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The Problems of Making a Contemporary Translation

BY J. B. PHILLIPS

THE problems of making a contemporary translation are not, I think, what they appear. The proper translation of the New Testament is not, and never has been, merely a matter of substituting an English word for a Greek word, and the most rigid verbal inspirationist would be among the first to complain if such a "literal" version were produced. Anyone who has access to a Greek/English inter-linear New Testament can plainly see what I mean. This is the sort of result you would get from even the simplest passage, for example, Luke xv. 8-10:

"Or what woman drachmas having ten if she lose drachma one not lights a lamp and sweeps the house and seeks carefully until she finds and finding calls together the friends and neighbours saying rejoice with me because I found the drachma which I lost so I say to you there is joy in the face of the angels of the God over one sinner repenting"

This sort of word-for-word substitution is fairly intelligible in a simple passage, although I would not claim even here that it is translation. But now let us see what happens when we attempt to use this method in a fairly close piece of reasoning, in, for example, St. Paul's letter to the Romans, chapter v. 12-16. (There is no punctuation because, of course, there is no punctuation in the early manuscripts.)

"Because of this as through one man the sin into the world entered and through the sin the death and so to all men the death passed through because all men sinned for until law sin was in world but sin is not reckoned not being law but reigned the death from Adam until Moses even over those not having sinned in the likeness of the transgression of Adam who is a type of the coming one."

That this sort of thing cannot possibly be true translation is pretty self-evident, but not everybody, judging by my own correspondence, appears to have thought of it! It is not only that word-order and idiom are different in different languages, but that words themselves are very much modified by their context. What we are trying to convey, with as little change as possible, is *meaning*. And that is hardly ever achieved by mere verbal substitution.

Before I read Professor Bruce's recently published book *The English Bible*, I had only vaguely realized that one of our earliest English translators was King Alfred the Great. In his preface, Professor Bruce quotes Alfred as saying, when translating from Latin into English, that he does so "sometimes word for word, and sometimes meaning for meaning". This is one of the chief difficulties. If we translate word

for word, even if we change their order, we get an unlovely grouping of words which are certainly not contemporary English. If, on the other hand, we go all out for meaning, we run the risk of being told that we have changed the original. No wonder translation has been described as an impossible art!

But before we consider what the difficulties are in translating what was contemporary Greek into what is contemporary English, we have to realize one formidable obstacle, and that is simply the enormous popularity of the 1611 version. A great many people, and certainly a great many Christian people, cannot see the need for modern translation at all. The beauties and rhythms of the Authorized Version have been closely interwoven with the English way of life for three hundred and fifty years. The very language of the Authorized Version has had a deep and lasting effect on our own literature, quite apart from its spiritual effect on many generations of Christians. It therefore seems unnecessary, and even sacrilegious, to alter what has lasted so well and so long. I, myself, receive quite a number of letters from people who plainly state, and obviously believe, that translation into contemporary English is uncalled for and abhorrent. On the other hand the only reason why I, and, I imagine, other translators, attempted such a difficult task at all was because we found from painful experience that the beautiful language, which we ourselves loved so well, had become archaic to the point of unintelligibility to many others. Christian people must realize this as a fact, however unpalatable it may be. From long practice Bible-lovers probably "translate" as they read. They do not realize that such words as, "let", "prevent", "conversation", "wealth", and many more, have completely altered their meaning. Such archaisms as, "much people followed him", "which of them twain", "Peter and Barnabas waxed bold", "straightened in your own bowels", are practically meaningless today. They forget, too, that "publish" in 1611 was not necessarily anything to do with books, nor "rehearse" anything to do with acting. And so one could go on; the archaisms are either glossed over or, if the reader is an instructed Christian, they are understood by a sort of unconscious translation.

Trevor Huddleston, who speaks from a wider experience of people than most of us, wrote some two years ago these words: "The issue for today, so far as the spread of the Christian Faith is concerned, is the issue of communicating it to a pagan, post-Christian world: a world which has heard a language and relegated it to the four walls of a church; a world which will only hear that language again if it can come with a freshness, a stimulus, a shining sparkle about it." I am certain that Bishop Huddleston is absolutely right. However much I, myself, may love the familiar rhythms and cadences of the three hundred and fifty years' old version, I must recognize that they form an insulating barrier between the Truth of God and many millions of people for whom Christ died.

Every year scores of devoted men and women spend hundreds of hours translating the Word of Life into newly discovered languages, some of which have never been written down before. Now plainly they make no attempt to translate into these strange tongues as they

were spoken three and a half centuries ago ; they are concerned to communicate in the language of today. Surely, therefore, we who translate into English are not unreasonable in trying to make our version contemporary and intelligible.

