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The Monarchs and the Message: Reflections on Bible Translation from the Sixteenth to the Twenty-First Century

In this article, Tom Wright, whose own translation of the New Testament was published in 2011, highlights the importance of translation within Christian faith as the message of the universal kingship of the Jewish messiah is communicated to the nations. Exploring the translations of the Reformation era, he sets Tyndale's translation and the King James Version in their contrasting political contexts before explaining the significance of the word 'Christ' and the issues it raises today both for translators wishing to be faithful to the New Testament message and Christians seeking to live out Jesus' radical definition of 'lordship'. He concludes, drawing on his own experience, with reflections upon some of the other challenges facing translators today - such as the inevitability of distortion and the tensions that can arise between accuracy of word and tone or flavour - as they seek to convey the Bible's message to contemporary readers and rulers.

Introduction: Translation as part of Biblical Faith

The phrase 'lost in translation' is such a cliché that it even became the title of a movie. There is a famous story about a missionary starting a sermon by quoting Jesus' words, 'I am the good shepherd', only to have the local interpreter tell the congregation, 'He says he is a good man, and keeps goats.'

But things get lost just as effectively when, instead of translating, we stick with a foreign or ancient language which readers or hearers do not understand. This is so whether we are talking about the Bible or Shakespeare, about Schubert's songs or Wagner's operas. We want to get the force of the original, but we want to understand it as well. To translate is to distort, but not to translate can be a greater distortion still. Especially when part of the point of the text is to communicate meaning, not just to produce melodious noise.

Opera-goers, of course, often have the luxury of surtitles, so that while the original words are sung on stage the translation can appear on a screen above. Despite the popularity of overhead projectors in church, I have not heard anyone suggesting that we should read the Bible out loud in its original Hebrew and Greek, with a modern English translation above. The reason we don't do that, I think, is not just the lack of competent people to read the original languages out loud. The reason is that *we believe in translation*. Putting the message *of* Jesus, and the message *about* Jesus, into different languages so that people can understand it in their own idiom is one of the things Christians characteristically do. The problems that this poses – the danger of things being 'lost in translation' – have been faced and surmounted again and again. When the church has refused to translate, for instance in the long Middle Ages when the western church had the Bible in an ancient Latin that few could understand, the ordinary people were at the mercy of whichever priest was claiming to interpret it. Now, happily, more

or less all churches recognise the glorious duty of getting the Bible to people in their own tongue. One of the delights of being an Observer at the Synod of Bishops in Rome in late 2008, quite apart from the interesting contrast with our own dear Lambeth Conference a few months before, was the appeal from all round the hall for every man, woman and child across the Catholic world to have the Bible in their own mother tongue. If only they had said that in 1525, I thought, the entire history of the western world would have been very different.

That imperative to translate is, I take it, one of the powerful meanings that emerges from the story of Pentecost in Acts. When the Spirit comes, the followers of Jesus are able to tell people about God's powerful deeds *in their own languages*. Christianity has been a translating faith from the outset.

Jesus' first followers were in any case already almost certainly bilingual. Their mother tongue was Aramaic (a language which developed from the classical Hebrew of the Scriptures, a few hundred years earlier). But Greek had been everybody's second language in their part of the world for three hundred years by their day, and it's quite likely that many 'ordinary people' in the Middle East had a smattering of other languages as well. The question of how well Jesus himself could speak Greek – of the language, for instance, in which he conversed with Pontius Pilate – remains largely unaddressed, and people can still write books as though Jesus was a monolingual Aramaic speaker.

That, I think, is highly unlikely. Bilinguality has, historically, been the norm in many parts of the world. Those of us who grew up with only one language, and have had to learn others at a later age, are the impoverished exceptions, and I suspect we often project our imagination onto other times and cultures. The little boy selling postcards outside the Church of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem can not only speak Arabic and Hebrew but can also most likely get by in English, French, German and Spanish; why should Jesus not have been able to speak and read Aramaic and Hebrew and also to speak Greek? Only a monolingual world such as ours, in fact, would need the old tease about the person struggling to learn other European languages. 'The French,' says the pupil, 'call it a *cuiller*; the Italians call it a *cucchiaio*; the Germans call it a *loeffel*; the English call it a *spoon* – which is after all what it is.' There is the easy mistake: the assumption that one's own language 'tells it like it is', that the words *we* use are the natural names for things, and that other languages are a kind of code for one's own. It is highly unlikely that any of the early Christians would have made that sort of mistake.

The question of translating Scripture had already been faced when scribes, after the exile in Babylon, 'interpreted' the ancient Hebrew Scriptures into Aramaic so the ordinary people could understand it. It was then faced even more directly by those who, somewhere between one and three hundred years before Jesus' day, translated Israel's Scriptures from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek. Christianity was born into a world where biblical translation was already an established fact. There was little sense, as there is in the stricter forms of Islam, that the sacred language was the 'real thing' and that translation meant desecration.

