cor. 1: 30 RV.

Yet from this same God you have received your standing in Jesus Christ, and He has become for us the true Wisdom, a matter, in practice of being made righteous and holy, in fact, of being redeemed. 1 Cor. 1: 30 J. B. Phillips.

6. In him we have redemption through his blood, the forgiveness of our trespasses. Eph. 1: 7 RSV.

For in Christ our release is secured and our sins are forgiven through the shedding of his blood. Eph. 1: 7 NEB.

7. Therefore I testify to you this day that I am innocent of the blood of all of you. Acts 20: 26 RSV.

That being so, I here and now declare to you that no man's fate can be laid at my door. Acts 20: 26 NEB.

8. (God) has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David. Lk. 1: 69 RSV.

(God) has raised up a deliverer of victorious power from the house of his servant David. Lk. 1: 69 NEB.

What are the basic differences in these two kinds of translations? One obviously is the attempt to express the meaning of the Greek in normal contemporary English, avoiding expressions which cry out for explanation or which savour of an ecclesiastical tradition which may be quite foreign to the reader of today—see for example numbers six and eight above. This is obviously just as important, or more important still, in languages which lack the Christian heritage of our own tongue: through literal renderings of Greek and Hebrew words a kind of ecclesiastical vocabulary can easily develop, and in some countries has developed, which is utterly strange to those outside the churches, brought up in a totally different religion. In such cases the Bible becomes part of the *arcana*, the mysteries, of the Church; those inside may gradually hope to gain an understanding of its meaning, but there is no such hope for those outside: it is almost as if a foreign language were used in church. One remembers the story of the young artisan, Fred, who had never been to church but got to know the young curate, Bill, at the open youth club. One day he was induced to attend evening prayer with some other lads from the club. To his surprise his friend Bill came processing in at the beginning of the service wearing the oddest gear, and when the hymn finished started to proclaim solemnly, 'Dearly beloved brethren, the Scripture moveth us in sundry places. . . .' Completely baffled, Fred turned to his neighbour and whispered loudly, 'Cor, blimey, what's come over old Bill?'

But bringing the language up to date in the sense of getting rid of obsolete words, phrases and constructions is only a part of the revolution which Bible translation is undergoing; there are several other processes involved. One is the rejection of 'concordant' translation—the kind of translation in which wherever possible a Greek word is rendered by the same word wherever it occurs; this is a marked feature of the English Revised Version. To take a single example, the Greek word *sarx*, rendered 'flesh' everywhere in the RV has a number of quite distinct meanings:

1. the soft tissues of the body; e.g. Lk. 24: 39 flesh and bones.
2. the human body in general; e.g. Heb. 5: 7 in the days of his flesh.
3. a human being; e.g. Acts 2: 17 all flesh.
4. what is merely external; e.g. Phil. 3: 3 confidence in the flesh.
5. man's unregenerate nature; e.g. Gal. 5: 19 the works of the flesh.
6. natural descent; e.g. Rom. 1: 3 descended from David according to the flesh.

7. one's own relations; e.g. Rom. 11: 14 them which are my flesh. I leave it to the reader to judge how far the English word 'flesh', as it is used today, is appropriate in those contexts—I would think only the first use could stand. NEB represents *sarx* by about a dozen different expressions. What likelihood is there that there would be a single word in, say, a Bantu language, which would fit all these very different uses? Yet this method of concordant translation has been followed by many translators in the languages of Asia, Africa and other parts of the world, with most unfortunate results. Thus one missionary had a chart stuck up in his study giving in parallel columns a number of important terms in Hebrew, their Greek and English

'equivalents' and the supposed equivalent in the language into which he was translating, as though the same term was bound to be appropriate in every context.

Once introduced such expressions, often utterly foreign to the genius of the receptor language, become part of the Church's tradition. Missionaries learn their language from the Bible and so are quite unable to criticise its style and vocabulary, while native speakers accept these linguistic anomalies as part of the strangeness of their new faith. They have learnt to regard it as utterly different in any case from their old ways of thinking, and such peculiarities of language are accepted as helping to underline the difference, so much so that any attempt to replace them by more natural forms is resisted at first as an attack on orthodoxy. But the attempt must be made if the Church is to communicate its faith to those outside; the meanings must be sought behind the words, and these may require very different translations in different contexts, as the example of *sarx* shows.

