

A NOTE ON A VERSE IN THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE

by R. J. A. SHERIFFS

DR. SHERIFFS, lately Lecturer in Hebrew in Rhodes University, Grahamstown, Cape Province, discusses the rendering of 2 Tim. 3 : 16a in the light of its context and of various translations. According to some translations, the words assert the inspiration of all Scripture ; according to others, they assume it. Which is the preferable construction ?

THE appearance of a new translation of the Bible has very often been met with sharp criticism from Christians. There will always be those who are naturally conservative regarding any attempt to improve on the King James translation of the English Bible. This apprehension is quite understandable and is not new. Our Anglo-Saxon ancestors were really anxious to spread a knowledge of the Bible in the vulgar tongue but feared lest harm should come of it. Aelfric writing to Aethelwold the Alderman says: "Now it thinketh me, love, that that work [the translation of Genesis] is very dangerous for me or for any man to undertake ; because I dread lest some foolish man read this book . . ." (*Praefatio Genesis Anglice*).

JEROME'S VULGATE

Jerome's attempt to revise the Latin Bible was looked on with suspicion as revolutionary, heretical, subversive of faith, and tampering with the Word of God. Augustine told the story, with evident approval, of an African bishop who nearly lost his flock through substituting the word "ivy" for the well-known one "gourd" when reading out the Lesson from the Book of Jonah. Jerome's revision read *hedera* for the familiar *cucurbita*. Undiscouraged by his many critics, Jerome wrote to Marcella, "I could afford to despise them, if I stood on my rights, for a lyre is played in vain to an ass". Maybe Jerome was a better scholar than a saint, for he hit out at his detractors, calling them "fools", "stupids", and "two-legged donkeys" (*bipedes asellos*). In the course of time the value of Jerome's work was fully recognized by the church.

KING JAMES'S BIBLE

It was the same when the so-called Authorized Version of 1611

was suggested. "My Lord of London" is reported to have said: "If every man's humour should be followed, there would be no end of translating". The translators themselves inform us in their preface that a work such as theirs "is welcomed with suspicion instead of love, with emulation instead of thanks". There were those who were afraid that a fresh translation into English of the sacred texts would seriously disturb the faith of Christians and make them think they had been misled by the older version. "Hath the Church been deceived, say they, all this while? Hath her sweet bread been mingled with leaven, her silver with dross, her wine with water, her milk with lime?" This seems a strange argument to us today.

THE REVISED VERSION

So too, when a plan was made for a Revised Version of the English Bible of 1611 there were gloomy forebodings of the alarming consequences which would result from any attempt to alter the time-honoured Version. In the event, the Revised Version of 1881 has not proved to be a serious rival of the A.V., although its value as an aid to study has been everywhere proclaimed.

AMERICAN REVISED STANDARD VERSION

Again, when the American Revised Standard Version made its appearance in 1952, it was subjected to quite severe criticism in conservative evangelical circles. Some of this criticism was probably deserved; some of it was not. It is to the credit of the late Dr. Donald Grey Barnhouse that he did not join in this witch-hunt. His article entitled, "Have you read it?", which appeared in the *C.S.S.M. Magazine*, was a model of Christian restraint and fair-minded constructive criticism.

THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE

The New English Bible of 1961 is the latest attempt to bring the earlier versions in line with modern scholarship. So far, only the New Testament has been published. The statement on the dust-cover informs us that this new version is "neither a revision of the Authorized Version nor intended to replace it". This should remove the prejudice of some of its readers. There can be no doubt that the translation is the result of first-class scholarship combined with judicious thought. It is not the purpose of the present writer to launch an attack on this work but to comment on the translation of 2 Timothy 3: 16 found in it.

2 TIMOTHY 3: 16

Much importance has been attached to this verse in the Second Epistle of Timothy by many conservative evangelicals, for it has seemed to lend strong support to the doctrine of the plenary in-

spiration of the Scriptures. Any change in the wording of the commonly accepted translation will be resented by some and looked at askance. At first sight the difference between the translation of the A.V. and the rendering of the same verse in the New English Bible seems great and hard to understand. The A.V. renders it, "All scripture is given by inspiration of God and is profitable for doctrine", etc.; the New English Bible translates it, "Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching", etc.

It is well known that since the A.V. was translated a great wealth of new manuscript evidence for the text of the Bible has come to light. It may be conjectured by some readers of the new translation that this has resulted in a better translation of 2 Tim. 3: 16. In point of fact this is not the case. The alternative translations are not based on any known variants in the Greek text, but arise purely from the syntactical difficulties of the passage in the original. Strictly literal translation of the verse would render it, "All (or 'Every') scripture God-breathed and profitable for teaching", etc.