But if scriptural translation was already a fact of ancient Jewish life, with the Christian gospel there was an extra dimension. It wasn't just that there were some members of the wider believing community who happened not to read or speak Hebrew or Aramaic. It was, rather, that from the beginning the early Christians believed that Jesus was Israel's Messiah *and therefore the rightful lord of all the world*. This belief is etched across the New Testament,

from the Magi offering homage to the King of the Jews (Matthew 2:1-12) right through to the grand declaration, in the book of Revelation (11:18), that 'the kingdom of this world has passed to our Lord and his Messiah'. Put Pentecost in the middle of that sequence, and we get the picture. It isn't just that some non-Jews might want to avail themselves of a new religious or spiritual opportunity. Nor is it the case, however, that the early Christian message had to be 'translated' away from 'Jewish' thought-forms and into 'non-Jewish' ones in order to be 'relevant' to the wider world. It is, rather, the much more robust claim – one that remains unknown to many modern western Christians! – that Israel's Messiah was supposed to be king over the whole world, and that the resurrection had demonstrated Jesus to be this Messiah, this world-king. This is, and remains, a deeply Jewish message, rooted in Israel's Scriptures, but it is a Jewish message that in its very nature demands translation. The message of the cross, declares Paul, is 'a scandal to Jews and folly to Greeks'. But the scandal has nothing to do with its being expressed in a different language, and the folly has nothing to do with Greeks having to learn Hebrew to read about their new lord and saviour. This is the primary root meaning of the title of this paper, 'The Monarchs and the Message.' For the early Christians, Jesus was the monarch, king of all the world; so the message had to be translated.

Translating the message into the world's many languages is therefore organically linked to the central claim of the gospel itself. Not to translate might imply, perhaps, that Jesus belonged, or belonged specially, to one group only – a dangerous idea which some of the earliest New Testament writings strongly opposed. The fact that the New Testament is written in Greek, not Hebrew or Aramaic, tells its own story: this, the early writers were saying by clear implication, is the Jewish message *for the whole world*. To translate is to imply that, just as the gospel of Jesus is for all people, so the early Christian writings which bear witness to Jesus are for all people. No doubt all human languages will find it a challenge, this way or that, to express in their own idiom what the early Christians were trying to say in theirs. Losing things in translation will always be a risk. But it's a risk we recognise. It is the same risk that all Christians face when they try to express their loyalty to Jesus in their own particular lives and situations. Translation is difficult, but it is the same sort of difficulty as we face in discipleship itself.

But once we've got the ancient Scriptures in English, isn't that enough? Should we not be content with the wonderful earlier translations, stretching back in a long and distinguished line through the King James Version of 1611 to the great pioneer, William Tyndale, and behind him to John Wyclif? And haven't there been far too many translations even in the last ten or twenty years? Are we not in danger of flooding the market? What about the later monarchs, particularly the two who bookend that great translating century which we might date from 1511 to 1611, from Tyndale to Laud: from Henry the Eighth, who staunchly opposed translating the Bible, to James the Sixth and First, who commissioned and authorized it?

Monarchs and Messages in the Reformation Era

Throughout my work of translation I have had in mind the debt we all still owe to William Tyndale. His story has often been told: on the run in a foreign land, in hiding, under pressure from rival Protestants with variant theologies as well as from King Henry's spies and agents. Tyndale has recently caught the public's eye once more through his appearance in Hilary

Mantel's award-winning *Wolf Hall*. For some of us, though, he has been a lifelong hero. He was determined to do whatever it would take to break the long centuries of clerical monopoly and manipulation of the sacred text – the long years when, because no new translation was being done, major distortions were happening instead – and to get the Bible into the hands of the ploughboy, the ordinary men and women, where it belonged. He knew it might cost him his life, and it did.

Why was it so difficult? Here we meet the obvious but still interesting point that the contrast between the political situation of Tyndale and the King James translators could hardly be more different. Tyndale was faced with implacable opposition, because everyone from the King downwards knew that a new Bible, one which ordinary people could read for themselves, could and would unleash all kinds of new forces which they would be unable to control. No doubt there was a noble motive alongside that of fear. Ancient and mediaeval political theorists knew just as well as we do that, though social stability isn't everything, social instability is normally dangerous – dangerous not only to the wealthy and powerful but also to the 'little people' who are caught up in the middle of it all. Tyndale's understanding, however, was clear: the social, cultural and political scene needed radical transformation, and a fresh and freshly understood Bible would be a key element in this work.

I well remember when I first read Tyndale, looking for good Reformation soteriology, being surprised at how much political argument there was there too. It doesn't surprise me now. Tyndale's translations, and his wider theological writings including the Prefaces to the individual books, were all aimed at enabling a genuine upward intellectual and spiritual mobility among the ordinary people. A freshly understood Bible, he believed, would not only result from a change in the political climate but would also help to bring that change about. Here is the difference. Tyndale was translating with radical intent. King James' men were translating – or rather, editing and adapting Tyndale, the Bishops' Bible, and the rest – with stabilising intent. To which of these tasks, they might ask us, is the Bible better suited? It's a good question, and it has been in my mind on and off throughout my own years as a translator, which include the seven years of my active episcopate.

