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The New English Bible

THE appearance this Spring of the New Testament in "current English"—to use the publishers' phrase—marks the end of the first stage of an undertaking which has already engaged the energies of many scholars for nearly fourteen years, and is likely to continue to occupy them for a long time ahead. The event has aroused considerable interest all over the world, and it seems desirable, therefore, to place on record a fuller account than has so far appeared in Baptist circles of the origin and aims of the New English Bible, and the means taken to produce it.

The idea of a new and authoritative translation of the Scriptures into English has been in the air for a long time. As is well known, an attempt was made at the end of last century to revise the Authorised Version of 1611. This did not involve a fresh translation from the original tongues, for it was based explicitly on the twin principles that the alterations made to the Authorised Version should be as few as possible, consistently with faithfulness, and their expression limited to "the language of the Authorised and earlier English Versions." The result was not a success. For while scholars have found the Revised Version useful for a variety of reasons, the Church as a whole has never felt at home with the book, and in Britain, at any rate, it has won but meagre support, although in America the corresponding—though somewhat different—version (published in 1901) has been widely accepted and used.

Since then, although the Authorised Version still maintains its unique position as an English religious classic, the feeling has continued to grow that something more and something different is needed if the Word of God is once again to make its impact upon the English-speaking peoples of the world with living power. The reasons for this view are manifold. In the first place, Biblical scholars have long been unhappy about the state of the original text underlying our English Bible. The Authorised Version of the Old Testament was admittedly based upon a very early form of the Hebrew text. Yet, even so, this was fixed two or three centuries later than that represented in the Septuagint, which in many instances is now known to be more accurate. And in the case of the New Testament, the 1611 Version was largely based upon the late and corrupt mediaeval manuscripts used by Beza, notwithstanding the existence of more trustworthy material close at hand. A thorough re-examination of the textual evidence has therefore seemed to many scholars to be overdue.

This view is confirmed by the fact that in recent years many

fresh manuscripts have come to light, some of them of considerable antiquity, which have greatly increased our knowledge of the grammar and vocabulary of Biblical Hebrew and Aramaic. This material has been further enriched by the discovery since the 1870s of large quantities of Greek papyri, the contents of which have thrown a flood of light upon the social and domestic background of the New Testament, and upon the Greek vocabulary and idioms in popular use at a very early period of the Christian era. During the last century, too, the study of ancient manuscripts and their systematic classification has become a major concern of textual critics all over the world, so that far more is known today than ever before of the origins and relationships of the various extant versions of the Old and New Testaments, numerous as they are.

These facts were bound to call in question not merely the trustworthiness of the texts on which the Authorised Version was based, but also the accuracy with which the translators then understood and conveyed the meaning of the Scriptural authors. In short, the arguments in favour of re-opening the whole question finally became irresistible, and in 1937 the International Council of Religious Education acting on behalf of the Churches of the United States and Canada, sponsored the preparation of a new English version of the Bible. This was avowedly intended to be a revision of the American version of 1901, and not a completely new translation. The Council wished the new version, in fact, to stay as close as possible to the "Tyndale-King James tradition," and directed that it should "embody the best results of modern scholarship as to the meaning of the Scriptures, and express this meaning in English diction which is designed for use in public and private worship and preserves those qualities which have given to the King James version a supreme place in English literature."[1] The new version duly appeared in 1951 under the title of *The Revised Standard Version,* and it has deservedly met with a favourable reception in Britain.

The question still remained whether this new version did all that was required, and most British scholars thought not. They believed that the situation in regard to the Bible could not be adequately met by a further revision of the Authorised Version, however carefully undertaken, but that what was needed was an entirely new translation from the original Hebrew and Greek. It would seem, too, that expert opinion in this matter was in line with the wishes of a great many ordinary readers of the Bible also who, with little or no knowledge of the technical issues involved, were looking for something different. For one of the notable features of the life of the Christian Church in our day has been the reception given to translations of part or all of the Bible into modern English which have been prepared by individual scholars on their own initiative.

[1] *R.S.V. Preface,* vi.

These have circulated very widely, and it is only necessary to recall the names of such translators as Weymouth, Goodspeed and Moffatt —to say nothing of others of more recent date—to realize the considerable part that they have played in preparing the way for a fresh approach by the Church as a whole to the task of translating the Bible anew. The plain fact is that the gap between the language of the Authorised Version of 1611 and contemporary English has become for most people virtually unbridgeable. Yet the pioneering work of individual scholars has served to show that the modern man is not as indifferent to the Bible as is sometimes supposed, but will listen to its message when it is brought to him in a form which he can understand and assimilate.

