

## *New Bible Translations: A Short Survey*

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New translations of the Bible have, in general, been ill received. The Septuagint version of the Old Testament required perhaps the most audacious 'blurb' that any book ever received—the *Letter of Aristeas*—to win public acceptance for it; and long after it appeared, the day of its publication was said to be as calamitous for Israel as the day on which their fathers made the golden calf. Jerome's Latin Vulgate was widely attacked as revolutionary, heretical and subversive of the Christian faith, because of its many departures (all of them justified) from the inferior Old Latin texts. Sir Thomas More said that Tyndale's translation of the New Testament was so faulty a piece of work that revision was out of the question, 'for it is easier to make a web of new cloth than it is to sew up every hole in a net.' When the Authorized Version appeared in 1611, Dr. Hugh Broughton, 'the great Albionean Divine, renowned in many nations for rare skill in Salem's and Athens' Tongues, and familiar acquaintance with all Rabbinical learning', protested that he would sooner be rent in pieces with wild horses, than any such translation by my consent should be urged upon poor churches.' (In spite of his immense scholarship, he had not been invited to join the committee that produced the Authorized Version; he was known to be a bad team-worker.) And there was a loud chorus of reprobation when the Revised Version of 1881-5 was published, in which the leading voice was that of another great scholar, Dean Burgon, who condemned the work as 'the most astonishing as well as the most calamitous literary blunder of the age'.

If we remember all this, and more of the same, we shall view in their proper perspective the loud criticisms voiced in recent years against a number of modern biblical translations, and in particular against the American Revised Standard Version of 1946-52. The best of translations are but translations at best. The Bible is probably the most translatable book in the world, but even so, the process of translation inevitably means the loss or obscuring of some elements present in the original text. And the criticisms which the public is ready to mete out to new translations of the Bible are a healthy symptom in so far as they betoken a vigilant determination not to be deprived of any part of the pure Word of God, and not to have anything foisted upon it as the Word of God which has no right to be so described.

Let us recognize that the wealth of recent Bible translation in English is pre-eminently an evangelistic enterprise: it springs from the anxiety of Christian men and women to get the message of life across to their fellows in language more intelligible to the majority than that of the A.V. or R.V. Those of us who have had some education in English literature, or who have been churchgoers for years, do not realize as we should how meaningless much of the phraseology of the older Versions of the Bible is to people whose favourite reading is the sports edition of evening newspapers. Not that the difficulty is merely one of phraseology (if that were all it might easily be overcome); it is bound up with the whole mental attitude of a secularized generation, to which the subjects with which the gospel deals appear foreign and even unreal. To remove this barrier is, of course, the work of the Spirit of God; but we can see to it that the Word which the Spirit applies with convicting power

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to the heart is presented in terms 'understood of the people'.

This is the aim of many recent versions of the Scriptures in whole or in part. And some of them have been particularly successful. The translation of the New Testament Epistles, for example, by J. B. Phillips, entitled *Letters to Young Churches* (1947) has been conspicuously helpful in making Paul's arguments not only intelligible, but interesting and relevant, to the modern English reader. It is, no doubt, too paraphrastic to serve as a student's version, but it was not intended to be used in that way. Time and again its renderings into present-day idiom seem to hit the nail right on the head. In fact, Mr. Phillips is considerably more felicitous in translating Paul and the other writers of Epistles in the New Testament than he is in translating the Evangelists in his more recent work, *The Gospels Translated into Modern English* (1952).

A more satisfactory translation of the Gospels is Dr. E. V. Rieu's *The Four Gospels* (1952), a volume in the Penguin Classics of which he himself is General Editor. Dr. Rieu is a classical scholar who has already translated the two Homeric epics for the same series, and it is interesting to read his assessment of the literary quality of the Gospels in the introduction to his version of them. He disagrees with those scholars who have characterized the Gospels as unliterary productions. Their language, though not identical with that of the earlier classical writers, 'is still Greek, still beautiful, simpler than that of Plato and Demosthenes, but still charged with untranslatable subtlety.' As for the language into which they should be translated, he makes the interesting point that in 1611 'the discussion of spiritual matters in ordinary conversation was far more usual than it is today' and the translators of the A.V. consequently 'had at their disposal a religious vocabulary which was sure of ready acceptance.' It is the absence of such a widespread religious vocabulary today more than any other fact, he says, 'that makes it impossible to translate *everything* in the Gospels into the normal idiom of 1952. However, the translator must accept this limitation as a challenge rather than a handicap. blending the old wine with the new in such a manner that the skins hold both.' The way in which Dr. Rieu's translation responds to the challenge he speaks of is worthy of high praise.

