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Mr. Cranfield and Annotated Bibles

BY W. J. BRADNOCK

IN his article on *Annotated Bibles*, Mr. Cranfield has been at pains to set forth his case with great care and thoroughness. As his views and fears may possibly be shared by a substantial number of his readers it is necessary for anyone who attempts an answer to go straight to the root of the matter. What are the grounds for Mr. Cranfield's uneasiness about the Bible Society's recent Charter changes and how far are they justified?

(1) Mr. Cranfield believes that the recent changes in the Society's Charter imply a fundamental change in its historic policy with regard to 'note and comment' and that they open the door to the possibility of serious abuse.

(2) While he accepts that at least four of the eight suggested categories of 'reader's aids' cannot reasonably be questioned on grounds of principle he draws attention to possible dangers in the interpretation of Nos. 5, 7 and 8 (historical backgrounds, cross references and section headings) and asks for further elucidation.

(3) He demurs at the possibility of prefaces and 'introductions' being permitted in Bible Society editions and reserves his strongest criticism for the possible misuse or even use of section headings.

(4) He considers that the dangers of 'prefaces, sectional headings and explanatory notes' would be considerably enhanced if such features were to have the formal approval of the Roman Catholic Church in addition to that of the Bible Society and the constituencies it represents. He sees this as an 'assault on the freedom of Scripture' and an unwarranted attempt to establish a special authority for material which at best can only be described as of a 'temporary and provisional' nature.

(5) In spite of a general commendation of certain types of explanatory notes and aids for readers (particularly with regard to the chapter summaries of early editions of the Authorised Version), Mr. Cranfield concludes 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 portions of it. Bibles containing such material are the 'annotated Bibles' against which the gravamen of his criticism is directed.

Before examining each of these points in detail it would be well for the sake of clarity to state exactly what the Bible Society has done with its Charter and Bye-laws.

As it formerly stood the Charter read (IVa):

'The objects for which the Society is established and incorporated

are: To encourage the wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures without note or comment.'

As amended it now reads:

Article IVa: 'To encourage the wider circulation of the Holy Scriptures.'

Bye-Law 22: 'The Society shall circulate the Holy Scriptures without note or comment other than such aids for readers as shall have previously been approved by the General Committee.'

It will thus be seen that the 'note and comment' rule has been transferred from the Charter to the Bye-Laws where it more rightly belongs and in which context it retains all its mandatory character. What may appear to be new is the apparently qualifying clause 'other than such aids for readers as shall have previously been approved by the General Committee'.

The nature of these special 'readers' aids' has been specified in detail in the eight categories listed in Mr. Cranfield's opening paragraph and the purpose of the Revised Bye-Law 22 is to make it clear that these eight features are to be seen as quite distinct from the 'note and comment' rule in its historic meaning.

Let us now look at Mr. Cranfield's points in turn:

(1) Has the Bible Society abandoned, for all practical purposes, its 'note and comment' rule? No. In order to make this clear we must first establish what the Society's founding fathers meant by the 'note and comment' rule and we may approach this by first establishing what they did *not* mean by it. We have only to look at certain editions of the Scriptures published throughout the 19th century in a variety of world languages to discover that all the following features are present to a greater or lesser degree:

Chapter Headings

Running heads (content summaries and the equivalent of section headings)

Marginal notes

Textual notes

Chronological Indexes (especially Ussher's Notes) and Historical notes

Reference systems.

Though most of these features can be found in Bibles throughout the whole of the nineteenth century, practically all of them are to be found during the first twenty years of the Society's life. It is therefore obvious that our founding fathers did not think of these explanatory aids as 'note and comment'. How then *did* they think of them? In 1804, the Society had as yet little or no experience of Bible work outside the shores of England and knew nothing whatever of the infinitely complex problems of Bible translation into foreign languages to which their Charter committed them. We must therefore expect to find the explanation of the 'note and comment' provision somewhere in the immediate background of the English ecclesiastical and political scene of the sixteenth-eighteenth centuries. We have not far to look.

