

Theology on the Web.org.uk

Making Biblical Scholarship Accessible

This document was supplied for free educational purposes. Unless it is in the public domain, it may not be sold for profit or hosted on a webserver without the permission of the copyright holder.

If you find it of help to you and would like to support the ministry of Theology on the Web, please consider using the links below:



Buy me a coffee

<https://www.buymeacoffee.com/theology>



PATREON

<https://patreon.com/theologyontheweb>

[PayPal](#)

<https://paypal.me/robbradshaw>

A table of contents for *Bibliotheca Sacra* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_bib-sacra_01.php

ARTICLE X.

THE LATEST TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE.

BY HENRY M. WHITNEY.

V. THE QUESTION OF MODERNNESS, IN THE LIGHT OF
TWO RECENT EXAMPLES.

THE present is not the only time when elaborate attempts have been made to put the New Testament into a thoroughly modern form, but it certainly is the time when such attempts have seemed to be the result of a general demand, and have therefore been most seriously taken. The "Twentieth Century"¹ version is not the only recent attempt of its kind. We may say of it, in passing, that the twenty or more Britons who made it have well kept the secret of their identity, that the vacancies in their ranks have been promptly filled, that their work has been very severely criticized, and, with reservations, pretty warmly commended, and that they are pledged by their preface to try to make all possible improvement in a future edition.

The only other version having the same ideals and having achieved any degree of prominence is "the American Bible,"² but it is much less generally or intimately known. It is like the "Twentieth Century" in trying to be thoroughly modern and idiomatic in diction and in structure, in taking very great liberties with the text, in

¹Some account of the "Twentieth Century New Testament" may be found in the *Bibliotheca Sacra* for October, 1902, pp. 653 f.

²The American Bible: The Books of the Bible in Modern English for American Readers. By Frank Schell Ballentine. Scranton, Pa.: Good News Publishing Company. 1902.

occasional felicities that would have been clear gain to either the English or the American Revision, and in equally numerous and much more prominent infelicities marring the total effect. Indeed, for better or worse, it has borrowed from the "Twentieth Century" a good many points. It differs from the other in endeavoring to utilize the resources of the printer and the binder for the production of an attractive book:—under the influence of opinions expressed by Richard G. Moulton, it is made up into five light, handy, prepossessing little volumes, with cloth or morocco binding; it differs in having many typographical errors; it differs in having a large amount of notes; it differs in laying great emphasis upon such passages of the New Testament as seem to many critics to belong in the field of "wisdom-literature," and therefore to need to be printed in some distinctive way. In commenting on this work we shall not refer to the earlier issues through which the translator felt his way to his maturest thought, his latest choice.

As to the general question of a version of the New Testament in the English of the day, we hold certain things to be true:—

1. The first is that, as we have said, the making of such versions is now the result of a quiet but strong popular demand. It is a part of the disposition to "prove all things," when men want to know how the gospel would sound in a perfectly modern form: they want to know whether its substance is so abiding that it can bear the change from a diction associated through centuries with reverence and awe to the language with which earnest men to-day tell of momentous events or set forth their deepest convictions. If it cannot make this change without loss in its appeal to the soul, they are doubtful whether it really has a content that is of vital significance to man. The language of the best English prose of to-day is the

noblest vehicle that has ever existed for the conveyance of fact, or thought, or feeling,—even in the field of religion. A version in the English of a Newman would certainly be a great boon to the church.

Then there are, undoubtedly, some to whom the archaic form is a hindrance, as to some it is a help. It is like the question of forms of worship: some people find it impossible to worship under a ritual: some can worship in no other way; some shrink from the horrible possibilities of an extempore prayer: some cannot attend a church where the prayers are set. As to the Bible, there is room for both kinds: we cannot see that, ideally or abstractly, either is the true, the only, or even the better, way. It is certain that the diction of the Bible can be archaic and yet clear: it is equally certain that it can be modern and yet impressive and noble. The Revisions must be judged by the question whether they bring the union of the archaic and the intelligible to the highest possible point; the translations that attempt to be uncompromisingly modern must be judged by the question whether they are truly modern and whether they work out this modernness into a form that is exact, and strong, and seemly. To carry archaism to the point of obscurity and to carry modernness to the point of colloquialism are equally inexcusable faults. To attain the end, by archaism or by modernness, is to be in the best sense right.