*The Bible in Basic English*, the New Testament part of which appeared in 1940 and the remainder in 1949, labours naturally under severe limitations of vocabulary. For the translators' purpose the Basic vocabulary of 850 words was increased to 1,000. It therefore is not calculated to help the accurate study of the Scriptures; it was intended largely for readers whose native tongue is not English, so that with a limited vocabulary they might be able to read and understand the Word of God. But it is an independent translation from the original languages, and the fact that the responsible committee carried out their work under the direction of Professor S. H. Hooks is a sufficient token of the scholarly standard of the enterprise. The dignity of the language is remarkable, and some of the paraphrases are wonderfully happy. It was pleasant to see a framed text in the home of a newly-married couple recently, which ran: 'Where the Spirit of the Lord is, there the heart is free' (the Basic rendering of 2 Cor. iii. 17).

More recently there has appeared *The New Testament: A New Translation in Plain English*. by Charles Kingsley Williams (1952). The 'Plain English' used by this version is based on a list of 1,500 fundamental words that make up ordinary English speech—a wider range than that of Basic English. Mr. Williams uses between 160 and 170 additional words not included in the fundamental list. One of the outstanding

advantages of 'Plain English' over Basic English is that it is much better provided with verbs. Thus, Plain English can say 'Do you love me?' in John xxi. 15ff., whereas Basic English has to say 'Have you any love for me?' or 'Am I dear to you?'

The Revised Standard Version is the latest translation that belongs to the main tradition of the English Bible, going back through American Revised Version and R.V. to A.V., and beyond that to Tyndale. The latest, and possibly the last: for whatever the future of Bible translation may be in America, the Protestant Churches of the British Isles are now cutting loose from the main tradition and a committee of scholars drawn from their ranks is now at work on a completely new translation from the original texts—a new translation, and not a mere revision. This new translation may not appear for a decade yet; the present policy is not to publish any part of it before the whole is complete.

The I.V.F., being a youthful body, has never objected to anything simply because it was new, and the New Testament part of the Revised Standard Version had not long appeared when the I.V.F. secured permission to publish St. John's Gospel in this new version for broadcast distribution among students. Criticisms have been urged against the R.S.V. on various grounds, but we may at once dismiss those which have no better basis than that it departs in matters of text or translation from the wording of earlier Versions.

In view of sweeping charges that have been brought against it on the score of doctrine, it may be as well to say here, and to say so emphatically, that every point of Christian faith and practice can be established as conclusively and unambiguously from the R.S.V. as from the A.V. or R.V. As the June 1953 issue of *The Reformed Journal* of Grand Rapids (one of the best periodicals that the reviewer receives from America) says: 'One may take exception to the translation in parts—perhaps in many parts. But the R.S.V., too, is the Bible—the Word of God from heaven which the Lord gave for the redemption of His world... God's Word, in the only form in which God has made it available to us, i.e. in the form of the redactions and translations of scholarly but fallible men.'

It may be that some of the hostile reaction of evangelical Americans to the R.S.V. is due to a fear lest it may be imposed on the American Protestant Churches as the 'official' Version. If we may be guided by historical precedent, however, Bible translations have a way of winning acceptance in accordance with their inherent worth, whatever attempts may be made either to impose or to discourage their use. In this country, at any rate, no one is trying to impose the R.S.V. on us, and we may consider its qualities dispassionately. (And when the new British translation appears, it is the British public and not the British Council of Churches that will decide whether it will displace the A.V. and R.V. in Christian worship.)