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But what sort of English shall we use ? Certainly not slang, which changes fairly rapidly, and we must avoid colloquialisms, which are likely to " date ", as far as possible. But can we, in all honesty, use the same methods as King James's men ? The men of 1611, confronted with what they believed to be " the lively oracles of God " used the finest English for their purpose, making their whole magnificent effort an act of verbal homage. Now we today, with no less reverence, I think, know that the bulk of the New Testament was not written in literary Greek. Nearly all of it is written in the *Koine*, the common Greek language spoken and written by most people in the then known world. With, if I may say so, characteristic humility, God chose as a vehicle for His eternal Gospel, not the splendour of classical Greek, but the popular tongue of the market-place, the seaport, the office, the workshop, and the home. Enormous quantities of papyri written in this form of Greek, and of approximately the same date as the New Testament writings, have become available during this present century. The modern translator who knows far more about this popular tongue than did King James's men, has, perhaps reluctantly, to make up his mind that it is not his job to decorate and polish, but to turn Greek words into English words and meanings in approximately the same style, and that means using ordinary modern English such as is spoken, written, and understood by the majority of people today.

But here again we meet a difficulty. If we completely short-circuit the centuries we inevitably destroy the sense of historical " period " in which the documents were first written. Some, therefore, would argue that ancient words or expressions must not be completely modernized lest today's reader is made to feel that what he is reading is contemporary, whereas, in fact, the Greek was written nearly two thousand years ago. And there is a further point. Although it is virtually certain that the writers of the New Testament were not aware that they were writing Holy Scripture, yet the Church long ago recognized that their writings were uniquely inspired by the Holy Spirit. Many, therefore, think it profitable that a translation into today's English should be somewhat elevated in style, and carry a greater dignity than our ordinary everyday speech.

The early Church valued the New Testament Scriptures because they were written by eyewitnesses of God's Life lived among men, or because they were written by men such as Paul who was plainly chosen by God in His Eternal Purpose. When the Church began to decide which books should or should not be included in the official canon, the overriding consideration was whether the book was authentic or not. But when the canon had been finally closed the chosen books rapidly attained the status of " Scripture " and were honoured accordingly. From that time on they ceased to be regarded as purely human documents.

For myself I can see the force of both these arguments against rendering everyday Greek into everyday English. But in my own work I decided to ignore both of them. My reason is simply that after three hundred and fifty years of the Authorized Version, many exciting and challenging truths have been rendered impotent by sheer beauty of language as well as by the familiarity of repetition. I was, and am, prepared to destroy the flavour of historical period if, by so doing, I can liberate the glorious certainty and the almost frightening energy which has for so long been imprisoned.

Over the second point there must always be some disagreement. In my judgment there should be, for liturgical use, a certain heightening of the dignity of language. The original letters, for example, were almost certainly read aloud to small groups of Christians, meeting in secret. The content of the letters was so urgent and important and the circumstance of their reception so often fraught with danger that there was obviously no need to change the language in any way. But, as time went on and a passage of Scripture came to be read for the five hundredth or even the thousandth time, not now to a small group but to a large congregation, I can easily see that whilst the original message must in no way be distorted, the words themselves might have to be changed to match the growing shape of the Liturgy. And this, of course, is what actually happened. For as Latin came to replace Greek throughout Christendom, we find the solid and dignified Latin of St. Jerome's Vulgate ousting the pristine simplicity of New Testament Greek.

But Christians do not always hear the Word of God declaimed before large congregations. There are, in the English-speaking world, countless groups of Christians who meet for Bible study. And every faithful Christian nourishes and sustains his own spiritual life by a private reading of Holy Scripture. Apart, then, from liturgical use before a large congregation, it seems to me that intelligibility, readability, and accuracy in a present-day translation are by far the most important considerations.

The work of the translator is, as I see it, to convey the meaning and sense of one language into the meaning and sense of another. He cannot help being an interpreter, although if he is a conscientious man, he will not allow his personal feelings to colour or "slant" his interpretation. He is somewhat in the position of an interpreter between the heads of State at an International Conference. His sole work is to convey, as accurately as he can, comments or views expressed in one language into another language altogether. However competent he is, his work can never be completely perfect. For not only do the words of one country contain overtones and shades of meaning which are not matched in the words of the other country, but the whole cultural and ethical background of the two countries may be so widely dissimilar that accurate communication is a work of genius. This illustration may serve to show how daunting is the work of the modern translator of the New Testament. The message he is required to transmit is, he believes, both universal and eternal. Yet the more he studies sympathetically the world of the young Church as well as his own contemporary world, the more he feels in despair at making accurate translation. Patterns of thought, the extent of human knowledge, and even ways of everyday

living were so different two thousand years ago that to attempt to reproduce them conscientiously in modern English could easily result in making the Gospel seem more than ever far away and long ago.