Another important process is that of 'restructuring', replacing the Hebrew or Greek grammatical structure of the original by a structure which accords better with the genius of the language in question. An example of this is seen in the sixth of the verses quoted above. Many nouns in the Biblical languages, as in English, refer not to objects or persons, nor even to abstract qualities, but to actions or happenings; they are 'event-words' rather than 'object-' or 'abstract-words'. A few common examples in the New Testament are: redemption, faith, grace, obedience, baptism, salvation. Four such words occur in Mk. 1: 4, the third of the verses quoted, and in Today's English Version all but 'sins' are replaced by verbs. While such substitution may be optional in English (it often adds sharpness and clarity) it is quite essential in many languages which differ radically from the indo-European family to which both Greek and English belong. Further, long periods such as are seen in Lk. 1: 1-4, Eph. 1 and a number of other Pauline passages are quite strange and unnatural in many languages; they require to be broken up into much smaller units, related to each other by co-ordination, not subordination.

To make translations meaningful today adjustments are also needed in many cases on account of the gulf between the cultural background of the Bible and that of the receptor language. This problem does not arise acutely in English, for cultural backgrounds to some extent overlap. Thus we too are familiar with ploughing and other processes of agriculture, with the use of yeast for making bread, with building stone houses, with knocking at doors and with the anointing of monarchs; and where our culture differs the Biblical expressions reflecting a strange culture have become more or less well known through the influence of the Bible in British and American life: e.g. whited sepulchres, girding up the loins, a good Samaritan, a prophet without honour. But what is one to do when translating for a people whose culture is completely foreign to that of the Bible, which knows none of the customs or institutions referred to above? In some parts of the world, for instance, agriculture is unknown, or if crops are grown they depend on hoe-culture. Then perhaps 'if you had not ploughed with my heifer . . .' must become 'if you had not hoed with my hoe'

(Jud. 14: 18). Admittedly something is lost, but here there is no better way. In some regions only a thief knocks at doors; an honest man calls out, not minding if his voice is recognised. So Rev. 3: 20 must read, 'I stand at the door and call. . . .' A recent review of Today's English Version takes the translator to task for inaccuracy for referring to a coffin (Lk. 17: 14, for 'bier'), tents (for 'booths', Lk. 9: 33), and aprons (Lk. 17: 8, for a servant's attire)! Of course, there is no inaccuracy here; the translator knew as well as the reviewer the precise meaning of these terms in the New Testament culture, but he preferred to use the nearest cultural equivalent which would convey meaning to the people for whom the book is intended. For them 'booth' is meaningless, and 'bier' conveys quite the wrong meaning. Sometimes of course this method is impossible, and a foreign word must be used, with perhaps a footnote or explanation in the glossary, but the less this is done the better; where a reasonably close equivalent exists it is surely right to use it.

One might perhaps sum up this new approach to translation in two principles. First, translate the sense, not the words. This is often more difficult than the older and more literal method. Thus what do 'poor in spirit' and 'the righteousness of God' really mean? The older translators have skated over these problems, but modern translators are trying to get to grips with them. They feel obliged to determine for example which meaning of *sarx* is used in a particular passage, and a verse like Gal. 6: 4, or 1 Cor. 1: 30 (quoted in number five above), can no longer be left obscure and almost meaningless. Some may object that this involves interpretation rather than translation. But in fact these are not two distinct things with a clear frontier between them; they shade off into one another with no line of demarcation. Certainly the translator must guard against any excessively individual or subjective interpretation, and for this reason the Bible Societies arrange for a review committee associated with almost every translation, though it may complicate and delay procedures. It is the translator's task to make sense of his text, a task in which even the RSV has failed at times, cf. 1 Chr. 26: 18 'and for the parbar on the west there were four at the road and two at the parbar'. If the Bible is truly the word of God it must speak with a clear voice; though at times the meaning of the original may be hard to know with certainty, the sacred writers were not intentionally obscure or ambiguous, and here the translator must seek to follow them, even if it means choosing one of two or more possible meanings—to do that is far better than fence-sitting, and an alternative can be given in a footnote.

The second principle is always to bear in mind for whom the translation is intended. It is not sufficient to ask of a particular phrase, 'Is this meaningful?', for the answer is another question: 'For whom?' What is meaningful for the well-educated and instructed Christian may be meaningless for the learned Muslim who uses the same language; what makes sense to him may be nonsense to the barely literate Christian. This means that in major languages translations at varying levels are envisaged; indeed such translations are already in existence in English, German and Spanish, and others are in preparation in French, Portuguese, Swahili, Persian and other languages. The RSV

claimed to get rid of archaic and obsolete expressions, yet it is full of words which are quite strange to the spoken language of today, such as sanctification, visitation, dispensation, redemption, brethren, betrothed, etc. The worshipping Christian may understand (though perhaps even he sometimes misunderstands); but to the unchurched worker on the factory floor they carry no meaning at all. No doubt he understands many terms which he would never dream of using himself, but these are not among them.

