

On Translations of the Bible

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The earliest translation of the Bible that we know anything about for certain is the translation of the first five books of the Old Testament from Hebrew into Greek, made in Egypt about the middle of the third century B.C. King Ptolemy Philadelphus, the story goes, wanted a translation of the laws of the Jews for his library. So he applied to Jerusalem. The High Priest sent him seventy-two elders (six from each tribe) with some Hebrew scrolls. On arrival the elders were right royally entertained; and three days afterwards the work of translation began. It took seventy-two days in all. And the completed version not only found favour with the king, but was also greeted with enthusiasm by the Egyptian Jews themselves.

What reliance should be placed on the details of this story is debatable. But there is no need to doubt its basic assertion—that a Greek version of the Pentateuch came into being in Egypt about 250 B.C. And there is no doubt at all that this version was the nucleus of the Greek Bible as it has come down to us. Translations of other parts of the Old Testament followed later, the work of different translators at different dates and places. But the popular mind made no distinction. The translations of the Historical Books, the Prophets, the Psalms, and the rest, were all added to the existing translation of the Pentateuch; and the whole was known as the ‘Septuagint’ (after the seventy translators who had completed their task in seventy days). This Septuagint Greek Old Testament was what most of the writers of the New Testament used for the text of their scriptural quotations: it was ‘the Bible’ for all the early Christian churches outside Palestine, before there was a New Testament; and it naturally served, in consequence, as the basis from which a number of other early translations were made,

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notably the Latin. But by this time a rudimentary New Testament had been set alongside the Old, and ‘the Bible’ was becoming in content very much more like the Bible that we know today.

This was towards the end of the second Christian century—about A.D. 170-200. ‘In the early days’, wrote St Augustine of Hippo, discussing the origin of the Latin Bible, ‘whoever chanced upon a Greek manuscript and thought he had a little aptitude in both

Greek and Latin attempted a translation.¹ And it looks from the surviving evidence as if what Augustine said was true. The process of translation was quite haphazard. And the effect was chaotic. In any one church there might be several competing translations of some of the more popular Biblical books, but of the less popular none at all. And as time went on, the different translations got so mixed together, that it was ultimately no exaggeration to say that no two manuscripts could be found that had the same text.²

An attempt to bring some sort of order out of this chaos was made by Pope Damasus, who in either A.D. 382 or 383 encouraged his secretary, Jerome, to do something about it. Jerome responded with characteristic vigour, and in 384 produced a text of the Latin Gospels, revised with reference to the Greek original, and followed it soon afterwards with a revised Psalter. At this point Damasus died. Jerome left Rome for Palestine and continued his activities at Bethlehem. But the more work he did on the Old Testament beyond the Psalter, the more convinced he became that to translate the Septuagint (as he had been doing) was not good enough. For a satisfactory translation he must go to the Hebrew. So he decided to start afresh and work directly from the Hebrew. The whole undertaking took him some fifteen years and was completed by the end of the year 404.

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To begin with, Jerome's new version was not well received. People did not like the changes. But gradually it won its way, until it became the *versio vulgata*, the 'usual' or 'common' version, the Vulgate, the accepted Bible of the Church in the West all through the Middle Ages.

But Jerome is of interest for us not only because he was responsible for the Vulgate. From time to time in his letters and other writings he tells us something about how he thought a translator of the Bible should set to work and what principles he should be guided by. He did not believe, for example, in a word-for-word translation: the translator, he thought, should aim rather at the sense³—he was in favour, that is, of what we should nowadays call a 'free' translation rather than a literal one. And when we look at the Vulgate we can see him putting his principles into practice. The sheer variety of his renderings is astonishing. In the first chapter of Job, you will remember, four messengers of woe appear one after another, and each concludes his tale with exactly the same words, 'I only am escaped alone to tell thee'.⁴ Jerome translates slightly differently each time.

Since the Vulgate was the accepted Bible in the West throughout the Middle Ages, it was only natural that it, in turn, should provide the basis for the earliest of the English versions. But with the spread of the new learning and the advent of the Reformation another era opened. Tyndale went back behind the Latin to the Greek for the New Testament and to the Hebrew for the Old. And the trail which Tyndale blazed with his

¹ Aug., *De doct. Christ.* ii.16: 'Qui enim scripturas ex hebraea lingua in graecam verterunt, numerari possunt, latini autem interpretes nullo modo. Ut enim cuique primis fidei temporibus in manus venit codex graecus, et aliquantulum facultatis sibi utriusque linguae habere videbatur, ausus est interpretari.'

