

# Bible Translation

H. K. MOULTON\*

We are engaged here in discussing the authority of the Bible. On the whole we are reasonably sure of the basis of our discussion. We are fairly clear about the theological truths of the Bible, about its ethical standards, about the challenge of its personalities, good or bad, about the insights of its poetry and gnomic wisdom. We take this material for granted and try to see in what ways it must be applied directly to our situations today and in what ways its spirit remains relevant though the form of its application must be modified.

But, for our study to be truly adequate, we have always to bear in mind the still more basic question: what is the Bible? What ancient documents are we to accept as authoritative? Where the ancient texts vary, which is the original Scripture? What is the true understanding of the Hebrew and the Greek, even when the first two questions are decided?

I am not now concerned with these first two questions. The Canon of Scripture, a burning question in ancient days, has long been established. The only open question is the position of what Protestants call the Apocrypha, and Roman Catholics the Deutero-Canonical books. Even here the two sides are merging. The Bible Societies are now able to publish the Apocrypha. I had the joy of close association with the Samoan Bible, the first to be published by the Bible Societies in two editions, one with and one without the inter-testamental books. Even so, the edition containing the Apocrypha had to have the London imprint because New Zealand, whose imprint it should have had, could not bring itself to take this new step. There was an ancient Bible Society regulation: 'The Society shall not publish the Apocrypha', a kind of Eleventh Commandment, and New Zealand held on to that. Elsewhere, however, the regulation has been amended to 'The Bible Society shall not publish the Apocrypha, *except when specially requested*'. That opens many doors. A little tact oils many hinges. On the other hand, the Roman Catholics have never claimed more than Deutero-canoncity for the Apocrypha and are quite willing to group these books together instead of having them dispersed through the Old Testament. The Canon is not a serious present problem.

The problem of Text will always be with us, always fascinating for people like myself, important in some places, but nowhere affecting fundamental Christian theology or ethics. By all means let us use our utmost intelligence to decide the original text as best as we can. Our work will help in many places of detailed exegesis, but it will not affect the question of the Bible's total authority, except for people who are

\* Dr H. K. Moulton was Visiting Professor of New Testament at the United Theological College, Bangalore, from 1971-1973.

convinced that one edition or translation is verbally inspired and feel their faith shaken if any variation is discussed.

No, it is probably the third question which is of most practical significance when we are studying the authority of the Bible. What is the meaning of the original Greek and Hebrew *as understood by translators*? 99.9 per cent recurring of people in this world cannot read the originals. They have to rely on translation, and in the vast majority of cases in one language only, their mother tongue, and even there in all probability in one version only. There was the old lady who is said to have remarked that if the English Authorised version was good enough for St Paul, it was good enough for her. The story is probably apocryphal, or at any rate deuterocanonical, but it makes a point. Bishop Azariah once said to me that there were thousands of good Tamil Christians who believe that the Tamil Bible translated by Henry Bower and his colleagues in the 1860s actually came straight down word-perfect from heaven.

This puts an awesome onus on translators. All translation is inevitably commentary. At the latest session of the Tamil Bible Revision Committee we had a long discussion on Romans 5:20: is the *hina* there 'final' or 'ecbatic'? Or, to put it in language that the old lady might follow more easily, is Paul saying that the Law was introduced *in order that* sin might increase, or that it was introduced, and *as a result* sin increased? I favoured the latter and was delighted to find that St Chrysostom was on my side. Indeed we owe the word 'ecbatic' to him, though it comes more naturally in Greek. Others, however, were more rigid in their thinking, and in the end we did what we occasionally do and put one sense in the text and the other in the margin, but there were we, a group of fallible translators, left with the decision whether to leave the Tamil church with a legacy of determinism or freewill. What a responsibility! Despite our best endeavours there are bound to be many places like that: where more than one sense of the original is possible, and translators have to form their own judgements as to which sense is correct. Their thinking goes through several processes: What is the exact meaning of the individual words in front of them? What is the sum of interrelated meanings in the sentence or paragraph as a whole, since interrelation so often modifies meaning? What alternative meanings are possible, remembering that it is sometimes easy to make decisions between the two or more, and sometimes wellnigh impossible? And finally how can the meaning, as humbly decided by the translators, be best expressed in the style, idiom and local specialities of the receptor language?