Tyndale, classically, was successful. 'Lord,' he prayed as they strangled him at the stake, 'open the King of England's eyes.' The sign of that prayer being answered came, within a few years of his death, as the moderate reformation towards which Thomas Cromwell at least had been pushing Henry for some time arrived, and an English Bible was placed in every parish church in the land. The rest – as they often say, but in this case it's true – is history. More than 80% of the King James Version is pure Tyndale, including some passages for which King James and his men are regularly congratulated. But Tyndale's testimony remains exemplary: 'I call God to record that I never altered one syllable of God's word against my conscience'. Oh, he had his theological leanings, of course, as we all do. But he was determined that the message should get out, no matter what the monarch might say; even though he knew that, ultimately, the quickest way to get the message spread across the land was to bring the monarch on side. He was a revolutionary, but a revolutionary with a clear vision of a new, post-revolution stability in which the king would commission and support the work of bringing the Bible to the masses.

Back in the early 1970s, when I first made Tyndale's acquaintance, I determined that I should be able to say the same about my own use of Scripture as he had done about his. (I didn't, at

the time, imagine for a moment that I would end up as a translator, but when I did I continued to have him in mind.) When, in the 1990s, I was invited for the first time into Number 10, Downing Street, to discuss the offer of a senior job in the Church of England, I took time beforehand to stop and gaze at Tyndale's statue, a couple of streets away. There he stands, looking out across the Thames, with his printing press and his Bibles. We are not worthy to stand in his shadow. I wanted to be sure he would have approved of what I was doing. Would it help to get the Bible into the hands and hearts of the people? That was his goal, and I have tried to make it mine, too.

Tyndale's vision, then, was realized, even at the cost of his own life. There then followed, of course, the turbulent period in which many others lost their lives, as monarchs and translations came and went. But, as is now well known, it was with a very different vision that King James, canny Scot that he was, commissioned the translation for which his name would become world-famous. Faced as he was with the two main parties within the church, not to mention with the challenge of holding together two very different countries under the one rule, he hit upon the idea of a joint translation project as a way, not of bringing about revolution, but of preventing one. For him, the monarchical message was that of unity – a theme which could of course claim considerable support from the New Testament itself. Unity is not the only virtue enjoined by the early Christian writers – it must, they insist, be balanced with holiness, for a start – but it is one of the great goods for which Christians should strive. So King James' translators, whose story has been told and retold times without number over the last few months, were set to work with a purpose at once very like Tyndale's and very unlike. He was translating in order to stir things up; they were translating in order to quieten things down again.

And, of course, where he had succeeded in his aim, they largely failed in theirs. The new Bible didn't catch on at once. It was powerless, thirty years later, to prevent the outbreak of Civil War and the regicide to which it led. The compromise between James' bishops and James' Puritans may have lasted for his own reign, not least because of his strict control over what the Bible was allowed to say about monarchs – a point on which Tyndale had been much more dangerously explicit. But in the next reign, Bible or no Bible, the compromise didn't hold. The influence of Geneva on the Puritans was too strong: not for nothing is the English Reformer commemorated on the great Reformation monument in Geneva not Tyndale, not Cranmer or Ridley or Latimer, not even Richard Hooker, but Oliver Cromwell. That, too, was a shock to me as a young man, indicating the radical difference between what I saw the reformation as being all about and how they saw things in Switzerland. Though, since the Enlightenment, we have tended to downplay the political side of theological agendas, there was no such reticence in either the sixteenth or the seventeenth centuries.

The difference in political context between Tyndale and King James' men is reflected fairly directly in their words and phrases. No doubt a good deal here depends on other factors as well, not least the explosion of high-calibre English writing that came about in the age of Spenser and Shakespeare. Tyndale was writing before Hooker; James' men, after him. But we can detect more than just the shifting of language in the contrast between the two. For all that the King James Version employs over 80% of Tyndale, the changes are interesting and telling. One of Tyndale's modern editors, David Daniell, puts it like this:

If 'the former things are passed away' is preferred to 'the old things are gone', then Tyndale will be disliked and there is no way to mend it. Tyndale was writing for ordinary men and women reading the Greek New Testament in English to themselves and to each other, round the table, in the parlour, under the hedges, in the fields; not for those obediently sitting in rows in stone churches being done good to by the squire at the lectern. 1