On this assumption, in May, 1946, the members of the Presbytery of Stirling and Dunblane submitted to the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland a recommendation that a new translation of the Bible should be made in the language of the present day. The suggestion was approved, and in the following October a Conference was convened of delegates from the chief non-Roman Churches of Great Britain to consider the matter further. Representatives from the Church of England, the Church of Scotland, the Methodist, Baptist and Congregational Churches attended the meeting, which was held at the Methodist Central Hall, Westminster. They supported the Scottish proposal, it being agreed that the aim in view should be an entirely new translation, and not a revision of any previous version of the Bible, such as had at one time been contemplated. At a further meeting held in January, 1947, when representatives of the University Presses of Oxford and Cambridge were also present, it was resolved to request the Churches interested to appoint representatives to form "The Joint Committee on New Tranlation of the Bible," which should then be responsible for organizing the project. This body held its first meeting on 10th July, 1947, and in due course it was fully constituted as follows[2]:

Church of England—Six members.
Church of Scotland, Methodist Church, Baptist Union, Congregational Union—Two each.
Presbyterian Church of England, Society of Friends, The Churches in Wales, The Churches in Ireland, The British and Foreign Bible Society, and The National Bible Society of Scotland—One each.

Representatives of the Presses—Four.

The first Chairman of the Joint Committee was the Bishop of Truro (Dr. J. W. Hunkin). The Rev. Professor C. H. Dodd, of Cambridge,

[2] Besides the nominated representatives, provision was made in each case for an "alternate" to act when necessary.

was appointed Vice-Chairman, and the Rev. G. S. Hendry, of the Church of Scotland, Secretary.

The purpose of the new translation was conceived under a two-fold aspect. In the first place, the aim was, by a fresh study of the basic texts, to recover the meaning of the Biblical authors with more accuracy than had hitherto been possible. It was recognized at the outset that this would necessarily involve considerable research since no single existing text could be taken *simpliciter* as the sole basis for the New Translation. The criterion would have to be the best ascertainable text in the judgment of competent authorities, with appropriate recognition of alternative readings. Secondly, it was felt that the new translation must strive to make the meaning of the original authors plain to modern readers by giving to it an English rendering that should be at once clear, forceful and dignified without being stilted. "Timeless English" was the phrase used. The object was not to produce a literary masterpiece, nor to try and compete with the Authorised Version by offering a substitute for it. Indeed, the New Translation would not be designed primarily to be read in Church, although its authors would rejoice if it were adjudged worthy to be so used on suitable occasions. Its ultimate purpose would be to liberate the message of the Bible from out-moded forms, so that the inherent beauty and truth of the Divine Word should once again be able to make a direct appeal to the minds and hearts of men.

All this plainly implied a task of uncommon difficulty, and the Joint Committee resolved to entrust it in the first instance to specially chosen panels of scholars from various British universities, who were eminent in their own fields, and representative of competent biblical scholarship today. Names were considered and approved by the Committee on 2nd October, 1947, and the Old Testament and New Testament Panels were formally constituted. It was also decided to set up two other Panels, one to deal with the Apocrypha, and the other to advise generally on the literary style of the whole work. At a somewhat later stage, the Committee decided that a higher degree of integration was desirable, and they appointed Professor Dodd to be General Director of the New Translation.

The Joint Committee have met regularly twice a year since January, 1948, usually in the historic Jerusalem Chamber of Westminster Abbey, and from time to time they have invited the members of the Panels to confer with them. Progress reports have been received, and the Committee have given such advice and decisions as have been necessary. In the course of the years a number of changes have naturally taken place in both the Joint Committee and the Panels. On the death of the Bishop of Truro, the Bishop of Durham, Dr. Alwyn Williams (later translated to

Winchester) became Chairman of the Joint Committee; and the Rev. (now Professor) J. K. S. Reid succeeded the Rev. G. S. Hendry as Secretary, when the latter moved to Princeton. The Baptist Union representatives on the Joint Committee when it was first formed were the General Secretary (The Rev. Dr. M. E. Aubrey) and the Rev. Principal P. W. Evans (of Spurgeon's College), with the Rev. Dr. T. H. Robinson (Professor of Semitic Languages, University College, Cardiff) as the "alternate" member. A year or so later, Dr. Aubrey and Professor Robinson changed places. More recently, Principal R. L. Child (of Regent's Park College) was appointed to the position on the Joint Committee vacated by the deaths in succession of Principals P. W. Evans and L. H. Marshall (of Rawdon College). On the death of Dr. Aubrey, his successor in the Secretaryship of the Baptist Union (Dr. E. A. Payne) became the "alternate."