A translation like the New English Bible is in modern English in respect not only of its vocabulary but also of its idioms and grammatical construction. But it still includes words which are not commonly used by people of ordinary education, such as 'purgation', 'ministrant', 'effulgence', 'exultation', to quote examples from a single chapter (Heb. 1). A 'popular' translation aims at dispensing with all such words and using terms understood by that important but non-vocal majority of mankind which lacks a literary education, avoiding at the same time any expressions which are merely colloquial or vulgar. Today's English Version, translated by Dr. R. G. Bratcher of the American Bible Society (Collins 1967), is such a translation in English. Since it was first issued in U.S.A. in September 1966, over eight millions have been sold; so clearly there is a ready market for a popular translation, and I have no doubt that many are reading the Bible in this form who would not read the more conventional translation. This is just what it is intended for, and many criticisms levelled against it, like that of Malcolm Muggeridge in the *Observer*, fall wide of the mark as they fail to appreciate the purpose of the book. Of course it is not the only kind of Bible translation that is needed, and none of its sponsors have ever suggested that it was.

Some have suggested that too much emphasis is laid on intelligibility or meaningfulness and that dignity and good literary style are equally important in a translation. 'The Bible deals with divine mysteries,' they say, 'So what matter if its language is sometimes mysterious and hard to grasp?' But such a plea arises from a serious confusion. The mystery underlying the Scriptures is the mystery of God himself, his being, his nature, his dealings with his creatures; no lucidity of language can dispel that mystery, indeed it only tends to enhance it. For many Muslims who do not know Arabic, the sacred words of the Koran in the original tongue are greatly revered, and to translate them is regarded as deplorable—simply to hear them without understanding their meaning is thought to convey God's blessing. But for the Christian the Bible is a means of grace only as it speaks to the mind, the heart and the conscience of the hearer or reader. If it is truly God's message to man, pointing the way to true life both in this world and in the world to come, then surely one thing matters supremely, that it should be understood. In the gold mines of the Witwatersrand people of many tongues labour, and for their safety notices have to be displayed in a number of languages. Those drafting these translations are not concerned to stick closely to the form of the English or Afrikaans original or to produce something elegant in style—their one thought is that the message should be understood, because people's lives may depend upon it. Is this not the case

even more with 'the sacred writings which have power to make you wise and lead you to salvation through faith in Christ Jesus'?

This new approach to translation is being disseminated through seminars for translators which have been held during the last four years under the auspices of the Bible Societies in many parts of the world; they owe their origin and in large measure their pattern to the vision and energy of Dr. Eugene A. Nida, the Translations Secretary of the American Bible Society. One such held last summer in South Africa involved about 80 translators, half of them African, working in a dozen different languages of South Africa, South West Africa, Rhodesia and Malawi. It took three weeks of hard work, six days a week, and its programme included lectures by staff members and discussions on translation theory and practice and on the great themes of the Old and New Testaments. A number of the participants, who included college and seminary lecturers, contributed papers on translation work, its history and problems in their own particular language. There were also a few lectures on anthropology, for the understanding of the cultural background of a language group is essential for good translation. Each afternoon was devoted to actual translation work in separate groups, one for each language; I spent the time with the Northern Sotho group (a language of some one million people in the Transvaal), discussing some of the suggestions and criticisms I had already sent in on their drafts of a New Testament revision. This summer the first such seminar is to be held in Europe, with staff and participants from a number of continental countries as well as Great Britain and U.S.A.

Another important feature of Bible translation work today is the growing Roman Catholic activity. With the increasing influence of the Biblical movement in the Roman Catholic Church this has been a fact to be reckoned with for a number of years, but the Second Vatican Council has turned the trickle into a torrent. The Constitution on Divine Revelation insisted that 'easy access to the Sacred Scriptures should be provided for all the Christian faithful' as this was essential to nourish them in the Christian life, and it also endorsed issuing of editions for the use of non-Christians. At the same time it encouraged joint translation work with 'the separated brethren', a suggestion which was generally welcomed by the Bible Societies. In the early days of the British and Foreign Bible Society's work on the continent, a few Roman Catholics had wished to co-operate with it, but the weight of authority soon came down on the other side, and the movement was condemned in scathing terms in a number of papal pronouncements. Today however we see a complete reversal of this policy. In October 1966 a questionnaire was sent out to conferences of Roman Catholic bishops all over the world by the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity in Rome, which asked a number of searching questions not only about Bible translation in their areas but also about programmes (if any) for promoting the knowledge of the Bible by Bible weeks, Bible reading lists, study groups etc., for distributing the Scriptures among special classes such as school children, literates and convicts, and for placing the Bible in every home; it even asked about Roman Catholic financial support for the Bible Societies. Such questions must have

made many of the bishops scratch their heads! One of them even invited the local Bible Society secretary to help him with his answers.