No doubt we can detect in Daniell's polemical tone his own dislike of the social and cultural setting of later stolid Anglican worship. King James' men were not only writing for the squire to read to the peasants, even if by the eighteenth and nineteenth century that was, *de facto*, quite often the case. But the point is clear, and interesting in one particular. Daniell draws attention to the fact that Tyndale was translating very close to the Greek. Greek often goes quite directly in English. It lends itself far more than Latin to clear, sharp English prose – a point which Tyndale himself urged in his book *The Obedience of a Christian Man* (1528). King James' men were the sort who naturally thought and wrote in Latin, and that may have been part of the point. Though they were of course working with the Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic, they were scholars mindful of the dignity of their role, not fugitives desperate to get the message across. Their version, for all its brilliance and its frequent skill in gently polishing Tyndale's rough edges, had the effect – it can hardly have been completely accidental – of making the Bible once more a somewhat elevated book, just a little above the common reader. The difference between the two versions in style thus mirrors the political message. Tyndale seldom missed a chance of cutting princes down to size (though he will not alter what Paul says in Romans 13, or Peter in 1 Peter 2); King James' men knew that that was what their master did not want at any price. But, in terms of style, Tyndale had already, as it were, let the English cat out of the bag. He was responsible almost single-handedly for making the native language, which at the start of the sixteenth century was barely respectable in educated circles, into the supple, powerful, sensitive vehicle it had become by the time of Shakespeare. Thus the implicit message of his translation, as well as the explicit ones, created a world of Englishness the like of which his own monarch, Henry VIII, could never have imagined.

There might be many passages which would make the point about style. Frequently, of course, the KJV goes with Tyndale, inch for inch (sometimes indeed into manifest error, as in Romans 6:11, where Paul's declaration that you are dead to sin but alive to God 'in Christ Jesus' has become, in both, 'through Jesus Christ', a significant difference). In the Johannine prologue, often quoted as an example of the wonders of the KJV, the only significant difference is that Tyndale refers to the Word as 'it', and KJV as 'he', until we get to the climax, verse 14, where for Tyndale's simple word 'saw' the King James Version has 'beheld': 'we saw the glory of it', says Tyndale; 'we beheld his glory', says the KJV. I wonder if the latter was trying to bring out a possible force of *etheasametha*? I rather doubt it. I think they were going for sonorous Jacobean prose, which of course they achieved. Famously, of course, the KJV translates *agape* as 'charity'. Many grumbled when modern translations replaced it with 'love'. Not many realised that all the modern translations were doing was reverting to what Tyndale had had in the first place. Not that Tyndale always went for the shorter word. The prodigal son's elder brother, on returning home, hears 'musick and dancing' in the KJV; for Tyndale, it was 'minstrelsy and dancing'. (The Greek is *symphonia*, which implies a plurality of instruments; perhaps one should translate the phrase as a hendiadys, and render it 'a dance band'.) More significantly, in line with his ecclesiology (one of the reasons Henry wanted to suppress him), Tyndale regularly translates *ekklesia* as

‘congregation’ whereas the KJV simply says ‘church’, and renders *presbyteros* as ‘elder’ rather than ‘priest’. (This was the same impulse that made Tyndale insert little jabs into the margin, such as his famous line on 1 Thessalonians 4:11, where Paul exhorts his readers to ‘study to be quiet, to meddle with your own business, and to work with your own hands’. Tyndale’s comment is pithy: ‘A good lesson for monks and idle friars.’ Not the sort of thing that King James would have wanted to see.) Sometimes, too, Tyndale’s language now seems quaintly old-fashioned to us, partly I suspect because the later popularity of the KJV sustained some usages that might otherwise have dropped out, whereas Tyndale’s words have moved on. When the Holy City comes down from heaven in Revelation 21, we are used to the idea that she is ‘prepared as a bride adorned for her husband’ (KJV); we might raise our eyebrows at Tyndale’s word, that she is prepared as a bride ‘garnished’ for her husband. What King James’ men referred to as ‘the days of unleavened bread’ (Acts 12:3) were for Tyndale ‘the days of sweet bread’; Tyndale clearly saw ‘leaven’ as making bread sour, so that in 1 Corinthians 5 ‘a little leaven soureth the dough’, and the Christian must have ‘the sweet bread of pureness and truth’.

All this, of course, merely illustrates Eliot’s sorrowful observation, that words will not stay in place: they change their meaning, lose old resonances and pick up new ones. Every serious student of Shakespeare or Milton, George Herbert or John Donne, knows that they used words in ways which do not quite correspond to the ways we use them now. And then there is a real problem, as C. S. Lewis pointed out in his *Studies in Words*. Faced with a word we don’t know, we may look it up in a dictionary. But when it’s a word we use every day, we probably won’t look it up – even though it may have changed its meaning since the time the author was writing. Then we are condemned to misread the word, the sentence, and the passage.

We can all spot this going on when earlier translations of the Bible refer to sums of money. In the King James Version, the householder agrees with the day-labourers to pay them a penny a day for their work (Matthew 20:2). (Tyndale has a nice note at 22:19, where, explaining the tribute-penny, he says, ‘A penny is ever taken for that the Jews call a sickle, and is worth 10 pence sterling.’) A ‘penny’ may have been a day’s wage in the early seventeenth century, but it certainly isn’t in the early twenty-first century. I have tried in my own translation to cope with this in various ways, determined to bring out the flavour of each passage rather than swap a familiar but hopelessly inaccurate term (‘penny’, ‘pound’ or ‘dollar’) for an accurate but hopelessly unfamiliar one (‘talent’, ‘shekel’, ‘denarius’). But we can, as it were, see that problem a long way off. It’s quite different when we come to a word like...well, let us take the bull by the horns. When we come to a word like ‘Christ’: what shall we do then? And this brings us to our own day, where the ‘monarch’ is a benevolent constitutional monarch, and the real power is wielded by the elected dictatorship we call the Government. Where does the translator’s shoe pinch now?