² So St Jerome's oft-quoted remark in the Preface to his revised Gospels: 'Si enim latinis exemplaribus fides est adhibenda, respondeant quibus: tot sunt paene quot codices.'

³ Hieron. *Ep.* lvii. 5 '... non verbum e verbo sed sensum exprimere de sensu.'

⁴ Job i.15, 16, 17, 19.

New Testament of 1525 was soon followed by others. I need only mention here Coverdale (1535), The Great Bible (1540) which was ‘appointed’ for use in churches, The Geneva Bible (1560), and The Bishops’ Bible (1568). Shortly afterwards the Catholics produced an English version of the New Testament in 1582 and of the Old Testament in 1610; but the basis of this ‘Douay’ Bible was, of course, the Vulgate.

The so-called ‘Authorized Version’ of 1611 was undertaken at the command of the king and was the work of six separate committees centred on Westminster, Cambridge, and Oxford.

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Officially it was a revision of the Bishops’ Bible, though all earlier English translations were consulted (including the Catholic New Testament). Rules were drawn up for the translators to observe, but these were mostly formal; and the fact that the Biblical books were divided between the six committees⁵ inevitably made for an overall unevenness of style and inconsistency in the renderings of individual words and phrases—something of which the translators themselves were well aware, but which in their Preface (‘The Translators to the Reader’) they were quite prepared to justify.⁶

Familiar as we are with the Authorized Version, it is difficult for us, at this distance in time, to gauge accurately the impact it made when it first appeared. What is certain is that it did not immediately drive all its rivals from the field—the last known printing of the Geneva Bible, for instance, is dated 1644. But by the end of the seventeenth century the Authorized Version had become for everyone, apart from the Catholics and a very few others, *the* English Bible.

The eighteenth century and the first half of the nineteenth century witnessed the appearance of a number of fresh translations by individuals. Meanwhile, doubts were expressed with

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increasing frequency about the adequacy of the Authorized Version when judged at the bar of advancing scholarship. Finally, in 1870, the Convocation of the Province of Canterbury took the decisive step. The result was the Revised Version: N.T. (1881),

⁵ The two Westminster committees were responsible for Genesis—II Kings and for the Epistles, the two Cambridge committees for I Chron.—Ecclesiastes and for the Apocrypha, and the two Oxford committees for the Prophets and for the Gospels, Acts, and Revelation.

⁶ ‘Another thing we think good to admonish thee of, gentle Reader, that we have not tied ourselves to an uniformity of phrasing, or to an identity of words, as some peradventure would wish that we had done, because they observe, that some learned men somewhere have been as exact as they could that way. Truly, that we might not vary from the sense of that which we had translated before, if the word signified the same thing in both places, (for there be some words that be not of the same sense everywhere,) we were especially careful, and made a conscience according to our duty. But that we should express the same notion in the same particular word; as for example, if we translate the *Hebrew* or *Greek* word once by *purpose*, never to call it *intent*; if one where *journeying*, never *travelling*; if one where *think*, never *suppose*; if one where *pain*, never *ache*; if one where *joy*, never *gladness*, &c. thus to mince the matter, we thought to savour more of curiosity than wisdom, and that rather it would breed scorn in the atheist, than bring profit to the godly reader. For is the kingdom of God become words or syllables? Why should we be in bondage to them, if we may be free?’

O.T. (1885). The idea was not to produce a new version, but only a revision of the Authorized. The Revisers were instructed to introduce only such changes as were absolutely necessary in order to render accurately the originals, and even then they were required to clothe them in Authorized Version language. It might be thought that such a commission was innocent enough. Yet the very undertaking of such a revision at all implied a criticism of the existing version; and the storm which had been brewing while the work was in progress, on the publication of the New Testament in 1881 broke with violence. The Revisers, it was said, had played fast and loose with the accepted Greek text: they had no ear for the beauty of the English language; and they had changed for no good reason (certainly without improving) many of the good old Biblical phrases that everyone knew and loved.