In January 1967 an important meeting was held between United Bible Societies representatives on the one hand and Roman Catholic biblical scholars on the other to work out the guidelines for co-operation. Careful preparation had been made beforehand and a great deal of ground was covered in a single day. Formerly Bible translation in the Roman Church had to be done from the Vulgate (cf. Ronald Knox's Bible), but the conference agreed that it should be done directly from the Greek and Hebrew, and appointed the Kittel text for the Old Testament and the United Bible Societies text for the New Testament as authoritative. Canon Law requires that Bibles should be accompanied by notes, and this has always been interpreted to include dogmatic notes, which would of course be an insuperable obstacle to co-operation. At the conference however eight kinds of 'aids for readers' were agreed upon, most of them already in use in Bible Society translations and Bibles like the RSV and the rest are often asked for by the younger churches. These are: alternative readings and renderings, meanings of proper names (when relevant to the context), plays on words, historical and cultural background, glossary, reference system and section headings. But no dogmatic and interpretative notes whatever are included. It is not of course intended that every edition should contain all these kinds of helps.

It is important to note that this co-operation does not involve the least sacrifice of principle on the part of the Bible Societies. In fact the Roman Catholic Church has not only come round to sharing the great purpose of the Bible Societies, to disseminate the Scriptures as widely as possible, but has also come to accept the basic principles on which they work as voluntary societies co-operating closely with, but not controlled by, the churches, committed to objective scholarship and a non-sectarian approach. It is a mark of this same change of attitude that Roman Catholic translators in English have come to abandon renderings which Protestant scholars have felt to be doctrinally biased, e.g. 'do penance' for 'repent' in the Rheims New Testament, and 'full of grace' for 'highly favoured' in every translation down to and including the RSV Catholic Edition, but not in the Jerusalem Bible.

The presence of rival Protestant and Roman Catholic translations, such as are found in Urdu and Arabic as well as most European languages, is an evident token of Christian disunity in the face of the non-Christian world, which must harm the work of evangelism. Further in many countries Roman Catholic scholars can provide skills which would not be available for a purely Protestant translation. Thus one of the Nyanja translators is a Malawian White Father who has spent about ten years in Europe in advanced Biblical studies; he is working with a Protestant of the Dutch Reformed Church from South Africa. In Rhodesia the editor of the standard dictionary of the Shona language is an Irish father, who is also a very keen Bible translator, though in this case it has not yet proved possible to arrange full co-operation. Further the Bible Societies see before them a still wider field of usefulness in the future, as a wider circle of people is opened up to receive the Scriptures.

It is interesting to note that in many lands Roman Catholic authorities are commending to their people translations prepared entirely by Protestants under Bible Society auspices. Thus recently a bishop in Chile issued a letter to the faithful in these terms: 'The Lord has charged me with the happy task of making known to man the knowledge of his Son Jesus Christ as contained primarily in the Word of God—the Holy Scriptures. . . . It is indispensable that the faithful Catholics have easy access . . . to a version which is economical and easy to read.' He then went on to commend the Bible Societies' 'Version Popular' in Spanish, 'thanking our brethren of the Bible Societies for this text which is so useful to our purposes', and concluded with an appeal to priests, monks and nuns, as well as the laity, to promote the widest possible distribution and reading of the New Testament. Who could oppose what is so clearly a work of God's Spirit?

And so the good work of translating and spreading the Word goes on. More and more languages receive the Scriptures, and more and more up to date translations are produced. The latest techniques in printing and publishing (cf. the BFBS's new illustrated RSV) are applied to them, and Bible Society bookshops all over the world arrange their distribution together with a devoted company of colporteurs and volunteers from the churches. Newly emerging nations are becoming full members of the United Bible Societies, no longer under the direction of London or New York but working together in fellowship and seeking where necessary the friendly help of those with greater experience and resources, now able themselves to call out fresh support and service in their own lands which was not available to a foreign society. At the same time the needs and opportunities increase, especially where the 'literacy explosion' is in evidence, and often lack of resources prevents some of the needs from being met. But we who serve God in this field thank him for the joy and privilege, praying that through the written word the Living Word himself may continue to speak to many in every land and to draw them to love and follow him.