Their decisions, when finally committed to print, will have far-reaching effects. Ordinary translation may have blemishes which can be criticised in passing and, then ignored. Only occasionally, as in legal documents are they important. The Bible is different. Millions of Christians regard it as the inerrant Word of God. A translation in a new language may fix Scripture for its readers for generations to come. That has happened time and again. A new translation in an old language will always meet with criticism from those who regard it as perverting the established Word. Few Christian readers have the necessary knowledge and ability to be flexible in their approach to

translation problems. Some are militantly opposed to any change from their favourite version. I have the joy at present of working with a keen and responsive group of post-graduate students preparing for the M.Th. degree in New Testament. We study our set books (a large proportion of the N.T.) in Greek with the alternative textual variants. We look at eight or nine different English versions, at two Tamil versions (including the excellent R.C. one), at the Urdu, Hindi, Oriya, Telugu and Kannada. Finally we decide on what we consider to be the best rendering, or we feel obliged to leave some questions open. In 1 Timothy 1:16 does *dia touto* 'for this reason', point forward or back? Is the writer saying that he had received mercy because he was the foremost of sinners, or because Christ was to make an example of him for future believers as the foremost of those who had enjoyed his mercy? Or does the phrase point both back and forward? We dare not be too positive with any of the three possibilities. Would that readers could be so open-minded! Unfortunately there is neither the mental ability nor the will in so many cases. The translator walks on a knife-edge, seeking to present God's Word understandably, purely and persuasively, yet never offensively, save where the Word must always give offence.

What is the ideal translation? Would that I, or anybody, could answer that question! Some have thought that the closer the wording is kept to the original languages, the more faithful it is likely to be. One respects that point of view. Here are people who feel the sacredness of the Word and are reluctant to play about with it. Any modification might destroy the inerrant holiness of the original. Sometimes this practice in the ancient versions is a help to the textual critic. If the order of words varies in the Greek manuscripts, we can tell which manuscript was followed by some of the Latin versions because we know that they translate word for word, regardless of differences in Latin style. In modern times an Interlinear Greek Testament is helpful to a beginner up to a point. It does his preliminary vocabulary and accidence work for him. But for an understanding of meaning it is sheer murder. Adultery might be a better description. Instead of marrying one language to another, it goes little further than the mechanics of prostitution.

At the other extreme is what is often called paraphrase, though the word is almost impossible to define. Take J. B. Phillips as a possible example. His New Testament (not to mention his Four Prophets) has been deservedly popular ever since he began it in 1947, a significant date in so many ways! It has especially restored that mercurial and utterly devoted figure, Paul of Tarsus, to his lively and vigorous self, completely absorbed in his mission and his Lord. It has freed him from the ponderous weight of holy translation. Yet we cannot help wondering in many places how much is Paul and how much J. B. Phillips. When Paul says in Phil. 4:2 'I entreat Euodia and I entreat Syntyche', does he mean 'Euodia and Syntyche, I beg you *by name*'? It is a nice thought but does it go beyond Paul? Possibly in Phillips we have an ideal partnership between the first century and the twentieth. Perhaps in some places we have interpretation, or even misinterpretation. Unquestionably we have much to be thankful for, but we should

be quite up the wrong street if we expected this or any translation to be dictation verbatim from the mouth of God.

Similar merits and faults can be found in all translations. Let me give a few illustrations. Take first the English 'Authorised' Version of 1611, often called the 'King James Version', the authoritative version still to many. Its language, right or wrong, with its wonderful rhythms, has moulded the English language perhaps for all time. Yet some of its vocabulary and grammatical structure is archaic. It is based on an inferior text through no fault of its own, and it is often quite unintelligible. Dr C. H. Dodd has recently called attention to its translation of Job 36:32-33: 'With clouds he covereth the light; and commandeth it *not to shine by the cloud* that cometh betwixt'. (So far so good, though the italics show that explanatory words had to be added). But go on: 33. 'The noise thereof sheweth concerning it, the cattle also concerning the vapour'. As Dr Dodd says, at that point they just gave up! N.E.B. gives something more intelligible, but is bound in honesty to admit in a footnote that the Hebrew is obscure.

The English Revised Version of 1881-85 is the one on which I was brought up. My grandfather was a member of the revision committee. It was abused or ignored by many who did not want change from the A.V., but it was a great advance in scholarship and is still respected for that today. It was handicapped in English style by not being sufficiently freed from the A.V. The American Standard Version is its counterpart, though it is a little more free in its style.

The American Revised Standard Version, its successor, has good scholarship, a sober style and the beginnings of breaking away from the more literal type of translation. It is probably the most useful for the serious student today if he sees the value of remaining fairly close to the original.