My own fingers got burned in the embers of that controversy when I was sent away to boarding-school in 1918. We were set so much 'prep' every evening and tested on it in class next morning. The custom then was that we shut up our books: little bits of paper were distributed (just enough to take ten one-word answers): ten questions were asked: we wrote our answers and then exchanged our papers for marking with the boy in the next desk: the correct answers were read out: some addition followed; and the totals were entered in the master's mark-book. When it came to Divinity, instead of just asking questions, the master read out the chapter of the Bible we had done as 'prep', leaving blanks here and there for us to fill in—up to ten. The first time this happened I was alarmed to discover I had got only two answers right. I expostulated. But I was told that it was clear from my answer-paper that I hadn't done my 'prep' from the Bible. I had been using 'a thing called the Revised Version' that was not the Bible. And, as the term wore on, I observed that a very high proportion of the blanks we had to fill in each week were at precisely those places where the Revised Version differed from the Authorized—a most

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effective method of convincing any 'little devil' that might have the impertinence to use the Revised Version of the error of his ways!

The twentieth century has so far been remarkable for both the number and the variety of the translations produced. It started with R.F. Weymouth's *The New Testament in Modern Speech* in 1903; and then in 1913 came James Moffatt's *New Testament*, followed by his *Old Testament* in 1924. Of the many subsequent translations by individuals, probably the most popular of all today is J.B. Phillips's *The New Testament in Modern English*, published in 1958. In the 1940s appeared *The Bible in Basic English*, a co-operative undertaking; and among translations designed more specifically for Catholics may be mentioned *The Westminster Version of the Sacred Scriptures* (1913 onwards), R.A. Knox's version (N.T. 1945; O.T. 1949) and *The Jerusalem Bible* (1966).

But pride of place among the twentieth century versions must be accorded to the American *Revised Standard Version* (N.T. 1946; O.T. 1952) and *The New English Bible* (N.T. 1961; O.T. 1970).

The *Revised Standard Version* gets the ‘standard’ part of its name from its predecessor *The American Standard Version* of 1901. This Standard Version was not new: it was the American edition of our own Revised Version with a number of minor amendments. Looked at from this point of view the R.S.V. is the R.V. still further revised. But it is the R.V. revised very much further. In the process of revision the latest developments in scholarship were, of course, taken full account of. Much more important, however, the members of the committee responsible were not required (as were our own Revisers in the 1880s) to make only the most essential changes; nor were they required to restrict themselves to A.V. language. They were left completely free in both respects. And so, instead of ‘Sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof’ they could substitute ‘Let the day’s own trouble be sufficient for the day’.⁷ Yet in their Preface they disavow any intention of being really up-to-date. ‘The Revised Standard Version’, they write, ‘is not a new translation in the language of today... It is a revision which seeks to

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preserve all that is best in the English Bible as it has been known and used through the years’.

On the other hand, *The New English Bible* is a new translation in the language of today—a completely new translation. Its declared aim is ‘to state as unambiguously as possible, in the natural language of the English-speaking peoples today, what the original means in the light of the new knowledge that has been discovered’.⁸

Our modern situation, with so many possible translations to choose from, is novel but not unprecedented. In St Jerome’s day, as we have seen, there was no standard Latin text. Again, the Reformation period in England, with its succession of contending versions, was very like our own. But in each of these instances a common mind was gradually reached, and a single version ultimately emerged as generally accepted. Out of the confusion of the fourth and fifth centuries the Vulgate emerged in the sixth century as the Latin Bible of the Middle Ages. Out of the battles of the sixteenth century the Authorized Version emerged in the seventeenth as the Bible that Englishmen knew and loved. Will something similar happen at the end of the twentieth century or the beginning of the twenty-first?

I am not going to prophesy. This evening I only want to emphasize two very obvious points: (1) that, whatever may happen in the future, we cannot, in our existing situation, escape the necessity of choosing between one translation and another, if we are going to use the Bible at all; and (2) that simply to ask, ‘Which of the available translations is best?’, as people sometimes do, is to over-simplify. We have got to go on to ask, ‘Best for what?’ Because some translations are manifestly better for some purposes than for others, quite apart from our own likes and dislikes.