2. Those who feel as if something were wrong when there is more than one version of the Bible in common use perhaps forget what has been the case in the past: through a large part of the time since Tyndale there have been two or more versions in the field. When the Pilgrims first set foot on Plymouth Rock, King James's version was but nine years old and was not very much liked; it had half a century between it and the time when it should be thought of as "the Bible"; the Episcopal Prayer-book still uses an

earlier version, with strikingly variant forms.¹ At any rate, in our present case, the way out is the way through, and the best will be chosen at last.

3. Again, although it may not seem so at first thought, it is really much less difficult to satisfy criticism with a version in archaic than in modern English. The archaic vocabulary and forms are established; the modern are in a state of constant flux. But, especially, the archaic is out of the field of most men's intimate knowledge:² the modern idiom is a thing as to which most men have very positive opinions and know, or think they know, just what is right.

The clerk taking his first lesson in marking boxes is told to slant his letters backward,—why? Because every one is familiar with print that is perpendicular or italic, and hence would quickly notice any departure from perpendicular or italic form; but no one is familiar with backward-sloping print, and so his errors will be less marked. Such is the case with translation: the slightest departure from worthy and standard modern English excites instant remark: "Oh, I don't like that!" This is the effect of the "pigs" that abound in both the "Twentieth Century" and the "American Bible." We have heard the former condemned for its introduction of the florin, a recent British coin, not fitting the coin that it is made to represent. In the "American Bible" we read (Acts xviii. 9): "Do not be afraid, but keep on talking": how can any one fail to see the ineptness of that? And again (Mark xiv. 28): "I shall go ahead of you into Galilee": it would radically alter our conceptions of Jesus if we had to learn to think of

¹In Ps. xlii. 7 it has *waterpipes*; this became *waterspouts* in 1611, and *waterfalls* in 1901.

²Hence Chatterton, in his famous "ancient" documents, was able to impose upon all except scholars by giving to recent words a fantastic spelling, and he even represented an earlier generation as eating a "mormal" (a gangrenous sore): he had found one in Chaucer, possessed by a cook.

him as speaking any Aramaic or Hellenistic equivalent of that. And again (Mark xiv. 65): "They began to cuff him," and (xv. 19): "They kept striking him with a cane": this last is extraordinary: the notion of a cane carried by some one at the crucifixion and lent for men to strike with—well, it at least produces in the reader a sense of guilt because of his disposition to laugh outright; then comes a reaction, and he is ready to toss the book by and never to open it again. To return to the original point: such things may escape detection in an archaic version, but in a modern version they cannot be hid.

4. To compensate for such a disadvantage, the translator into modern English has one advantage that he has not always realized and therefore has not always used. It is that every man, whether reader or hearer, understands a much larger vocabulary than he uses or is able to use. This is true even of the scholar, the maker of dictionaries: he knew how to define each word, because he looked it up, but, in multitudes of cases, when he passed on from a word he forgot what he had learned about it, and so, though he feels pretty sure of it when he hears it, he never thinks of it by his own mental action, and when it is suggested to him he does not risk using it for fear he may err. Outside his speaking-vocabulary is thus a margin of words that he uses when he writes; outside that is still another margin of words that he understands when he hears them; outside that is another that he almost always understands by the connection in which they are used; and that shades off into the darkness of the technical realm, like a lecture in mathematics, where he cannot, under any circumstances, at all comprehend.

But this has been the case with every man that ever came into the world, except that of the uneducated it is much more broadly and conspicuously true. It is held that some men's working vocabulary consists of only two

or three hundred words, and yet they may have a distant acquaintance, a bowing acquaintance, with several thousand: they understand "the boss," but they cannot use his words. It is just so in grammar and in manners: men who cannot make a grammatical sentence recognize a great deal better grammar than they speak; men who cannot think quickly enough to use the ordinary forms of courtesy are keenly aware when those forms are used or neglected toward themselves.