But suppose he pursues a different and more hopeful line. Suppose he remembers that human nature and basic human needs are the same in all centuries. Then he will aim not at one hundred per cent accuracy, which is impossible in any case, but at equivalent effect. That is to say, he will try to reproduce in today's hearers and readers the same emotions as were produced by the original documents so long ago. This, to my mind, is a very difficult, but not hopelessly impossible objective.

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It would seem obvious that the successful translator must know very well indeed the languages of those for whom he is required to interpret. But strangely enough the New Testament scholar of today is considered perfectly adequate for the task if he has a thorough knowledge of Greek and its usages! Few seem to realize that it is every bit as essential that he should know the usage and thought-forms of his English-speaking contemporaries in various walks of life and in various parts of the English-speaking world. The scholar is all too often isolated from the workaday world; he is inclined to use a word or an expression which is most beautifully apt in the ears of his fellow-scholars, but which has long ago become an archaism to ordinary people. And when he does descend to the colloquial he is all too often inclined to use outdated slang. I hope to give examples of this in a later paragraph. For the moment I will only record my conviction that this knowledge of how ordinary people speak, write, and think can only be acquired by reading all kinds of books and periodicals, and by honest conversation on friendly terms with people whose background is far from scholarly.

In recommending the use of ordinary English, I do not mean slang, or colloquial near-slang, which not only change very rapidly, but vary greatly from place to place, and from country to country. I am suggesting as strongly as I can that there is a perfectly sound English vocabulary which is very widely used, quite outside intellectual circles. In the Introduction to the New English Bible, the scholars responsible for that work state that "the rate of change in English usage has accelerated"—and they mean since 1881. I very much doubt whether that is altogether true. I have in my possession bound popular magazines of over sixty years ago, and for the most part I can detect very little change in the language used then and the language commonly used today. The chief difference lies in the fact that modern English is more economical of words. It is not really the hard core of communicative English that has changed very much, at any rate in the present century, but that slang, colloquialisms, and jargon, especially technical jargon, have increased greatly, and the first two change rapidly. We may aim at timeless English but no one can prophesy how long a particular word is going to retain its peculiar meaning and flavour. By careful study of good standard English, we can at least avoid the archaic and the obsolescent. What concerns me is that learned scholars of the New Bible actually appear to know New Testa-

ment Greek better than they know the current usages of their own tongue. Yet you surely cannot be a successful interpreter unless you know both languages intimately.

We must, therefore, always keep in mind the people for whom we are translating. The men of 1611 were producing a work which, for the most part, would be read in public for a people who were very largely illiterate. Moreover, they were writing for a comparatively small number of people in our own country. The translator today, however, is writing virtually for the whole English-speaking world and he is writing for people who are accustomed to reading, even though their reading matter may not be of a very high intellectual standard. It becomes more than ever necessary that he should familiarize himself with that plain ordinary intelligible English which can be understood in most parts of the world. In other words, good translation today is *almost entirely a matter of communication*. We have far better manuscript evidence than was available in 1611. We have a vast mass of "collateral" Greek papyri to assist us in interpretation, and we have an impressive array of scholarship. There is little doubt, therefore, of what the original New Testament writers meant to say; the problem is purely that of *communicating their meaning* to the average modern reader of English.

One of the most formidable obstacles to good translation into our language today is the, often unconscious, use of "translators' English". In this kind of language we get an unhappy mixture of ancient and modern, a stilted manner of speech which otherwise occurs only in the worse religious plays! Although the meaning in this kind of language is usually pretty clear, the general effect upon the reader is to inform him that he is in the presence of translation. The donnishness, the archaisms, and the scissors-and-paste construction of sentences is likely to prove most irritating. For, apart from the question of style and readability, I believe the modern reader is unconsciously exasperated because the Greek scholar who can find his way about the New Testament blindfold in its original tongue has not troubled to master his, the reader's, customary speech.

Before I give some examples of this unhappy miscarriage in the art of translating, I would like to explain how I think it happens. The translator, who is almost always a practising Christian, finds it extremely difficult to rid his mind of at least the echoes of the 1611 Version. Because he has read the Authorized Version most of his life he does not always realize how archaic some words have become. And because he is conscious of translating sacred material he is loth to let go the dignified security of established words. But, on the other hand, as he studies the Greek of the papyri of the second and third centuries A.D. he sometimes finds sudden illumination. Determined, then, to render what he thinks is the exact flavour of the certain Greek word or expression into modern English, he may then fall into the trap of using what is, in fact, a dated colloquialism, and thus it is that we get this extraordinarily mis-matching of ancient and modern, sometimes within a single sentence.