After this comes the watershed. Translators begin to see the advantages of translating meanings rather than words. Following the exact structure of Greek sentences is realised to be less important than making the meaning clear in the natural idiom of the receptor language, however much that may differ in structure from the Greek. A great deal of emphasis has rightly been laid on this in recent years. Dr Eugene Nida of the American Bible Society has made it his main concern. He has written largely on it and has lectured in detail to groups of translators all over the world. Through his efforts many translators are breaking free from the wrong kind of reverence for Scriptures. They are learning to devote themselves to meaning as a whole rather than to apparent verbal accuracy which may actually distort meaning rather than translate it.

Not that this emphasis is entirely new. The earliest English translators, Wycliffe and especially Tyndale (to whom the English Bible will be eternally indebted), based their translations on this principle. To quote Prof. F. F. Bruce (*The English Bible*, p. xi), 'The translator's business is, as far as possible, to produce the same effect on readers of the translation as the original text produces or produced on those able to read it'. This law of equivalent effect, as it is commonly called nowadays, is not a new-fangled notion: it was known and enunciated centuries ago. There are two versions of the Bible associated

with the followers of John Wycliffe. One of these is a very literal rendering of the Latin Vulgate; very literal, it appears, because it was intended to be used as a volume of canon law, where verbal precision is all-important. But that was not the version which people risked their lives and liberties to buy and read. The Wycliffe version which did attain such popularity and excite such devotion was the work of a man who put on record his conviction that the best way to translate from Latin into English was to make the sentence, rather than the individual word, the sense-unit. 'Meaning for Meaning' in effect, was John Purvey's motto. I think it would be fair to say that the Tamil versions (the Indian versions with which I am most nearly acquainted) have also avoided the literalness, the close adherence to the form of the original, which makes translation unnatural and even unintelligible. Bartholomew Ziegenbalg, who produced the first Indian New Testament in 1715, wrote in quite a colloquial style, hard though his book is to read today, with no separation between the words and no dots on the consonants to indicate closed syllables. The very form of Tamil syntax fortunately makes it impossible to follow the long drawn out construction of Ephesians 1, which in Greek has only three full stops in 23 verses. The Tamil revision of 1942, with which I was most fully concerned, has no fewer than 14 full stops in this chapter. 'Dynamic' translation, as we now call it, is not new, but it owes a great deal of its present impetus to Dr Nida's own dynamic personality.

The New English Bible, of which the New Testament was published in 1961 and the Old in 1970, is an outstanding example of this type of translation, though it was not influenced by Dr Nida. It originated from a proposal made by a Scottish Presbyterian minister right back in 1946. Those brought up on the older versions sometimes find the Scripture almost unrecognisable in its pages, but it reads naturally, intelligibly and (in places such as Second Isaiah) with dignity and beauty. There is perhaps some justification in the criticism that the vocabulary is sometimes characteristic of the university don rather than of the ordinary man.

One of the great joys of recent years has been the revived interest of Roman Catholics in the Scriptures. Under the enlightened guidance of Pope John and others of his time, the dominance of the Latin Vulgate has been very considerably modified. Even that fine Greek scholar, Ronald Knox, was compelled in 1945 to make his English translation of the N.T. from the Vulgate. Now all over the world Roman Catholics are associated with Bible Society translators in the rendering of Scripture from the original languages into local languages, direct from producer to consumer with no Vulgate middlemen. One outstanding result of this new spirit was the French translation with notes made by a fine group of scholars in Jerusalem in 1956, and therefore known as the Jerusalem Bible. An independent English translation with the same name was made in 1966, though the notes themselves are translated from the French with some revision. The translation is not as 'dynamic' as the New English Bible, but it reads simply and well. Some of the notes, especially on the Virgin Mary and the Brethren of our Lord, would not be entirely acceptable to other Christians,

but the great majority would be valuable to any reader. We can legitimately rejoice at this new development of outstanding potentiality.

Undoubtedly the most widely circulated current version is 'Today's English Version; Good News for Modern Man'. If I give the figure as thirty million copies sold since 1966, I shall probably be a few million out of date. The main translation work has been done by a fine New Testament scholar, Dr R. G. Bratcher of the American Bible Society, whose personal friendship I greatly value. He has accepted suggestions and criticisms from many people including myself, but the substantial credit for the work is wholly his. The chief aim of the translation has been simplicity of vocabulary and syntax, with the result that many people have found it within their compass when more complex versions have passed over their heads. The danger involved in this aim is that in a number of places the translation is oversimplified and the meaning not fully brought out. For example in John 1:13, where R.S.V. translates quite literally: 'Who were born, not of blood nor of the will of the flesh nor of the will of man', T.E.V. has 'They did not become Gods' children by natural means, by being born as the children of a human father'. This is certainly simpler than the R.S.V., but it does not quite bring out the full meaning of the original. However, this occasional over-simplification is a comparatively small price to pay for general intelligibility. The simple but most effective line drawings add greatly to the merit of the Book.