Hence a version of the Bible in modern English—or in any English, for that matter—need not be limited to the words that those who are to read it do actually use: they have these outer fields, these margins, of diction, all around their actual speech, and the version may go freely all over that tract of vocabulary and still it will not escape their ken. They may never say "swine" or "serpent"¹ or "staff" or "buffet" or "midst" or "blessed" or "mote" or "strait" or "arise" or "glory" or "verily" or "lest," but they know the words perfectly well, or they can make them out from the connection, and they are ready and anxious to hear them.

We have quoted the words above because they were thrown out of the "Twentieth Century" or the "American Bible" or both; they illustrate a cardinal error of those works in confounding modernness with frequency of use or with conversational use. In the Gospels this error had full play; in the struggle with the abstractness of the Epistles the "Twentieth Century" men were fairly beaten out of their mistake: they had to take words from the outer margins of men's knowledge, for the talking-vocabulary of very few people would cover the words in which Paul and the rest set forth either doctrine or duty.

¹ It was a relief to find in Matt. x. 16, that the reading is not, in either of these modern versions, "Be ye wise as snakes"; but, in consistency, why not?

We have noted the word "verily" because the "American Bible" flinches from it, and flinches so far as to get into a serious mistake. "To tell you the truth" does not mean the same as "verily, verily"; it implies more or less of an attempt at concealment, followed by a little outburst of frankness, but neither *ἀμῆν* nor "verily" ever meant that. The translator should have as his very first principle to get the expression that translates, whether men understand it or not: if they understand it, so much the better; if they do not understand it, they must learn it, and they can easily learn it; at any rate a different idea must not be put in its place.¹

5. And this brings up another point, which is of the highest importance in this connection; namely, that one of the chief values of the diction of what we read is its education of us in words that we have not before understood, or that, though we perhaps understood them, we were not so fully at home with that we dared to let them pass our lips. We all want to reach out, to grow, in this way. Almost every one of us has noticed in himself at times a glow of satisfaction over the picking up, the mastery, of some word that henceforth, he thinks, will be his.

One of the most popular writers of the present day tells us of his emergence from the woods, in boyhood, with the scantiest range of words, and those largely provincial and as largely mispronounced, and of the exquisite pleasure that it gave him just to sit silent and listen to the teacher using such beautiful English, beautiful in diction, beautiful in grammar, beautiful in rhythm, beautiful in the modulation of the spoken form, and then to try to work those beautiful things into his own cruder, narrower, less musical

¹ See the note on page 352 as to the substitution, by the "American Bible," of "saloon-keepers and prostitutes" for "publicans and sinners."

speech. He would not have thanked that teacher for coming down to his plane or range. These are the people that are worshiped in this world,—the ones that unostentatiously, without scorn, just live before those less privileged or disciplined a higher, larger, more beautiful life. And speech is one of the chief realms in which this homage is at once compelled and most freely and naturally paid.

Luther's Bible has been one of the chief educators of the German-speaking people; there have recently been riots in Greece over the proposition to render the Bible into the vernacular, which is regarded as defiled by the presence of Turkish words; the English-speaking people have been educated by their Bibles for more than a thousand years, and they will never give either respect or affection to any version that cannot do for them what has been done for their fathers by that masterly series of versions that has been a chief glory of their race.

Whatever can be accomplished within a scanty, a conversational, vocabulary may be a remarkable feat, like some men's playing of the piccolo-flute, but after all it is only piccolo-music, and so is not worth hearing or heeding long. Hence the Gospels of the "Twentieth Century" and the "American Bible" must be expanded beyond the bounds, and lifted above the level, of conversational English, or their doom is not far off. The judgment of men must be presumed to be sure to come round to sanity at last, and sanity requires that a great message shall have large range of diction and that it shall enlarge the man whom it seeks to help. Hence, to our thinking, about the first step in the making of a competent translator of the Bible is a thorough study of the masters of English prose.

6. Again, although the content or province of a word is the primary thing, it is not by any means all. Each word has (*a*) its province, its geography, its area, in the realm of thought, but it has also (*b*) its degree of intensity,

and (c) its place in the scale of dignity. Every one knows examples of each of these attributes of words; he knows them in general literature, and he knows them in the Bible, if he knows the Bible at all.