I have a collection of several hundreds of examples of translators' English which I have noted in recent years. It would be wearisome to

point out the occasional infelicities to be found in Weymouth, Moffatt, and even that excellent American translator, Goodspeed. But Ronald Knox, who aimed at a style that should be "timeless", produces the same sort of unhappiness in such a sentence as this:

"Nobody can say that we are encroaching, that you lie beyond our orbit; our journeys in preaching Christ's gospel took us all the way to you. Ours, then, is no disproportionate boasting, founded on other men's labours; on the contrary, as your faith bears increase, we hope to attain still further vantage-points through you, without going beyond our province, and preach the gospel further afield, without boasting of ready-made conquests in a province that belongs to another. He who boasts, should make his boast in the Lord; it is the man whom God accredits, not the man who takes credit to himself, that proves himself to be true metal" (2 Cor. x. 14-18).

There is no doubt about the meaning here, but what strange English is this? Again, if we look into the careful scholarly work of E. V. Rieu we find such sentences as this:

"But one cannot break into the Strong One's house and plunder his goods, unless one begins by tying up the Strong One. After that one will ransack his house" (Mark iii. 27).

"To which Jesus replied: 'Consent now. It behoves us to conform with all right usage.' And John consented" (Matthew iii. 15).

This is not modern English, and I cannot imagine any century in which such language would be written or spoken.

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This failure to communicate is, in my opinion, as much a barrier to understanding as the archaism of the Authorized Version. But the richest mine for these deplorable juxtapositions of words, semi-archaisms, and dated slang, is the New English Bible, which has just been published. There are scores of examples of such obstacles to communication, and I will content myself by quoting a few. "Their aim was to frame a charge against him" (Matt. xii. 10); "Every kingdom divided against itself goes to ruin" (Matt. xii. 25); "So they fell foul of him" (Matt. xiii. 57); "Or what can he give that will buy that self back?" (Matt. xvi. 26); "If your hand or your foot is your undoing, cut it off . . ." (Matt. xviii. 8); "Tell her to come and lend a hand" (Luke x. 40); "We are not base-born" (John viii. 41); ". . . a propagandist for foreign deities" (Acts xvii. 18); "Let us exult in the hope of the divine splendour that is to be ours" (Romans v. 2); ". . . be consolidated in the faith . . ." (Col. ii. 7); "Tell them to hoard a wealth of noble actions by doing good" (1 Tim. vi. 18); ". . . for in all such ways they will add lustre to the doctrine of God our Saviour" (Titus ii. 10); ". . . if you give fortitude full play . . ." (James i. 4).

It really passes my understanding that a literary panel which, we are told, existed to correct and improve the English of the translators'

panel, should allow these and a great many more similar expressions to be passed as contemporary English.

In my experience there is no substitute for the sheer labour of understanding both sides. If it is of interest, my own method has been somewhat as follows. First, a literal translation of the Greek is made, using every possible aid from lexicon or commentary in order to feel what the Greek really means. Then, completely forgetting the Greek, and as oblivious as one can be to the familiar echoes of the Authorized Version, the resultant rather odd English is put into the language of today. This is then read, read aloud, tried out on various friends, and on intelligent but not outstandingly intellectual people, and further corrections are made. Then the work is put away while another part of it is translated and after an interval of some weeks the first corrected version is examined again. Probably still more correction is called for, and then, at the final stage, the resultant version, which by now is in acceptable modern English, is compared with the Greek. This is not only to ensure as high a degree of accuracy as possible, but to secure, as far as one can, that equivalent effect which is the aim and object of the whole operation. This process, which I can see no way of shortening, means that at least six, and sometimes more, versions are made before one's instincts as a translator are satisfied.

I see, then, this problem of translation into modern English in terms of the thorough understanding both of the original Greek and of the vocabulary, thoughts, and minds of the people who are likely to read in English today. But we must do even more than this. We have to use imaginative sympathy with the writers of long ago. We shall never "get across" the passionate urgency of Paul, for example, unless we use every scrap of knowledge and inference that we can find in order to put ourselves imaginatively in his shoes. Naturally, this is not easy, nor can it be done without its particular cost. But we must studiously avoid the sort of detachment which is sometimes adopted by the well-bred English layman when he is asked "to read the Lessons" in church. Quite possibly, on the technical level, he reads well, but if there is the faintest note of, "I-am-reading-this-as-best-I-can,-but-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-me" in his diction, then he has no hope at all of communicating the real New Testament.

If we are to be successful translators we cannot afford to be detached. We must feel to the full the love and compassion, the near despair and the unshakable hope, the gay courage and the bitter hostility of this most extraordinary period of human history. Unless we, too, experience the awe and wonder of the earlier disciples, unless we can share to some extent the certainty and fortitude of the young Church, and unless we can sympathize with the deep pastoral concern of the apostles, we shall never communicate the living heart of New Testament writing, however immaculate our translation may be.
