

Preface

THE FIRST edition of this work (issued under the title *The English Bible*) coincided with the publication in 1961 of the New English Bible New Testament. The second (revised) edition followed soon after the publication of the complete New English Bible in 1970. This further edition under a new title endeavours to bring the story up to date, especially by the addition of a chapter which looks at a number of versions which have been produced within the last eight years or so. A few omissions have been repaired and some factual slips corrected. For the rest, the main record remains practically unchanged since 1970.

Traduttore traditore, says an Italian proverb: “the translator is a traitor”. An exaggeration certainly; and yet an honest translator is bound to confess that something is lost, something is changed, in the course of translation. Those of us—alas! a diminishing band—who in our earlier years were taught to read Homer in the original know perfectly well that no translation can ever give us the true feel of the authentic Homer. No doubt the Bible suffers less in translation than many other works do, but no Bible translator who knows his business counts himself to have attained perfection. I too have made my own private ventures into the field of Bible translation; and these ventures have at least taught me to deal very leniently with other translators. Not all the Bible translations with which we have been favoured in recent years have been produced by such a well-qualified body of men as the New English Bible; yet one would be slow to pass unmitigated condemnation even on the poorest of them, bearing in mind the difficulties of the task.

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Yes, but what of those translations where the translators deliberately introduce their own peculiar ideas of religious belief and practice? Must they not be condemned? Indeed they must; but let those who are themselves sinless in this regard cast the first stones. And by those who are sinless in this regard I do not mean those who have never tried to translate the Bible, but those who have translated it so objectively that their own beliefs, principles and practices have influenced no point of their work. Let us remember, too, that it is usually our unconscious prejudices and preferences that do the most damage; we can recognize our conscious ones for what they are and make allowance for them accordingly. All this suggests that a translation carried through by a body of men representing a wide range of ecclesiastical and theological opinion is more likely to be free from bias in these matters than the work of one individual, or of a committee selected from a more limited field.

One of the earliest of English translators, King Alfred the Great, distinguishes two ways in which translators may go about their work. "I began," he says, "amidst other diverse and manifold cares of the kingdom, to turn into English the book which is called *Cura Pastoralis* in Latin, and in English, *The Shepherd's Book*, sometimes word for word, and sometimes meaning for meaning." The history of the English Bible—indeed the history of Bible translation in general—illustrates the conflict between these two ideals in translation. Because of the special religious character and status of the Bible, there have always been those who felt that only a word-for-word translation could do justice to the implications of its divine inspiration. And some translations in fact have been so extremely literal that they can only be understood by reference to the original.

Now there is a place for such very literal translations. There are, for example, some editions of the Greek New Testament where an interlinear English rendering is provided, in such a way that each Greek word has its English equivalent directly beneath it. This interlinear rendering is not a translation, in the proper sense of the term; it is what schoolboys know as a "crib". Its purpose is to show which Greek word corresponds to which English word, and if it achieves that purpose, good and well. But who would tolerate this if

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it were offered as a trustworthy translation of the opening words of St John's Gospel?

In beginning was the Word, and the Word was towards the God, and God was the Word. This was in beginning towards the God. Everything through him became, and apart-from him became not-even one-thing. What has-become in him life was, and the life was the light of-the men. And the light in the darkness shines, and the darkness it not overcame.

What is wrong with that? It is a word-for-word rendering of the Greek text of the 1958 edition published by the British and Foreign Bible Society. There is obviously one thing wrong with it: it is not English. And there is something else wrong with it: it does not faithfully represent the writer's meaning. *Traduttore traditore?* If this is a translation, the translator *is* a traitor. But it is not a translation; it is a "metaphrase".

For certain limited purposes—purposes normally limited to the study and the classroom—a "crib" has its uses.¹ But it can never be an acceptable translation, because 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 Wycliffite 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. The translators of the New English Bible have followed the same procedure; how successful they have been it is henceforth for us, the readers, to decide.

¹ Cf. the literal rendering of an Old English Bible story on pp. 4 f. below.

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We call the King James Version the “Authorized Version”. What makes a version “authorized”? And has the New English Bible been “authorized”?

There is no mystery about the matter. An authorized version is one that has been authorized for stated purposes by competent authority. For example, Roman Catholics in Great Britain have nowadays a variety of “authorized” versions of the Bible in English. The older Douai-Rheims-Challoner version and the more recent version by Mgr Ronald Knox are authorized for public and private use by competent authority—that is to say, by the Roman Catholic archbishops and bishops of England and Wales and of Scotland. The Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version was “published with ecclesiastical approval” and carried a foreword by Cardinal Heenan in which the work was welcomed “not only because it will lead more of our people to read the Bible, but also because of its ecumenical value”. The English edition of *The Jerusalem Bible* was issued with Cardinal Heenan’s *imprimatur*.

Similarly, a Bible translation is authorized for the use of members of any other Church if the competent authorities of that Church authorize it. But where a Church is “by law established”, the authority of the state may be involved as well. After his breach with Rome, King Henry VIII of England regarded himself as the competent authority in the Church of England as much as in the realm of England. In 1537 his royal licence was granted to two versions of the English Bible—Coverdale’s and Matthew’s—but that made them permitted rather than fully authorized versions. More explicit authorization was given to the Great Bible of 1539 and following years: the title-page of its second edition describes it as “the Bible appointed to the use of the churches” [i.e. the parish churches of England], and “appointed” means “appointed by royal authority”. Later in Henry’s reign a ban was imposed on earlier versions (even, and indeed especially, for private use), but the authorization of the Great Bible remained in force. In the reign of Elizabeth I the Bishops’ Bible tended to supersede the Great Bible as the version for church use. Convocation of Canterbury directed that it should be made available in many public places, but Queen Elizabeth herself never formally acknowledged it or gave it preferential treatment.

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While the Bible of 1611 is a version undertaken under direct royal patronage, and probably approved by the King in Council, its use was not imposed on the churches by Parliament or Convocation. Had it been so imposed, its revision or replacement would have been charged with as much political dynamite as the revision of the Prayer Book. It is something to be thankful for that an Anglican clergyman does not require to have Parliamentary sanction for using in church the Bible version which he thinks fit to use.

In Scotland the Geneva Bible was appointed to be used in churches from the year of its publication onwards. Whether its replacement by the 1611 version was ever formally authorized by competent authority—that is, by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland—I have not been able to discover.

Authorized or not, the 1611 version found widespread and long-lasting acceptance throughout the English-speaking world because it deserved such acceptance. If any more recent version proves to be deserving of such acceptance, it will not fail to achieve it.

“Man’s chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy him for ever. The word of God, which is contained in the scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him. The scriptures principally teach what man is to believe concerning God, and what duty God requires of man” (*Westminster Shorter Catechism*, Answers 1-3).

“Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning; Grant that we may in such wise hear them, read, mark, learn, and inwardly digest them, that by patience, and comfort of thy holy Word, we may embrace, and ever hold fast the blessed hope of everlasting life, which thou hast given us in our Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen” (*Book of Common Prayer*: Collect for the Second Sunday in Advent).

Note: Except in extracts from versions of the Bible, the spelling in quotations from older English writers has usually been modernized.