Review Article

Translating The New Testament

Standing athwart the path of English Bible translators, the Authorized Version has been at once a challenge and an obstacle. On the one hand it has, since itself ceasing to be new, spurred translators to produce a version which should be more accurate and speak to contemporaries in their own idiom; on the other hand the very splendour of the achievement of King James's men has provided the standard by which these other versions have been judged, and usually condemned. Hallowed through generations of use and association, enshrined in literary allusion, part of the very fabric of the language, it has become the Vulgate of the English Protestant churches and a classic of prose literature.

But challenges to its supremacy have been increasingly common in this century. The past fifty years might, indeed, through the work of Weymouth, Moffat, Knox, Goodspeed, Rieu, Phillips and others be called the greatest age of Bible translation since the sixteenth-century movement which culminated in the 1611 version. And now, on the 350th anniversary of the great work, appears the first instalment of a new translation* which in sponsorship and quality challenges comparison not with its illustrious twentieth-century predecessors but with the Authorized Version itself.

The New English Bible, unlike the Authorized Version, is not a revision of existing translations, but a version made from the original texts. Produced by committees of leading British Biblical scholars, under the auspices of the major Protestant churches, the new Bible embodies the best modern scholarship. In particular one may note the improved accuracy which recent textual criticism and investigation of Hellenistic Greek have made possible. Thus, the words of Jesus "whosoever committeth sin is the servant of sin" (John 8:34) are replaced by the more forceful, and not less well-attested, "everyone who commits sin is a slave". In Luke 2:14 the new version gives us "Glory to God in highest heaven,/And on earth his peace for men on whom his favour rests". The authority for the Authorized Version's tripartite rendering, "Glory to God in the Highest, and on earth peace, good will toward men", is deserted for other textual witnesses; the exegetical solution thus proposed is supported by a recent discovery among the Qumran Hymns. Here

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as elsewhere the translators shift the balance in that proportion of the New Testament text (calculated by Hort as roughly one eighth of the whole) which constitutes the area of criticism. No less important are the gains from recent study of the language of the Greek New Testament, especially the flood of light thrown on the subject by the papyrus discoveries in Egypt. For example, we now learn that the Prodigal Son "turned the whole of his share into cash", not simply gathered together his substance (Luke 15:13). In short, the New English Bible presents a translation sounder in textual authority and linguistic interpretation than has hitherto been available.

It is, however, the decision to translate the original texts into contemporary English that arouses the most lively interest. To all except literary sophisticates to whom the language of the Authorized Version poses no problem, that decision is right and inevitable. The language of Holy Writ should not be remote and strange; yet that is what the older version is to the common reader. The natural processes of change in the language have made obsolete many of the constructions and much of the vocabulary of the old version. Many passages, obscure in the Authorized Version, are here made clear, as in Hebrews 4:12, "For the word of God is alive" (A.V. 'quick'), or Matthew 7:3 where the antithesis "mote" and "beam" is, for perhaps more than one reader, explained in "Why do you look at the speck of sawdust in your brother's eye, with never a thought for the great plank in your own?"

But the difference in the New English Bible is more than a matter of purging obsolete words. There is a fundamentally different theory of translation behind it. The Authorized Version, as John Selden observed, "is rather translated into English Words than into English phrase"—that is, it often reproduces characteristic features of the original languages in English. It is partly this alien element that gives it the qualities variously described as "dignified", "elevated", and "poetic". To the remoteness of the Biblical scene, customs, and thought-patterns were added linguistic features from the original which the new Bible eschews in favour of a translation into the vocabulary and constructions of modern English.

Moreover, there is another quality of the Authorized Version to be pondered before the delicate task of comparison with the new version is attempted, namely, that it had, even in 1611, an archaic flavour which derived from its substantial reliance on earlier English translations. Readers who derive their notion of New Testament style from the Authorized Version possess a taste almost, one might say, corrupted by the magnificent synthetic prose of King James's men. Professor C. S. Lewis has observed pertinently that the qualities we most admire in the Authorized Version are not those which, throughout most of its history, the New Testament has impressed readers as possessing. To St. Augustine, as to Hugh St. Victor and Aquinas, the rustic simplicity of the book was a matter for embarrassment; Tyndale praised it, but did so for its "grossest manner" which brought it to the hearts of ploughboys. There can be no doubt that the Authorized translators strove to achieve a greater elevation and dignity than were to be found in the more

idiomatic translations of some of their predecessors (though even so the most gifted stylist among them, Lancelot Andrewes, habitually carried with him into the pulpit the more rugged Geneva Version).