The Message of the Monarch for Tomorrow’s World

For many people in the western world, ‘Christ’ is simply a swear-word. Many have forgotten, if they ever knew, that this word has for two thousand years been firmly attached to one human being in particular. Many who have not forgotten that basic point, however, have assumed that ‘Christ’ is simply, so to speak, the ‘surname’ or family name of Jesus of Nazareth, so that ‘Jesus Christ’ corresponds to ‘John Smith’ or ‘Mary Fitzpatrick’. Again, many who have not made *that* mistake have supposed that the word ‘Christ’ conveys, and

always did convey, the Christian belief that Jesus was and is the second person of the Trinity, so that 'Jesus' is the 'human' name of the person concerned and 'Christ' is his 'divine' name or title. Books have appeared with titles such as 'Jesus Who Became Christ', hinting that Jesus started off as an ordinary human and was only subsequently elevated to divine status. There we have three quite different meanings of 'Christ' which people today may well 'hear' when they hear the word. And here's the point: *none of these corresponds to what the word conveyed in the first century*. And I believe that none of them make the point that the New Testament needs to make in our own day. No translation is 'neutral'. Perhaps the biggest difference between the time of the Reformation and our own is that today most people in the western world would simply assume that the New Testament is a 'religious' text which has therefore nothing, or next to nothing, to do with how the world is run, with what we now call social or political issues. That merely shows our own captivity to post-Enlightenment Deism or Epicureanism and to the new theories of 'the state' which it produced. What can the translator do – what *must* the conscientious translator do – to enable the New Testament itself to make its proper, and deeply subversive, point?

In the first century the word 'Christ', or rather the Greek word *Christos* which occurs hundreds of times in the New Testament, was the translation of the Hebrew or Aramaic term *Mesiah*, 'Messiah'. 'Messiah' means 'anointed' or 'anointed one'. In ancient Israel various people were anointed as the sign of God's commissioning: prophets, priests and above all kings. But in Jesus' day the various meanings of 'the anointed one' had narrowed down to a single focus: the coming king from the line of David, the one who would rule the whole world and establish God's justice within it. This expectation was popular (though not universally so) in first-century Judaism, and there were various interpretations of who such a 'Messiah' would be, what he would do, and so on. Jesus' followers believed that this range of interpretations had been suddenly and sharply redefined in and around their Master, who had proclaimed God's kingdom, who had been executed by the Romans as the would-be 'King of the Jews', but who had been raised from the dead by God and thereby declared to be truly the Messiah, Israel's king, the world's rightful lord.

Comparatively few modern Christians, let alone modern non-Christians, have much inkling of all this. But unless we try to understand it we shall never grasp two-thirds of what they were talking about. The word 'Christ', then, serves both as a central example of the problem of translation, and also as a pointer to the reality (God's claim on the whole world through his anointed servant) which is the ground-plan on which the project of biblical translation stands, from which it gains its *raison-d'être* and legitimacy. Jesus' own radical redefinition of what 'lordship' was all about demands it. He will not impose his rule on people from a great height in a language they do not understand. He wants them to know, to love. Biblical translation aims to embody that quite specific aspect of the divine plan and intention.

All right: how then shall we translate *Christos*? No one English word or expression will convey what the Greek word meant to Paul, say, or to Matthew. But to leave it as 'Christ' is, straightforwardly, to falsify it. I have experimented with saying 'King' or 'Messiah' or 'the anointed one' as the different contexts seem to me to demand or at least to permit. Doing that doesn't, of course, solve everything. You can't capture the full texture of an ancient word with any single, unadorned, unexplained contemporary one. But simply saying 'Christ' doesn't get us anywhere, except back into multiple misunderstandings. Yes: translating

Christos as 'king', which I have often done, raises all kinds of questions. But not to do so, to leave 'Christ' as either a proper name or a merely 'religious' word, would be to falsify it.

Old words, then, can mislead, or simply go quiet on us. One specific aspect of that problem is that for many centuries in the Christian church the fundamentally *Jewish* rootedness of early Christianity was screened out, and with it points like the one I have just made about 'Christ'. This is a problem with the whole tradition from the King James Version, and indeed from Tyndale before him. Faced with this, the translator has to do something (I believe) to joggle the elbow of the reader, to flash a warning light, to signal that things may not mean exactly what has been expected. This, actually, corresponds to something Jesus himself did all the time. He told strange, teasing stories about what God's kingdom was really like, to shake his hearers out of their normal assumptions. Perhaps different translations can and should do the same today.