For the whole of that period was marked by the production of Bibles, by both Protestant and Roman Catholic authorities, full of tendentious notes of an interpretative doctrinal, theological or political character. It was natural that the newly formed Society, with its strong lay leadership, should wish to steer clear of the bitter controversies of which these Bible editions were sometimes the cause and sometimes the result. 'Note and comment' therefore was aimed at individualistic, dubious and 'loaded' interpretation, doctrinal, theological or political, for party or sectarian ends.

Here then is the key to an understanding of 1804. The ban remains as valid today as it did then and at no time has the Society relaxed its vigilance to ensure that it should be duly observed. Nor does it intend to do so. In fact, with the immense experience gained during the last century and a half through translating the Scriptures in the multifarious languages and dialects of innumerable cultures of the world, the Bible Society today may claim to have a more sensitive understanding—though not a different one—of the true significance of 'note and comment' than those who first made the rule in 1804. And the whole record of its officers and committees through the years testifies to this.

(2) Mr. Cranfield accepts that alternative readings, alternative renderings, explanation of proper names and explanation of plays on words all have their rightful place in any responsible translation of the Scriptures and cannot be objected to on principle. We note this gladly and would only add that for our part we would prefer to express ourselves more positively as recognising it to be the duty of translators to deal honestly and openly with all these minor problems of the translational task. None of them involves a doctrinal or theological principle and therefore the 'note and comment' rule is not involved. Yet all must be honestly faced if a translation is to be meaningful.

Mr. Cranfield shows rather more concern about historical backgrounds, maps and illustrations, cultural differences and cross references. While affirming that the involvement of some of these features with interpretative theological, doctrinal or sectarian questions is relatively small, we would not wish to say that it is non-existent. The real questions are whether the Bible Society has the means of rightly estimating this degree of involvement and can deal with it properly; and whether the gains to the reader so outweigh the possible disadvantages as to justify their inclusion.

Historical backgrounds. The Society's formal statement on this reads: 'brief identification of historical individuals, places and events which are related to so-called "secular history"'. Much of this information may be given in the forms of maps (with ancient and modern nomenclature) and short explanations provided in a Bible Index'. Perhaps the best, though not the only, illustration of the way in which this has been handled is the Society's Third Jubilee Bible, published in 1954, of which more than 3 million copies have been circulated and which has evoked universal appreciation from tens of thousands of Bible readers in all walks of life. We may indeed find in the preface to this Bible the clearest possible statement of the Bible Society's attitude not only to the matter of Historical Backgrounds but also to

maps and illustrations and cultural differences, and not a little on the subject of section headings which is dealt with more fully below. We believe that this edition of the Bible shows at once how all these important 'aids to readers' may be made available to the great advantage of the Bible reader while in no way raising any single doctrinal or theological issue of any significance. And the principles applied there have been successfully used in a variety of ways over many years in innumerable Bible editions in a very large number of languages.

Cross references. Again we gladly note Mr. Cranfield's appreciative words about the value of cross-reference systems such as are commonly included in the Authorised Version and the Revised Version margins, and his request for further information on these matters. Long ago the Bible Society recognised not only the great value of these cross-reference systems but also their inherent liability to abuse in the terms he has himself used. Perhaps there is no other 'Bible aid' which could lay a Bible editor more open to the charge of theological tendentiousness or doctrinal bias than this particular feature. The Society's founding fathers seem to have been unaware of this for they gave their blessing to certain cross-reference systems which have long since been rejected under the 'note and comment' law. Does this mean that the Society should abandon this 'aid' altogether? Certainly not. For it is quite possible to provide a most helpful cross-reference system that in no way contravenes the 'note and comment' law and in fact the Bible Societies of the world have laboured at this task for many years. In modern Bible Society systems the following basis has been laid down and it will be seen at once that it virtually rules out any possibility of doctrinal or theological bias:

'the listing of passages (with identificational annotations) involving parallel content, similar historical events, quotations, clear cases of allusion, and parallel treatment of subject matter'.

The United Bible Societies now restricts itself to this basis for all reference systems and the BFBS has given up the usage of the Revised Version system in spite of its immense usefulness and scholarly objectivity.