(a) For instance, in Judges vii. 8, when it is said (in all versions?) that "the camp of Midian was *beneath* him in the valley," there is now an error as to the province of "beneath"; "beneath" now means "directly under": the right word is "below."¹ In Acts xvii. 3: "Opening and alleging that it behooved the Christ to suffer," not only does "opening" need an object, for clearness and for idiom, but "alleging" is outside of its own province: the idea is that of setting forth, exhibiting, proving,—a field of meaning that is not even touched by "allege." In Acts xiii. 50, both the modern versions miss the idea by speaking of "the *ladies* of position": why not "women"? To the uncultivated the term "lady" emphasizes dress; to the cultivated it emphasizes breeding; but neither of these has any place in the verse. Besides, the texts of the Bible should not abet the tendency to drag down the noble word "woman."

(b) In John ii. 4: "Woman, what have I to do with thee?" there is at least an error of over-intensity,—an error that gives every reverent reader pain: we may or may not be able to accept the striking and unusual but plausible interpretation of the two modern versions (T. C.: "What do you want with me?"; A. B.: "What do you want me to do?"), but we crave to have the form as it is found in all other versions changed at once to something less rude and less harsh.

(c) In the old versions there was very little that was lacking in dignity; in the Revisions there is even less; in the two modern versions there is much. To have an excess of dignity is to strut or be stilted; to have too little is to

¹ See the synonymy in the Century Dictionary, under *below*, prep.

shuffle in one's gait. The prime defect of the narrative parts of the two modern versions is in the choice of words that are meaner than the thought. To attempt to put the Bible into merely colloquial or even conversational English is a mistake, clear down to the roots.

For, when a thought is put in words that are unworthy of it, it is, to all effects and purposes, a meaner thought. Every one knows how Samuel Butler, in "Hudibras," goes on through witty but wearying cantos, vulgarizing every thought that he touches by associating it with grosser ideas, and that especially by couching it in cheaper words:—

"Like a lobster boiled, the morn
From black to red began to turn";

thus sublimely does he picture the break of day. Many a man has puzzled over Lowell's "Sunthin' in the pastoral line," trying to understand his own feelings at the phrasing of such beautiful thoughts in the broadest Yankee vernacular, till he has discovered that, as the beauty deepens, the vernacular softens and at the climax is almost dropped:—

"'Nuff sed. June's bridesman, poet o' the year.
Gladness on wings, the bobolink, is here ;
Half-hid in tip-top apple-blooms he swings,
Or climbs aginst the breeze with quiverin' wings,
Or, givin' way to 't in a mock despair,
Runs down, a brook o' laughter, thru the air."

He is able to overcome his revolt against the diction only by thinking of it as the best that Hosea Biglow had; it keeps recurring to him that it was freakish in Lowell, and artistically unworthy of imitation, to cast that poem in diction that is so far below the grade of the thought.

There is a similar fault in much that Browning wrote: one cannot, in the first reading of even his most famous poems, feel safe about his yielding at any moment to his passion for the grotesque.

The discerning reader, coming to the "American Bible,"

naturally asks how it compares with the "Twentieth Century" in this matter of the dignity of its words. He will find that in many passages it runs along very well: for instance, in the account of the voyage and shipwreck of Paul (Acts xxvii.): although markedly needing correction in some points,—as in verse 34: "not one of you will lose a hair of *your* head,"—it tells the story with simplicity, directness, and point. There are whole chapters of a similar character. But, again, as we have already sufficiently suggested, it uses expressions that tempt one to look upon the book as a curiosity rather than as a serious work.¹

7. There seems to us to be one more thing to be said about the effort to get the Bible into current English words and forms. When archaic English has been used, so powerful has been the spell of the old traditions that, as we have abundantly shown, the one great need of the translators has certainly seemed to be an emancipated mind. Even the relatively small field of the conjunctions, without our looking farther, affords ample proof on this point. We have shown how the work of improvement has, in the hands of both companies of Revisers, been actually set back by their subjection to incorrect ideas about *οὐν*, and has failed thus far to get past the classic but non-Hellenistic ideas about *καί*. The two modern versions have been able to see that *οὐν* must often be rendered *then*, and that *καί* must often be rendered *but*. In John xii. 35 *καί* must even be rendered *for*: the modern versions had the perception