All this may seem disconcerting to 'ordinary' readers, particularly those who themselves only speak a single language. Does this mean we can't be sure what the Bible actually means? No: for much of the time there is no reasonable doubt. The story of Jesus, and its basic meaning, normally stand out clearly even through uncertain or distorted translations. (That's not to say that all modern translations are as good as one another, or as good as they should be.) But if we want to get a better idea of why fresh translations are always needed, we have to be clear about rejecting the common idea that each language has a set of words which simply do the same job in that country as their equivalents do in ours. That works all right for 'spoon' and 'fork', for 'mother' and 'father', for 'farm' and 'river' and 'mountain' and 'egg'. And a great deal besides. But there are numerous exceptions. I once received a postcard from a friend in Venice. The picture was of St Mark's Square. Printed on the card was the Italian phrase, Campo S. Marco. But someone had added an English translation, obviously by looking up campo in the dictionary. The result: 'St Mark's Playing Fields' – and not a blade of grass, or a goalpost, in sight.

And this is just the beginning. What about a word like 'justice'? When ancient Greek speakers used the word *dikaiosyne*, made famous by Plato in the long discussion of 'justice' in his *Republic*, did they mean the same as a mediaeval Latin writer would have meant by *iustitia*, also translated as 'justice'? And when, in late mediaeval English, the word 'righteousness' was used to translate those same words and their cognates, was there an inner core of meaning that was simply picked up from the earlier words and deposited in the latter, or were other ideas creeping in as well? And when we, today, hear 'justice', 'righteousness' and similar words, do we still hear the nuances and overtones which Paul (say) would have wanted us to hear when he used that language?

Of course not. The English word 'righteousness' has had a chequered career over the centuries. For many people it now means 'self-righteousness', a priggish, holier-than-thou attitude which would have horrified Paul himself. But there is more. For Paul, soaked in the Hebrew Scriptures both in their original version and in their Greek translation, the word resonated loudly with the hymns and prophecies of ancient Israel, celebrating the fact that Israel's God was faithful to his ancient promises and therefore would deliver his people from their enemies. There is no way that a modern English reader, faced with the word 'righteousness', or for that matter 'justice', will catch any glimpse of that warm-blooded, rich and tender, covenanted love of God for his people. Equally, if we translate the word as

‘covenant faithfulness’, we will miss the fact that it still carries plenty of meaning to do with ‘justice’, with things that are wrong being put right at last. We just do not have a single word, or even a single phrase, which will convey all that Paul meant when he wrote *dikaiosyne*. The best the translator can do is to set up signposts pointing in more or less the right direction, and encourage readers to read on and glimpse the larger picture within which the words will flesh themselves out and reveal more of the freight they had all along been carrying. On this point, I am sorry to say, Tyndale was in my view much too enthusiastic a follower of Martin Luther. In the famous passage in Romans 3, he oscillates between ‘the righteousness that cometh of God’ in 3:21, ‘the righteousness which is good before God’ in 3:22, ‘the righteousness which before him is of valour’ in 3:25 and ‘the righteousness that is allowed of him’ in 3:26: a combination of the genitive of origin and the objective genitive, with no sense (in my view) of what this key technical term is all about.

That is another sharp-edged example of the problem. Translation is bound to distort. But not to translate, and not to upgrade English translations quite frequently, is to collude with a different and perhaps worse kind of distortion. Yesterday’s words may sound fine, but they may not say any longer what they used to say.

Another related problem faces the translator of any ancient text: the evidence is thin, and tricky to handle. Someone who compiles a modern English dictionary is swamped with information. Every novel, every newspaper, every political speech may contain either new words or new shades of meaning for existing ones. Keeping track of these, and laying them out clearly, has driven the world-famous Oxford English Dictionary away from print altogether and into an on-line edition capable of being constantly updated. But with the ancient world things are very different. It would be possible for a single-minded scholar to read right through all known ancient Greek literature in a couple of years. One might have to give up watching television or playing golf, but it could be done. And in that entire body of literature, including inscriptions and papyrus fragments, many words occur once and once only. There are several such in the New Testament. And many others occur so infrequently that trying to catch their precise nuance is delicate, tricky and often quite uncertain. Older attempts to tell you what a word meant by tracking its supposed etymology have some value, but they can’t do the whole job for you. Words are like people: discovering where they have come from doesn’t necessarily tell you where they are now going to. We need etymology, but we need even more comparative studies from every possible angle. A half-hidden inscription here, a half-torn papyrus there, may yield clues and hints as to how an otherwise opaque word was being used in the first century. Work like this is going on all the time, and translators of the New Testament need to keep abreast of it.