3. *Prefaces, Introductions and Section Headings.* In spite of considerable and continuous pressure from many parts of the world the Bible Societies have as yet made no decision with regard to prefaces and introductions. Even so, it is hard to escape the conclusion that in their consideration of these features the Bible Society is dealing with quite different problems from those which Mr. Cranfield envisages. A *preface* can include all kinds of material, much of it harmless, some of it perhaps of local interest (translators' names, committees, description of translational processes, etc.) some of it merely an expression of gratitude and pious dedication; or it may involve some treatment of the nature of Biblical authority, or some evaluation of the content of Scripture or some appraisal of the scholarly abilities of the translators! In a preface many things are possible. And this is why the Bible Society has normally set its face against them. But not always. I have referred above to the preface to the Third Jubilee Bible. Would any open-minded reader deny that this preface is essential if that

particular Bible is to be properly used in the special form in which it is there given? Would any reader suggest that this preface is even remotely harmful or that it contains even the barest element of doctrinal or theological bias?

Judgment and common-sense supply the answers. And the same judgment and common-sense must be applied to the whole issue in its larger content. It is most unlikely that the Bible Society will ever concede the use of prefaces in any general sense. Each case will need to be studied on its merits.

As for 'introductions' either to whole Bibles or separate books of the Bible, similar considerations obtain. A very strong case can be made for some kind of simple, factual, non-controversial and non-doctrinal introduction to the separate books of Scripture, particularly for those many communities in the world which are entirely without any explanatory literature of a factual nature and no Biblical aids whatever. It remains to be shown that to meet specific situations such introductions can be produced, devoid of doctrinal or theological content and yet of real value to the reader in approaching a Biblical author with at least some informed background knowledge.

No decisions have been made. And no decision will be made that violates the 'note and comment' rule.

It remains to answer Mr. Cranfield's fear about Section Headings.

Mr. Cranfield says, 'The exact demarcation of sections is quite often a controversial matter'. Does this imply that each book of the Bible is to be presented to the reader as a solid piece, without sections or divisions or any kind? (For obviously the traditional division into chapters and verses has no particular authority.) To ask the question is to answer it—it would be wholly irresponsible to present, say, the whole of Isaiah or of Luke in such a format, whether for the English reader or for a South Sea islander. Sections there must be; rightly placed they greatly aid the reader. The fact that occasionally views may differ about the right place for them does not absolve the Bible editor from the responsibility of marking them. He must pray for God's help and use the best scholarship he can muster—he cannot sit on the fence in this matter, any more than he can in translating a verse like Romans 10: 4. If there is room for serious doubt, that can be indicated in the margin, just as alternative punctuations of the original should sometimes be indicated (e.g. John 14: 2).

Granted there must be sections, need there be section headings? The demand from overseas churches is clamant and clear. Many of us have ourselves found it helpful to glance at the headings in looking for a particular passage. How much more important such help is for the African or Asian Christian, who has nothing to guide him but what is between the covers of his Bible! Many ministers and teachers even are literally people of one book, for nothing else is available in their language. And what of the non-Christian? An international conference on the Christian mission to Islam at Brummana in 1966 asked the Bible Societies to consult the churches in each main language area about what aids for readers should be included.

And surely it should not be impossible to produce section headings which all but the most hard to please of scholars would accept. The

criticisms levelled against the UBS Greek Testament headings do not seem very weighty. If 'subjection' does not imply 'obedience' (the N.T. Greek lexicon gives this among its meanings), then why are they treated as practically synonymous in 1 Pet. 3: 5 and 6? If 'philia' can be universal in its outreach in Greek, cannot 'Brotherly Love' also be so understood? The BFBS would, I know, welcome criticism of its own list of section headings so as to avoid any biased interpretation. Incidentally, if scriptural warrant be required for section headings, we have an example at Mark 12: 26 (literally) 'in the book of Moses in (the passage about) the bush'.