So let us begin with someone who just wants to read the Bible—someone who approaches the Bible, as the saying is, ‘as literature’. Here personal preferences and personal prejudices are likely to weigh very heavily; and, as there are many translations to choose from, there are certain to be many different opinions about their respective merits. The broad choice is

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⁷ Matt. vi.34.

⁸ *Handbook to the New English Bible* (Oxford and Cambridge, 1970), p.15.

between ancient and modern ('Shall I stick to the A.V. or shall I go for something more up-to-date?'). I think the answer here is that we should do neither exclusively. The A.V. has become an English classic: many of its renderings ('escape with the skin of one's teeth',⁹ 'grind the faces of the poor',¹⁰ 'bear the burden and the heat of the day'¹¹)¹² have become part of our common idiom; and it is unthinkable that any Englishman who aspires to any education at all (least of all a Bible reader) could deliberately by-pass the A.V. altogether.

Yet a Bible reader would be unwise, in my opinion, to confine himself to the A.V. The discriminating reader will 'shop around a bit'. Among modern versions he will compare one with another, noting what seem to him the good points and the bad points of each; and he will, no doubt, do so with the A.V. at the back of his mind all the time. He may think 'he whom perdition claims for its own' (Knox) an improvement on 'the son of perdition'.¹³ He may think 'the words are yours' (N.E.B.) a rather tiresome periphrasis for 'thou hast said'¹⁴ and 'thou sayest'.¹⁵ Or he may think that the straightforward old-fashioned 'Lord, by this time he stinketh' is still preferable to the more refined modern 'Lord, by this time there will be an odor' (R.S.V.).¹⁶ In the end he may decide that one of the modern versions stands head and shoulders above the rest. Or he may decide that, whatever their merits, either individually or collectively, none of them can compare with the A.V. But whatever he may decide, and however prejudiced his conclusions may seem to us, who are we to say him nay?

Most Bible readers, however, are not just concerned with the

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Bible as literature. They are concerned with what is in it. And when you approach the Bible from this angle the literary merits of a version are of less importance than its accuracy. What you want to know in any particular passage, or about any particular word or phrase, is not, 'Is this a "happy" rendering?', but, 'Is this an accurate rendering of the Hebrew or Greek original?'. And that means that you must go to a modern version. The need to take into account the discoveries of scholarship was the chief motivating influence that led to the R.V. in the 1880s; and that need is no less today. Today we have in our possession very much more material from which to reconstruct the text as it left the authors' hands than we have ever had before, and we know very much more about the meanings and the uses of words in the languages in which they wrote. That is why the modern versions sometimes differ so radically from their predecessors.

⁹ Job xix.20.

¹⁰ Isa. iii.15.

¹¹ Matt. xx. 12.

¹² None of these three renderings, it is worth noting, was original in the A.V. 'Escape with the skin of one's teeth' is found already in the Geneva Bible, 'grind the faces of the poor' in both the Geneva and the Bishops' Bibles, and 'bear the burden and the heat of the day' goes back to Tyndale.

¹³ John xvii.12.

¹⁴ Matt. xxvi. 25, 64.

¹⁵ Matt. xxvii. 11; Mark xv.2; Luke xxiii.3.

¹⁶ John xi.39.

The pamphlet, *Handbook to the New English Bible*, ends with the following paragraph:

The translators would not suggest that their work is perfect and that no further translation will ever need to be undertaken. The N.E.B. is, quite simply, the best that the best available scholars could produce, with the knowledge and evidence available to them. And they can claim, with complete assurance, that they have made sense of more obscure verses than any other translation and have solved many problems for the first time.

To endorse this claim is not to say that all other modern versions are negligible. Nor is it to say that all the solutions proposed in the N.E.B. are necessarily correct—the translators themselves explicitly disclaim perfection. For myself, for example, while I am quite prepared to believe that the ‘porcupine’, to which the prophets refer as one of the denizens of the uninhabited wastes,¹⁷ is not really a ‘porcupine’ but a ‘bustard’, I am not nearly so happy about the ‘whale’ and the ‘crocodile’ in Job;¹⁸ and I am even less happy about some of the omissions and transpositions of verses and parts of verses, which occur again and again throughout the Old Testament. Nevertheless, for the Bible reader who wants an up-to-date, accurate, and

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readable translation, embodying the results of the most modern scholarship, I do not think the N.E.B. can be bettered.