Here I gladly acknowledge the contribution of one volume which has been at my elbow throughout my work on this project of translating the New Testament. I acquired my first copy of W F Arndt and F W Gingrich’s famous *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* when I graduated in Theology in 1973. That was actually the second edition of their work, based in turn on the fourth edition of a much older German Lexicon by Walter Bauer. Since then, the redoubtable American scholar F W Danker has laboured mightily to upgrade ‘Arndt and Gingrich’, producing a new, third edition so much superior to its predecessors that it is more or less a whole new work. It arrived on my desk early in 2000, when I was about to begin my present translation with a draft of Mark and Luke. (The reason I undertook this translation in the first place, I should perhaps make clear, was not for its own sake. I had

agreed to write a series of Guides to the New Testament – the ‘Everyone’ series – and one thing I did not want to confuse my readers with was a discussion of differences between translations, or the reasons why I disagreed with one or other version on this or that point. Providing my own translation was the solution.) The arrival of Danker’s new Lexicon was providential. Word after word is laid out with its multiple possible meanings, with classical and other references as well as the biblical ones, and with secondary literature. So much new material has been brought together, so many out-of-the-way texts have been located, compared and discussed, the work of so many scholars has been collated to fine-tune our understanding, that in literally hundreds if not thousands of passages we now glimpse, far more accurately than our predecessors, what precisely the New Testament writers intended. The task, like other aspects of this work, remains never-ending, but with Danker it has taken a giant step forwards. I and others are privileged to stand on his shoulders.

Or at least, to wobble there. There are at least two sorts of accuracy. The first sort, which a good Lexicon will assist, is the technical accuracy of making sure that every possible nuance of every word, phrase, sentence and paragraph has been rendered into the new language. But there is a second sort of accuracy, perhaps deeper than this: the accuracy of flavour and feel. It is possible, in translation as in life, to gain the whole world and lose your own soul – to render everything with a wooden, clunky, lifeless ‘accuracy’ from which the one thing that really matters has somehow escaped, producing a gilded cage from which the precious bird has flown. Such translations – the remarkable Revised Version of the 1880s might be one such – are of considerable use to the student who wants to get close to the original words. They are of far less use to the ordinary Bible reader who wants to be grasped by the actual message of the text. Ideally, of course, the two would run together. But granted the impossibility (for the reasons already given) of the strictest kind of ‘accuracy’, it is important from time to time to go for the accuracy of flavour and feel. The whole point of the New Testament, after all, is that it is one of the most dramatic, subversive and life-giving collections of writings ever assembled. Lose that and you’ve lost the plot.

That, alas, has happened – even in the case of some of the greatest translations ever. Even in the King James Version itself. Anyone who doubts this should consider the following passage:

For the earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God. For the creature was made subject to vanity, not willingly, but by reason of him who hath subjected the same in hope, because the creature itself also shall be delivered from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God.

That is Romans 8:19-21. In Paul’s original Greek, it is one of the most visionary, explosive short passages anywhere in his writings. It offers a bright, clear glimpse not only of humans being rescued from sin and death but of all the world on tiptoe with hope for its own redemption, for the time when God will do for the whole of creation what he did for Jesus at Easter. But for anyone not already in tune with what Paul is saying, the phrase ‘the earnest expectation of the creature’, offered by the King James Version, would be enough to throw them right off the scent. Romans 8 offers plenty of other passages to get one’s teeth into; one might be tempted to frown, shrug the shoulders, and read on to find something a bit clearer. Cosmic hope, it seems, did not play much of a role in sixteenth-century theology, and King James’ translators were not, perhaps, as interested in this passage as they might have been,

even though it is arguably the climax of the whole letter to that point. What they wrote was a technically correct reproduction of the Greek. But it failed to catch the exalted and sustained excitement of this decisive passage:

Yes: creation itself is on tiptoe with expectation, eagerly awaiting the moment when God's children will be revealed. Creation, you see, was subjected to pointless futility, not of its own volition, but because of the one who placed it in this subjection, in the hope that creation itself would be freed from its slavery to decay, to enjoy the freedom that comes when God's children are glorified.

I have therefore tried, in my own translation, to go for accuracy of flavour and feel, without sacrificing (I hope) word-by-word linguistic accuracy. I have wanted to catch that sense of explosive and subversive excitement, not only in Romans 8 but in passage after passage and book after book.

No doubt I have failed in all sorts of ways. But I have had to hold my nerve and do things which, if I were teaching a class in New Testament Greek, I would forbid. Thus, for instance, Greek regularly connects sentences with 'and', 'but', 'therefore', 'for' and so on. English regularly doesn't. There are other ways in which Greek and English go more naturally together than either does with Latin; in this respect they are very different. We English leave the logical connections to be made by the reader. Sometimes we can give a nudge this way or that; often we can't and (in my view) shouldn't. Many times the 'right' translation of such a connecting word, in terms of idiomatic and lively English, may be a comma, semi-colon or full stop. The point is this. Paul's letters are highly energetic. Filling translations of his works with stodgy, chewy words and phrases will give the reader indigestion. They may be 'accurate' in one sense, but they are inaccurate in another. Such challenges mean that translation remains exciting, demanding and never-ending.