¹The treatment that at times it gives to the text may be well illustrated by its substitution, as in Luke v. 30, of "saloon-keepers and prostitutes" for "publicans and sinners." The reason given for this is, not that it is a good translation, but that saloon-keepers and prostitutes are despised today as publicans and "sinners" were then. To which, of course, there are several obvious answers: of these one is that we want the Bible, and another is that it is small compliment to the intelligence or the enterprise of men to relieve them of the task of finding out how tax-gatherers and "sinners" were regarded in the time of Christ. The translator would do well to purge his work of ill-judged things like this.

for this, while the Revisions and the Bible Union lacked either the perception or the courage to bring it out. We give the "Twentieth Century" form: "Travel on while you have the Light, so that darkness may not overtake you; *for* those who travel in the darkness do not know where they are going."¹

But there are other conjunctions of which like things may be said. One is $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$, which ordinarily would be rendered *but* or *and*. In 1 Cor. i. 12 the Revisions and, substantially, the Bible Union read: "Now this I mean, that each one of you saith; I am of Paul: and I of Apollos: and I of Cephas: and I of Christ." This is very bad English idiom, for every member of the Corinthian church is thus made a member of each of the four parties into which the church was split; but it becomes good idiom simply by the change of each *and* to *or* and the repetition of *am*: "Each one of you saith, 'I am of Paul'; or 'I am of Apollos'; or 'I am of Cephas'; or 'I am of Christ.'" The "Twentieth Century" is true to the idea and makes good idiom, although awkwardly doubling the negative and otherwise departing from the literal form: "There is no one among you who does not say, either 'I follow Paul' or..." The "American Bible" has it: "Each one of you keeps saying [one wearies extremely of the frequency of this "keep" with verbs in the "American Bible," especially as it is often incorrect]: I follow Paul, or..." Is it possible to deny not only the propriety but even the necessity of thus rendering $\delta\acute{\epsilon}$ by *or*?

Another conjunction that has had exactly parallel treatment is $\epsilon\acute{\iota}$, with its compounds. They occur more than a thousand times in the New Testament, and generally should

¹This passage illustrates, on the other hand, the unwisdom of preferring conversational forms: "so that...not" is a very poor substitute for "lest [darkness overtake you]," and the plainest people know the meaning of "lest" in this connection. The same things may be said of "do not know" *versus* "know not."

be translated *if*. But there are cases where the clause thus introduced is unmistakably adversative, and where, therefore, *if* is wrong, *even if* does fairly well, but *though* is the one right word. Taking the first examples that we find, we note the following: Mark. xiv. 31: "*Though*¹ I have to die for thee, I will [shall?¹] not deny thee": all but the "Twentieth Century" use *if*. Luke xvi. 31: "They will not be persuaded *though* one rise from the dead": the version of 1611 has *though*; the Revisions and the Bible Union reverse the course of improvement by using *if*; the two modern versions say *even if*. Acts xiii. 41: "A work which ye will in no wise believe, *though* one declare it to you": here the record of the various versions is exactly the same as with Luke xiii. 31, except that the "American Bible" uses *though*. Rom. ix. 27: "*Though* the number. . . be as the sand of the sea, [only] a remnant shall be saved": the version of 1611 is right, the Revisions and the Bible Union are wrong, and the "Twentieth Century" returns to the right. 1 Cor. xiii. 1-3: "*Though* I speak with the tongues of men and of angels. . .": *ἐάν* is used five times: the version of 1611 has *though* throughout, the Revisions and the Bible Union use *if* throughout, the "Twentieth Century" uses *if* and *even if*; *though* is the one word that brings out the sense. It is true that there are passages in which *though* is the only right word and yet no version-maker has thus far found it out: for example, 2 Tim. ii. 13: "*Though* we believe not, yet he abideth faithful." There are others in which it is only versions before that of 1611 that are right: for example, it is only Tyndale (1534), Cranmer (1539), and the Genevan (1557) that are right in regard to Jas. ii. 11; their renderings are substantially represented by Tyndale's: "*Though* thou do none adulterie, yet if thou kill thou arte a transgressor of the lawe." Our