In London we have for many years been preparing what we have called *The Translator's New Testament*. It is now at long last being printed and we expect it to be published in the next few months. We began by making it somewhat literal, so that translators with little or no Greek could get as close as possible to the wording of the original. In recent years, however, we have been infected with the dynamism of the day and have aimed at translation of meaning rather than of words. This volume is being prepared especially for translators, with notes comparing different current versions and a glossary of theological and other terms to help translators on their way, but we hope it will be useful to many others as well.

One more English version may be mentioned: *The New Testament: A New Translation* (2 vols) by Professor William Barclay of Glasgow, who has also helped considerably in *The Translators' New Testament*. Prof. Barclay never economises in words if only he can make the meaning plain. For example, in 1 Tim. 2:6, where the Greek has *to marturion kairois idiois*, four words literally translated 'the witness (for) own times', Dr Barclay translates 'And that sacrifice of his is the proof and guarantee, given in his good time, that God's desire is indeed the salvation of all mankind'. Twenty-five words for four, but they certainly bring out the sense, or one possible sense, of a very difficult phrase.<sup>1</sup> For that notoriously difficult passage, 1 Cor. 7:36-38, he gives three different translations, because he feels that any of them can

<sup>1</sup> It might be added that at Gal. 3: 20: 'Now a mediator is not *a mediator* of one; but God is one' (eleven words in the Greek, thirteen in King James) Dr Barclay's translation runs to exactly eighty words. It is a good deal clearer than the original, and adds nothing that was not in Paul's mind.

be justified. He also has a brilliant essay on principles of translation and a most valuable glossary. Altogether a delightful book, stamped with his own character throughout.

This is not an exhaustive list of English translations. Professor A. S. Herbert of Selly Oak has recently produced for the B.F.B.S. a catalogue of some 1500 distinct English translations and editions from Wycliffe to the N.E.B. Our short selection from this list, however, is enough to show very clearly that there is no 'authoritative' translation in English or in any language. Some translations are better than others, but the wise man uses a combination of the best available, finding a condominium of authority to link up with that of his own judgement and conscience.

One could continue this survey all round the world. I limit myself to one further example: the *Modern Greek New Testament*, published in 1967. It is an extraordinary fact that the Greeks, in whose language the New Testament was written, have never until now had a printed New Testament that they could understand. In the early centuries there was understanding but no printing. Then as time passed, the language, like all languages, changed and, when printing came, it was not entirely different but as different, say, as Chaucer from modern English or the Tamil classics from the common literary usage of today. The majority of the Greek Orthodox Church encouraged this dichotomy. Greek had bequeathed to the world the priceless heritage of the New Testament. Why should its language be cheapened for the benefit of ordinary people? Indeed when a previous attempt had been made at the beginning of this century there were riots, and a law was actually passed forbidding any translation into Modern Greek. The so-called Modern Greek translation made by Bambas in the middle of last century was sufficiently near to the original not to arouse such great feeling but, whatever its comprehensibility then, it is certainly not Modern Greek now.

At the end of the war, however, the climate seemed more propitious, and under the wise guidance of the B.F.B.S. Translation Secretary, Rev. W. J. Bradnock, previously a missionary in Agra, and Mr George Kladis, Bible Society Secretary in Athens, a committee of Orthodox but progressive university professors was formed. Great care had to be exercised. Protestants (or Evangelicals, as they are usually called) were consulted but remained as back-room boys. Even now, with the far less thorny matter of Old Testament translation, this remains the position. The text followed was in the main the *Keimene* or Patriarch's Text, a text resembling the Textus Receptus, and the word *Keimene* meaning 'the text laid down once for all'. It was, however, possible in many places to introduce the readings of a modern critical text. The work proceeded with great circumspection. The language was not to be *katharevousa*, the 'purified', high literary style of today, but *demotike*, the language of ordinary writing at a mid-level, neither too high, nor too colloquial. At every point the translators were sensitive to reactions of all possible kinds. After all they were trying to do what no other translators in the world have to do: they were translating from Greek into Greek. They had been wisely chosen as the best

men for the job: highly respected, competent, alive to the value of the project. In the later stages I paid four extended visits to Athens as New Testament adviser. Strangely enough there were things where even we outsiders could help Greeks in the understanding of their New Testament. I had intimate contacts with Prof. Vellas, the chairman of the committee, a gentle man of small stature and delicate health but a man revered by all. It was mainly through the general respect for him that the project moved to its ultimate success. If Prof. Vellas was in on it, it must be all right. It was fascinating to find how Greek words had changed their meanings over the centuries. Paul's great word *dikaïosune*, God's vindicating righteousness, the right relationship with himself that he offers man, has now little spiritual connotation. It is part of the title identifying the law-courts. *Ampelos* in John 15:1 is no longer the vine but the vineyard, and the 'branches' are the vines. This gives quite a new slant to the allgory but it works out well in its own right: we are the vines which must bear fruit and we must remain in the vineyard if we are to receive all the cultivation we need.