Those who have themselves made some attempt at Bible translation will be least inclined to quibble about the distribution of 'thou' and 'you' or about the capitalization of such words as 'son' and 'spirit', for they know by experience how difficult it is to attain complete consistency in such matters. The fact that there is any difficulty about the distribution of 'thou' and 'you' is due not to an excessive dose of original sin in the new revisers, but to the illogicality of English usage in retaining the familiar singular (so far as prose is concerned) in addressing God alone.

In examining any translation of the Bible we must give separate consideration to the text on which the translation is based and to the way in which that text is translated. The text underlying the R.S.V. of the New Testament, reflecting the present

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position in textual criticism, is more eclectic than that underlying the A.V., which was almost completely Byzantine, or that underlying the R.V., which (thanks to the influence of Westcott and Hort) was almost completely Alexandrian. As for the Old Testament text, much more use has been made than heretofore of the ancient Versions (the Septuagint, Peshitta, Vulgate and Targums); and the scrolls recovered from the first Qumran cave have also been consulted. But the evidence of the Versions has not been used excessively. For example, the Septuagint reading of Is. liii. 11, 'From the travail of his soul he shall see light', is not mentioned even in a footnote, although it is supported by both the recently discovered Isaiah scrolls. In 1 Sa. xiv. 41 the longer Septuagint reading is rightly followed, which gives a description of the use of Urim and Thummim: but the revisers have ignored the Septuagint reading of verse 18, which speaks of the ephod instead of the ark—a reading which is required not only by the Septuagint reading of verse 41 but by the evidence about the history of the ark in the Books of Samuel generally. Again, in 1 Ki. viii. 12f., Solomon's words of dedication are restored to their original quatrain form, in accordance with the Septuagint text, but the additional note, 'Behold, is it not written in the book of Jashar?' is strangely omitted.

There has been considerable use of new archaeological information, as witness the renderings of 1 Sa. xiii. 21 and 1 Ki. x. 28f., and the translation of *hammanim* (Lv. xxvi. 30 and seven other places) by 'incense altars' (A.V., 'images').

Purely conjectural emendation has been restricted to a few places where there seems to be specially compelling reason for it; thus the rendering 'with trembling kiss his feet' in Ps. ii. 11 represents an emendation with which teachers and students have long been familiar in the Hebrew classroom and is not due to a perverse desire to expunge the divine Sonship of the Messiah from the Psalm (that is already firmly established in verse 7).

In the matter of translation, the New Testament section goes some way back towards the studied variety of the A.V. This makes it a less suitable version than the R.V. for the accurate student of the English Bible, whatever may be the stylistic advantage. But it is difficult even on stylistic grounds to justify the return to the rendering 'bottomless pit' for Greek *abyssos* in Revelation, especially as the R.V. rendering 'abyss' is rightly retained in Lk. viii. 31 and Rom. x. 7.

In general, despite some serious criticisms that can be made of it, the Old Testament translation is a better piece of work than the New Testament. The revisers, however, assure us that they have no thought of finality, and we may reasonably expect that some of those renderings to which gravest exception has been taken will be improved in later editions, just as the 1952 edition of the New Testament is a revised form of the 1946 edition. Of all these criticized renderings, that of Ps. xlv. 6 ('Your divine throne...') seems most unjustifiable; it is nothing less than a mistranslation. Greatest publicity has been given to the rendering 'young woman' rather than 'virgin' in Is. vii. 14; here the new revisers have adopted the version which stresses the short-term fulfilment of the prophecy, while in Mt. i. 23 they have retained the form ('virgin') which emphasizes its long-term fulfilment in the miraculous conception of our Lord. Before we seize on this translation as a sure sign of their unorthodoxy, let us reflect that the same thing is done in the new Dutch translation of the Bible, in which some unimpeachably orthodox scholars took a responsible part. It may be, as some critics of the

R.S.V. maintain, that Mt. i. 23 should have been normative for deciding the translation of Is. vii. 14; but they ought not in the same

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breath to criticize the revisers for translating Zc. xii. 10 in the form in which it is quoted in Jn. xix. 37!

The R.S.V. is far from perfect, although many of its imperfections will doubtless be removed in later editions. But let us be thankful for its good points—especially for the many Old Testament passages which it makes more intelligible than any previous English version has done—and hope that when the new British translation at last appears, it will be found to have profited by the more responsible criticisms which the R.S.V. has called forth.

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