¹ Wycliffe: "*Though* it bihove that I die to gidre with thee, I *shal* not forsoke thee." Similarly the Bible of Rheims.

present point, however, and it is abundantly supported by a large induction of cases, is that the two modern versions come off much better than the Revisions and very much better than the Bible Union version in discovering when *εἰ* and its compounds should be translated *though*. It is fairly incomprehensible that both bodies of Revisers and the Bible Union committee should have been so deeply in bondage to the primary sense of *εἰ* that they not only could not see even the signal cases where *though* should be used but even sometimes changed a *though* of the fathers to an erroneous *if*.

A similar group of facts may be found in connection with the treatment of *ἔρχομαι* in the various versions. Liddell defines it as meaning *come* or *go*, so that there is entire freedom to render it by either word as the context may demand, but the translators into the archaic have wanted to make it almost exclusively *come*. Taking Matthew as a representative book, we find that in xii. 9 and in xiii. 36 the word is by the Revisions and by the Bible Union very properly rendered *go*; in xiv. 12 the Authorized Version, the Revisions, and the Bible Union render it, correctly enough, both *come* and *go*; in xiv. 29 the Revisions and the Bible Union incorrectly change the *go* of the Authorized Version to *come*; in xv. 39, xix. 1, and xxi. 19 the Revisions and the Bible Union, incorrectly, have *come*, and the "Twentieth Century," correctly, has *go*. Going outside of Matthew for a single especially significant case, we find that in John iii. 26 there is agreement in all the old versions and in the Revisions and in the Bible Union upon *come*: the disciples of the Baptist complained to him: "He that was with thee beyond the Jordan... baptizeth, and all men *come* to him." Against these we set the authority of Lange ("are going"), of Weizsäcker ("alles läuft zu ihm"), and of the "Twentieth Century" ("everybody is going to him"). We believe that *go* is not only

right but essential to the expression of the jealousy and the alarm that originally prompted the words. Thus, in the whole history of the English Bible, the "Twentieth Century" stands alone among recognized versions in bringing out the true sense and bearing of the verse. And the inference from the group of cases and from a wider culling of examples is that this one version in modern English has in the treatment of *ἐρχομαι*, surpassed all other English versions from Wycliffe down.

It may be remembered that the "Twentieth Century" and the Conybeare-and-Howson paraphrase, both of which use modern English, detected and escaped the three discourtesies attributed by many other versions to Paul (Acts xvii. 22 f.) in his speech on the Areopagus: the "American Bible" is with them in this. The "Twentieth Century" detected the error in continuing the word *slumbered* (Matt. xxv. 5) in the parable of the maiden-escort; the "American Bible" is correct here too. The list would be a long one, that should contain the record of the cases in which the "Twentieth Century" has led us nearer to the sense: we have noted many of these in a previous paper.

Now the inference toward which we have been working is this,—that the use of modern English seems to give to translators of the New Testament perception, or courage, or both, in finding out and bringing out the exact sense of a word. In the light of all the facts, it seems as if the best way to get a satisfactory archaic translation of the Bible must be to translate it first into diction and structure that are at once perfectly modern and perfectly classic, and then to transfer it backward into the archaic style. Perhaps emancipation from venerable errors can be secured in no other way.

We would repeat the points that we have made: that the call for a New Testament in modern English is urgent, com-

ing from the people, and it must and will be met; that the age is restless, in religion as in all other respects, but is feeling after God, and it insists upon trying to reach him by fresh phrasing of the Word; that it does not object to having many versions, if it can only, by one or by many, find out more of the truth; that the making of an acceptable modern version is far more difficult than even the making of a version on the ancient lines; yet that the vocabulary at the service of the translator into modern terms is much larger than the makers of the best-known versions in the modern have allowed themselves to use; that any version in the modern will be rejected unless it keeps up the old traditions by having an educational and uplifting force even by its choice of its words; that its diction must be true to the content, to the weight, and to the grade of the original ideas; and that a principal benefit from these efforts in the modern will be through their effect upon the archaic versions that long and perhaps always will be dearer and more helpful to the great mass of mankind.