With some considerable diffidence we published the Modern Greek New Testament in 1967. We knew there would be opposition. What would be the general reception? Our fears were liars. The first printing was sold out immediately. We reprinted as fast as we could, but there were grumbles from people who could not get copies. The Department of Education in the Athens area asked for copies for their schools, and people in the south began to complain because they were not getting them too. Every recruit for the army is supplied with a copy, and every prisoner. So far we have printed the old text on the left-hand page and the new on the right, to show that there has been no bogus modification. It is judged, however, that this may no longer be necessary. The translation is welcomed in its own right.

You will forgive this long description of a work so close to my own heart, but it is a modern miracle, typical at the highest level of a very great deal of Bible Society work.

But may I now turn to another facet of the translation task? The Bible was written in Mediterranean languages in Mediterranean surroundings. Its geography, climate, fauna, flora and human customs range from east to west between Babylon and Rome, and from north to south between Macedonia and Egypt, quite a limited area within the total expanse of the world. Many of the material details taken for granted in the Bible are restricted to that area and are at any rate, not universal. Tropical conditions on the one hand and Arctic on the other have not had the need for words equivalent to Mediterranean terms. We in South India have no precise equivalents for ice, snow and hail. We have had to invent terms. Nor can we deal quite satisfactorily with the processes of bread-making or with wine. These are problems in many parts of the world. On the other hand, an Eskimo translator is faced with an inverted set of problems. When Jesus says, 'Are there not twelve hours in the day?' tropical zones accept the statement without question. Even in temperate zones not much mental adjustment is needed. But above the Arctic circle the day is



twenty-four hours long in June and in December there is no day at all. A literal translation is meaningless here. Nor can the Gadarene swine be transhipped to Northern Canada. They have only the caribou, and the swine became 'funny looking caribous'. I have no idea what a caribou looks like, funny or otherwise, but the Eskimo knows. On the other hand, when our Lord says of Herod, 'Go and tell that fox . . .', the question comes back, 'What kind of fox? We have grey, red, blue and white'. Remembering that the fox is the emblem of craftiness and destructiveness we ask which of the four Eskimo foxes is most like that, and the answer comes back, 'None, our crafty animal is the wolverine'. So the wolverine it must be in the Eskimo Bible to get the meaning across to them, even if it means nothing to us. One of the strangest questions I remember came from north Burma in connection with Hebrews 11:37: 'They were stoned, they were sawn asunder. . . . Which way were they sawn asunder, vertically or horizontally? We have different words for each'.

Camels are of course a problem in all lands where they are not indigenous. English has simply take over the Greek word. But what about the 'eye' of the needle through which camels go? Never mind the flat-footed efforts to explain that a camel was a kind of rope, or that 'through a needle' means a small gate. Jesus did a good deal of his teaching by preposterous exaggeration. Take the text as it stands. The English 'eye' of a needle goes right back, I believe, to Tyndale. It was only when I discovered that in Tamil a needle has an 'ear' that I began to raise questions and found that in Hindi it has a 'mouth'. In German it has an 'eye'. In French it has either a 'groove' or a 'hole'. In Latin it has a 'cave', the same word that is used in Exodus 33:22 for the cleft of a rock in which Moses hid when the Lord passed by. And so one could go on. What is the original Greek? We look at the three Synoptic Gospels and find three different words, but each one of them means, very simply, a hole!

One could multiply these local variations a hundredfold, and even the different ways of expressing more fundamental matters. Such variations, and all the multiplicity of translations in different languages or even in the same language, show that the authority of the Bible cannot depend on verbal inspiration. Even if the exact wording of the original writings had been preserved (which it has not, though we are certain enough of the essentials), we should always have to mediate it through local channels. We cannot do like the Immersionist sect which wondered about suitable authority for baptismal clothing and found it in Psalm 42: 'As the heart pants for the water-brooks. . . . Pants for the water-brooks', just the thing!

No, our authority is authority of meaning, not of words. The translator does his prayerful utmost to realise the meaning, to put it into language which will make it clear and compelling, and he hands it over to the individual conscience and to the teaching of the Church, so that it may be studied and weighed and accepted and obeyed, that so God's word may do its perfect work.