Full details of the membership of the Translation Panels will not be made known until the New English Bible has been completed. But with the publication of the New Testament, the names have been released of the scholars who have served on the New Testament Panel. They are as follows: *Chairman*: The Rev. Professor C. H. Dodd, D.D. (Congregational Church). The Very Rev. Dr. G. S. Duncan (Church of Scotland), University of St. Andrew's. The Rev. Professor R. V. G. Tasker (Church of England), University of London. The Rev. Professor C. F. D. Moule (Church of England), University of Cambridge. The Rev. Professor G. D. Kilpatrick (Church of England), University of Oxford. The Rt. Rev. the Lord Bishop of Woolwich (J. A. T. Robinson), University of Cambridge until 1959. The Rev. G. M. Styler (Church of England), University of Cambridge. Three members died (and were replaced by others) before the work was completed: The Rev. Professor T. W. Manson (Presbyterian Church of England), University of Manchester. The Rev. Professor W. F. Howard (Methodist Church), University of Birmingham. The Very Rev. E. G. Selwyn, Dean of Winchester.

A number of Baptist scholars have been closely concerned with other aspects of the project since its inception. Work on the Old Testament and the Apocrypha still continues, and, in view of the great amount of material involved, and the burden that it lays upon scholars who are for the most part fully engaged in their professional duties, it is probable that several more years will elapse before the goal is finally reached. Meanwhile, a tribute should be paid now to the help given to the Joint Committee by the representatives of the University Presses, which are bearing the whole cost of the new translation.

The aims and methods of the Joint Committee and the Panels are described in some detail in the Preface and Introduction to the

New Testament now in print, and it would be superfluous to elaborate upon them here. Broadly speaking, the usual proceeding has been for the work to be "farmed out" to individual scholars, who have been made responsible, in the first instance, for translating a particular book or books. Their translations have been circulated in draft to the members of the appropriate Panels, who have submitted them in joint session to a detailed and rigorous examination with a view to elucidating the validity of the original text and its true meaning. This group-work is a major feature of the whole undertaking. No part of the translation—not even a single verse—can properly be attributed to any one scholar. When a common mind has been reached, the book in question becomes the collective responsibility of the Panel, and is then passed forward to the Panel of Literary Advisers for further examination on grounds of style. Finally, the completed book is circulated in typescript to the members of the Joint Committee, so that they may offer any comments they wish upon it before it is ultimately approved.

So much for what may be called the mechanics of the New Translation. But what of the process itself? This is a much more subtle and difficult affair. It involves first of all deciding which among a number of variants has the best claim to be regarded as the authentic form of the original text. Next, the author's meaning has to be studied with reference not only to the precise words which he uses, and their grammatical significance, but having in mind also what is known of his social and cultural background, and the current speech of his day. Finally, there is the question how best to embody the author's meaning in contemporary English, so that the form shall be worthy of the subject-matter, and reproduce as clearly and accurately as possible the character of the original—whether that be prose or poetry, narrative, discourse, or what not. To sketch thus baldly the nature of the translator's task is to skate lightly over problems which in practice call for repeated and anxious consideration and discussion. What exactly is "contemporary English" or "timeless English"? And where does one draw the line between justifiable and unjustifiable colloquialism? If we abandon the second person singular, and say "you" instead of "thou," are we to apply this also to the prayers of the Bible and say (for example): "Your Kingdom come, Your Will be done"? What is to be done with a word like "Church" which, in its Greek form (*Ekklesia*) is often used in the Old Testament to translate a Hebrew word that means simply "assembly" or "congregation," and so may perhaps, even in the New Testament, sometimes mean no more than this? (Cp. *Acts* 5 : 11, 7 : 38). Should a Greek word like *doulos* be softened, as in the Authorised Version, to "servant" (Cf. *Rom.* 1 : 1, *Philemon* 16), or ought its full meaning of "slave" to be always given to it? These are the sort of questions that are continually arising,

to which simple answers can rarely if ever be given. They must be painstakingly examined and resolved in the light of the best evidence available, and there is no royal road to unanimity. Inspiration, as Dr. Oman used to say, is not an hebdomadal function. And the translators of the New English Bible would be the last to claim that all their renderings answer to that description. Yet at least they have tried to make the Bible a more readable and a more relevant book in the lives of English people than it has been for a long while past.

Notwithstanding all the pains taken in its production, it is not to be expected that the New Translation will at once achieve its purpose. Time alone can reveal how far it succeeds in winning acceptance from the Church as a whole. After all, even the Authorised Version, on its first appearance, had its critics, and was by no means universally approved. In every such enterprise there are losses as well as gains. Many readers of the New Translation will doubtless lament the disappearance of well-loved phrases, or resent what they regard as an unwarrantable interference with the traditional text. But in the end the work will stand to be judged as a whole, and the labour spent upon it will not be in vain if by the blessing of God it does something in our time to fulfil the words of Erasmus: "These sacred books reflect for thee the living image of His Mind, even Christ Himself speaking, healing, dying, rising again—in fine, they restore Him as so completely present that thou wouldest see less if thou didst behold Him with thine own eyes."

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