The problem for the translator is to decide whether the first three words are independent of the following phrase or not; are they co-ordinate or subordinate expressions? Should the first three words be translated, "All scripture *is* God-breathed . . .", or "All scripture God-breathed *is* . . ." ? In the first translation, the writer would appear to make a statement regarding the origin of Scripture; in the second, a statement regarding its use.

CRITICAL CRITERIA

It will be obvious there is no easy or infallible way by which a translator can decide for one rendering or the other. An element of doubt cannot be eliminated. However, the present writer suggests three criteria which may be used to arrive at a decision in translating. Firstly, we can turn to the earliest Latin translation of the passage, remembering that most good Latin writers in the early Christian centuries were bilingual, and so, familiar with Greek; secondly, we can turn to what was probably the earliest translation of the New Testament, the Syriac Version, and assuming that the text has been faithfully handed down, we can see how Semites have read the text in question; and lastly, we can consider the intrinsic evidence of the context as a guide to the meaning of the passage.

Firstly, then, we turn to the Latin translation of Jerome, whom we know to have been thoroughly at home with Greek. We find that his rendering of the passage follows the Greek text so closely that the ambiguity is still present. We can translate Jerome thus:

“Every scripture divinely inspired and useful for teaching”, etc. This certainly seems to favour the translation of the A.V. But there are some good copies of the Latin text which have a notable variant and this could be translated: “Every scripture divinely inspired useful *is* for teaching”, etc. In the light of the variant reading of the Latin manuscripts, it does not seem possible to make a final decision for one or the other.

Secondly, we turn to the Syriac Version, whose origin may go back to the second Christian century. A literal translation of the Syriac Peshitta is as follows: “All scripture which by the Spirit is written is useful for teaching”, etc. This appears to favour the translation of the New English Bible. Grotius, the Dutch theologian of the seventeenth century approved of the Syriac Version’s translation and said, “The Syriac well expresses the sense: ‘Every scripture which is inspired by God, is also useful’, etc.”

Thirdly, we consider the intrinsic evidence of the context as a guide to the meaning of the passage. The purpose of the epistle itself is, to invite Timothy to come to Rome and bring Mark with him, and at the same time to encourage Timothy in his pastoral office. The letter is full of fatherly exhortations and instruction. In chapter 3, Timothy is warned that many will forsake the truth of God and seek selfish pleasures, and he is exhorted to continue in the teaching which he had received from the apostle, and from the sacred scriptures, in which he had been instructed since he was a babe. The purpose of verse 16 is to remind Timothy of the value of this early instruction, and to exhort him to remain faithful to it. This being so, it is possible that the writer would wish to stress the dignity of those Old Testament scriptures as “God-breathed”, and from this predicate go on to remark on their complete usefulness.

But it must be admitted, that the two parts of the verse do not hang together well on this supposition, nor is it easy to see why the fact of the inspiration of the scripture is introduced as making for the completeness of the man of God (see v. 17). The writer has already, in verse 15, mentioned the sacred character of the scriptures of the Old Testament, and Timothy would no doubt agree to this. It seems, then, to the present writer, that what Timothy needed to know was that these scriptures were sufficient in themselves for his pastoral work, being God-breathed. Timothy could make use of *every* such scripture with confidence. This is brought out by the rendering of the New English Bible: “Every inspired scripture has its use for teaching”, etc. Martin Luther translated it: “All scripture inspired of God is useful for teaching”.

etc. And as early as 1380 John Wiclif, or one of his colleagues, translated it: "for al scripture ynspired of god is profitable to teche", etc.

CONCLUSION

There is a serious difficulty for translators in the verse we are considering and dogmatism must be avoided. In support of the translation of the King James's Bible we have James Moffatt, the American Revised Standard Version, Edgar J. Goodspeed, Professor C. F. D. Moule (*An Idiom Book of N.T. Greek*, p. 95), and many others; and in support of the rendering of the New English Bible we find the Syriac Version, Wiclif, Luther, Grotius, and many others.

It should be plain that the plenary inspiration of the Holy Scriptures is not dependent on this single passage. It is sufficient to point out that the word "scripture" is never used in the New Testament for any other than the sacred scriptures. Hence it must also have this meaning in the Second Epistle to Timothy. This is of great importance for the Christian. We may be quite sure of this, that whatever interpretation we give the passage in 2 Tim. 3: 16, we cannot get away from the declaration of the God-breathed" quality of the Scriptures which Timothy was exhorted to use "for teaching, for reproof, for correction in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, furnished completely unto every good work". So let us follow the advice of Origen who wrote: "Let us not be weary in reading the Scriptures which we do not understand, but let it be unto us according to our faith, by which we believe that *all Scripture inspired by God is profitable*".

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