4. *Common Bibles and the 'authority' of their annotations.* So far we have sympathised with most of Mr. Cranfield's arguments and fears and have tried to meet them sincerely and with understanding. In dealing with his fears of the consequences of the revival of Roman Catholic interest in the Bible we must try to continue in the same vein. But it becomes increasingly difficult. We must first note that it is at this point of his argument that Mr. Cranfield's terminology becomes somewhat vague and general. He speaks of 'annotated Bibles' as if they were the same things as commentaries on Holy Scripture which also contain the text of Scripture either in the original or translation. He seems to us to be suggesting here that the Bible Society might now be contemplating the production of commentaries of this kind. The argument seems to be 'Bible with annotations equals Bible with Commentary; therefore Annotations equal Commentary'—and commentary of the kind which, in the nature of things, may well be a highly subjective presentation of personal views about text and exegesis (though not the less valuable for that!). It should be enough to say that if Mr. Cranfield seriously makes this equation and believes that the Bible Society would contemplate such publications he is very far from understanding the Bible Society. To use the word 'commentary' of the Bible Society's eight categories of 'readers' aids' is to confuse the issues and to do so quite unnecessarily. These eight categories in every instance concern matters of unquestioned and unquestionable fact and with the minor exceptions referred to above under sectional headings are not subjects for personal conjectures. Nor do they require any 'authority' for their validation, other than the universally accepted Greek and Hebrew dictionaries or the established facts of Biblical scholarship. To use the word 'authority' in this connection is to open up an area of potential misunderstanding. But Mr. Cranfield does not leave the matter there. While implying that the Bible Society might contemplate producing 'commentaries' of a sectarian or subjective character, thus investing these productions with the 'authority' of the Bible Society, he goes on to suggest that the Society might conceivably also join hands with the Roman Catholic Church in the production of such 'commentary' Bibles, the 'authority' of which would be thus very greatly enhanced. What is the reader of the *Churchman* expected to make of this argument, if not that the Bible Society may now be preparing the way for some kind of dangerous alliance with non-Protestant communions whose authority would inevitably exercise a dominating influence over the ordinary man's right to understand the Word of God in full freedom? Such a suggestion is quite un-

founded. There is a world of difference between Mr. Cranfield's 'commentary' of personal and extensive exegesis for which he would rightly claim no authority other than that of the scholarship of the individual author—and the 'readers' aids' as adopted by the Bible Society. In the sort of 'Commentary Bible' which Mr. Cranfield conjures up, a commentator might very well argue that St. Paul did not write all the Pauline epistles, or that the author of Hebrews was a woman or even that the earth is flat and was created in 4,004 BC. He is entitled to his views and may expect them to be received on their merits and his ability to sustain his arguments in terms of contemporary scholarship. But he would look in vain to the Bible Society to make use of them as 'readers' aids' just as he would be rightly astonished if the Roman Church were to give them the mantle of their 'authority'. Let the reader understand that this is not the kind of readers' aid which is the concern of the Bible Society—or ever has been. Let the reader try, if he can, to enter into the situation of a primitive people of Africa or Oceania or South America, recently emerged into the civilized world and newly possessed of a translation of some portion of Holy Writ. He finds there innumerable words, names, ideas, expressions which are entirely remote from his own background culture and understanding; Pharisees and Sadducees, Sabbath, Paradise, Rabbi, Levite, Gentile, centurion, covenant and a host of others. Are none of these words or ideas to be explained to him? Will a simple explanation in his own language, at the foot of the page really assume the status of the Divine Word itself? And will such explanations be either more or less true if they are presented with the 'authority' of a Plymouth Brother or the President of the Methodist Conference—or even by a whole college of Cardinals? It is ideas such as these which are dangerous, not simple explanations of Biblical obscurities.

It seems to us clear that if Mr. Cranfield's suggestions are to be carried to their logical conclusion there would be an end not only to the whole business of 'aids to understanding' but to the whole process of translation itself; and all the unbibled world would be left to contemplate in puzzled wonderment—but absolute 'safety' of course—its meaningless possession of the sacred 'arcana' in the unintelligible languages of Hebrew, Greek and Aramaic. It was not for this that the Bible Societies were called into being.

It only needs to be added that the Bible Societies arrived at their own conclusions with regard to the need for readers' aids in the light of their own experience; that they were in no way and at no time influenced by the remarkable developments which have taken place in recent years in the Roman Catholic world; that they rejoice, with Mr. Cranfield, at the possibility of increasing co-operation between Roman Catholic, Protestant and Orthodox scholars, but, far from seeing this, as he does, as the possible beginning of a 'serious assault on the freedom of Scripture', would see in it a potential break-through to a larger knowledge of that truth, in Scripture and in Christ, which makes men free.