All of which is to suggest that a faithful translation of the New Testament into contemporary idiom should not be judged in terms of a direct comparsion with the Authorized Version, but only to the extent that we can assess the relative merits of both versions for their own ages as renderings of an original still available for analysis. And if modern scholarship has shown anything, it is that the Greek *koiné* in which the book comes to us, allowing for its subtle stylistic levels, is a vigorously colloquial language. For its original hearers and readers it must have had precisely that immediacy and familiarity the Authorized Version has lost for us, and which it is the principal aim of the new translators to capture. This they have done with a brilliance that occasional lapses do not seriously impair.

It is, therefore, idle to complain that the hallowed phrases have disappeared: that "scribes" and "publicans" are replaced by "lawyers" and "tax-gatherers", that "neither cast ye your pearls before swine" becomes "do not feed your pearls to pigs", that "Render therefore unto Caesar . . . " is translated "pay what is due to Caesar, and pay God what is due to God", that "Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof" is rendered "Each day has troubles enough of its own", that "God and Mammon" becomes "God and Money"—though there will be those who feel that the old wording, as part of the common idiom, should not be changed. Equally inevitable, perhaps, has been the loss of those passages in which the beauty of the Authorized Version resides in the organization of the sentences. The inversion which lends a haunting beauty to Matthew 6:28, "Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they toil not, neither do they spin", cannot be kept in natural, contemporary English. One regrets the loss of such features as these (especially in the new version of the Beatitudes), but go they must because they are inappropriate in modern English.

Where the new version disappoints, it is usually through over-directness. Perhaps the most striking instance is the opening of the otherwise admirable rendering of the Magnificat: "Tell out, my soul, the greatness of the Lord", which misses the resonance of both sound and meaning in "My soul doth magnify the Lord". One notices the same tendency elsewhere, for example in Matthew 16:26 where "true self" scarcely carries the weight of "soul". Here the very virtues of the new version, simplicity and directness, because too insistently sought, lead to a loss of depth.

Yet, while it is easy to find fault with the translators in occasional passages, one is left with a version that, taken as a whole, is always fresh and lucid. It never draws attention to itself; the object, the situation, the Gospel message come to us through the transparent medium of a subtle and exact prose. "You are a king, then?" said Pilate. Jesus answered, " 'King' is your word. My task is to bear witness to the truth. For this was I born; for this I came into the world, and all who are not deaf to truth listen to my

voice" (John 18:37). "It was there from the beginning; we have heard it; we have seen it with our own eyes; we looked upon it, and felt it with our own hands; and it is of this we tell" (1 John 1). Passage after passage could be cited to the same end: the impassioned rebuke of the hypocrites, the intimacy and concreteness of the parable teaching, the powerful rendering of the lonely and straitened figure of Christ, his face set to go up to Jerusalem, are presented in spare, fluid prose. For this is a flexible translation, able to compass the variety of the New Testament. Resourceful and sensitive, the translators are as successful in the jerky plainness of Mark as they are in the theological elaboration and paradox of John, or the splendid narrative of Acts. The rendering of Revelation has an apocalyptic fervour which promises well for the forthcoming Old Testament and Apocrypha.

It is to be observed too that though there are passages in which the Authorized Version is less diffuse, the new translation generally is economical and urgent. "Repent; for the kingdom of Heaven is upon you" (Matthew 4:17); "Remember: sparse sowing, sparse reaping" (2 Corinthians 9:6). Above all it is a translation of great simplicity. The decision to adopt in Paul's discourse (1 Corinthians 13) the translation "love" instead of "charity" is characteristic. For here the Authorized Version was influenced by the Bishops' Bible and the Rheims Version (both of which have the Vulgate *caritas* in mind) into deserting the rendering of Tyndale. Time and time again the new version recalls the vigour and concreteness of that greatest of all English Bible translators. Thus, where Tyndale has "In your prayers do not go babbling on like the heathen" (Matthew 6:7), and the Authorized Version "But when you pray, use not vain repetitions", the new version returns to the homely words of Tyndale rather than to the latinized text of 1611.

This quality in the New English Bible is significant. The translators, like Tyndale and Luther, believe that Biblical translation should result in a book that comes home to men in a language which, while faithful to the original, is familiar. I cannot believe that those reviewers who have spoken of the work as "useful to the student", or "to be read in the home", have grasped its purpose. The suggestion that it is less suitable for the pulpit than the Authorized Version is a desperate evasion of what the modern congregation needs: a Bible that speaks directly, simply, and urgently. This will create its own problems for, as the Bishop of Middleton has observed, the new version "could seem alien in the lethargic context of some Sunday worship. The New English text presupposes an intent and lively congregation (which it could help to create), and it cries out for good earthy exposition, just because it is more meaningful and alerting". No one who reads the Lord's Prayer in the new translation is likely to mumble it as a rite which familiarity has left meaningless. Here are "lively oracles" indeed.

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