The same has happened in the gospels. We live in a well-developed novelistic culture where dialogue is presented by means of starting a new paragraph each time a different person speaks. All the writer has to do is to indicate occasionally who is talking, in case the reader has lost the thread. It would be tedious to go on repeating 'he said' and 'she said', still less 'he replied to her' or 'she, by way of answer, said to him'. But the New Testament writers did not have the luxury of our printed layout. Their works were copied out, not only with virtually no paragraph breaks, but with no sentence breaks – *and with no breaks between words, either*. The reader needed a lot more help, and the gospel writers provided it. But we, who do the same thing by other means, would be frankly pedantic if we constantly said things like 'Jesus answered and said to them'. I have resisted the temptation to omit those connecting phrases altogether. But I have felt free to streamline, knowing that the way a modern English page is laid out will tell the reader exactly the same thing that Matthew and the others were communicating, but without the ponderous little clauses which he needed and we do not.

This leads me to a reflection about what you might call the 'level' of the translation. It has long been reckoned that the King James Version employs an 'elevated' English style. It is grand, splendid, magisterial. It strides down the road with measured tread, never in a hurry, looking to right and left and bowing to passers-by. Its cadences roll off the tongue and ring round the rafters, especially when helped on their way by the ample acoustics of an ancient

parish church or cathedral. The problem is that most of the New Testament isn't like that. Luke and Acts are, up to a point. Hebrews, too. But Mark? Paul?

Mark? Of course not. Mark is always in a hurry, or makes out that everybody else is. His gospel reads as though it was dictated at speed, albeit from a well-stored and much-rehearsed corporate and individual memory. It is more like a scruffy revolutionary tract than a polished, leather-bound treatise. And Paul? Well, was anything less measured, less grand and magisterial, than the letter to the Galatians? Is anything in the New Testament less polished, more jerky and disjointed, torn between anguish and irony, than the second letter to the Corinthians? Granted, Paul gets into a more measured mode in Romans. That all-time masterpiece seems to have been composed with considerable care, so that its main sections and smaller segments balance one another, rising and falling in a flow of argument. The material is every bit as passionate as Galatians or 2 Corinthians; but now it has found a vessel which can contain the passion and sustain it over a longer period. But for the most part Paul's letters are just that: letters, usually in a hurry, often anxious, frequently glancing over the shoulder at the next wave of pagan attack or unjust criticism. Paul could outthink most philosophers, let us be in no doubt. But it would falsify his letters to dress them up as polished philosophical tractates.

I have therefore tried, again no doubt with mixed success, to allow the New Testament to speak with different tones of voice, aiming often for street-level English rather than the somewhat donnish tradition of the King James Version, the Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version. That is the tradition on which I was brought up, and which I still use regularly. It isn't perfect, but it's a lot better than many of the alternatives. But I don't know many people today who actually talk in the way the RSV/NRSV tradition writes, and I suspect most of my readers don't know many such people, either. (I hasten to add that the same goes for most other modern versions as well.) I have tried to do what I think most of the New Testament is doing: to convey the actual tones of voice of actual people.

The second thing I have had in mind is that, despite the noble vision of King James and his translators, I think it is splendid to have a wide variety of translations on offer. For King James, a single 'Authorized Version' appeared as a political and social necessity. Somehow, they hoped, this book would hold together the warring factions which threatened to tear apart both church and country. The Civil War in the next generation showed only too clearly how strong the danger was, and how far short the noble aim fell. But the King James Version weathered the storm, not least by the strength of its scholarship. People sometimes mock the idea of a committee producing a document, but with the King James Version it wasn't like that. It was an exercise in collaborative scholarship. Many eyes, minds, hearts and voices all contributed, anticipating in a measure the way in which, today, international journals, seminars and conferences enable a rich conversation to take place and, sometimes at least, produce fresh insight and clarity.

In the first decade of the seventeenth century, then, many translators contributed to one Bible, intending that it should be the only one. I, in the first decade of the twenty-first century, have tried to do the opposite. I have worked alone (except for the remarkable and vital help which I have received, late in the day, from Dr Michael Lakey), intending that this translation should be one of many. When people ask me which version of the Bible they should use, I have for many years told them that I don't much mind as long as they always have at least two open on

the desk. It is, of course, better for everyone to learn Greek. The finest translations are still, basically, a matter of trying to play a Beethoven symphony on a mouth-organ. But what a new translation can perhaps do today is to jolt people out of the familiar, and open their eyes and imaginations to new possibilities: particularly to the new possibilities which speak of the ultimate monarchy, of Jesus as the king of the world in a way that Paul and Mark understood well but most contemporary readers have hardly begun to imagine.

Like all translations, mine falls well short. It is a signpost, not the reality itself. But I hope it is a true signpost: in particular, that it is a signpost which will alert the reader to what seems to me the forgotten truth of the early Christian message. The American version of this translation is called 'The Kingdom Version', and that makes the point. Most people today have forgotten, if they've ever known, what it might mean to claim, as Jesus did, that God was becoming king on earth as in heaven. Today's ruling powers, whether monarchies or not, need this message, and the church needs to be able to announce and live it. I will be happy if my translation goes even a little way towards bringing about that end.

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Endnotes

¹ Daniell 1989: xxvii