It is otherwise, though, when we come to consider the needs of the Bible student. The Bible student is concerned, not just with what is in the Bible, or with what the Bible means, but with what the Bible actually says. Often enough the Bible student today has little Greek and even less Hebrew: he may well be dependent entirely on a text in English. It is essential, therefore, that his English text be as faithful a rendering as possible of the Hebrew and the Greek. A literal, word-for-word, translation is obviously of more value to him than one which concentrates on the sense.

For the best part of a hundred years the R.V. has been the favourite here; and it has been widely used as the regular text, both for teaching and examinations, in universities, colleges, and schools, all over the English-speaking world. Its advantages are plain enough. Faithfulness to the originals was the Revisers’ prime concern; and when their version first appeared they were pilloried for being over-literal. ‘The revisers were not appointed’, one reviewer wrote, ‘to prepare an interlinear translation for incompetent schoolboys’.¹⁹ Perhaps not. But many Bible students since 1881 have had reason to be grateful to them and have come to realize that what was at first regarded as the R.V.’s greatest defect is (from their point of view) its outstanding merit. In particular, the Revisers took especial care to achieve consistency in translation, so that any Hebrew or Greek word, translated by a given English word in one passage, is translated by the same English word in other passages too (where the meaning is the same); and conversely, they took care to see that the same English word, each time it occurs, normally represents the same Hebrew or Greek word.²⁰ This may not be an attractive feature if we are choosing a ‘readable’

¹⁷ Isa. xiv.23, xxxiv.11; Zeph. ii.14.

¹⁸ Job xli, 1, xl. 15.

¹⁹ *The Edinburgh Review*, vol. cliv, no. 315 (July 1881), p.188.

²⁰ On this, see the very careful statement of the principles governing their practice in this respect in § 2 of their New Testament ‘Preface’, where some examples are given. Likewise, in their ‘Preface’ to the Old Testament

version—it makes for dullness; but it is a not inconsiderable recommendation if we are considering a version for students who cannot themselves go to the originals. Moreover, the Revisers took

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over the useful convention of printing in italics words that have no equivalent in the originals, and applied it consistently, so that the student can see immediately what the translators have supplied, either to make sense, or by way of interpretation. At one time it was thought that the N.E.B. would replace the R.V. as the regular text for students. But it is now generally agreed that, whatever its other merits, as an English text for students the N.E.B. leaves much to be desired. In the passage I quoted just now the N.E.B. translators claim to have ‘made sense of more obscure verses than any other translation’. Odd though it may seem, this is a disadvantage to the student rather than an advantage, because it conceals from him the difficulties. What the student needs is to be brought up sharp against the obscurities, to be made to realize they are there, and to learn how to deal with them. Not infrequently, too, the N.E.B. is frankly periphrastic: ‘a man dressed in silks and satins’ is doubtless a more striking rendering than ‘a man clothed in soft raiment’,²¹ but it can hardly be described as a translation in the strict sense. And so far as consistency is concerned—the translators expressly repudiate it²² (like St Jerome and the translators of the A.V.); and so they have no compunction about rendering the ‘scribes’²³ in the Gospels in no less than four different ways²⁴ (even in parallel passages in different

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Gospels),²⁵ and, in consequence, succeed in confusing them hopelessly with the ‘lawyers’.²⁶

they explain that they have frequently departed from the renderings of the A.V., because they thought it ‘necessary for the sake of uniformity to render such parallel passages as were identical in Hebrew by the same English words, so that an English reader might know at once by comparison that a difference in the translation corresponded to a difference in the original’: on a specific instance they remark ‘The words “tabernacle” and “tent”, as the renderings of two different Hebrew words, are in the Authorised Version frequently interchanged in such a manner as to lead to confusion; and the Revisers have endeavoured throughout the Pentateuch to preserve a consistent distinction between them’.

²¹ Matt. xi.8; Luke vii.25.

²² See their remarks in their ‘Introduction’ to the New Testament, particularly, ‘We have not felt obliged (as did the Revisers of 1881) to make an effort to render the same Greek word everywhere by the same English word’.

²³ Gk. γραμματεῖς.

²⁴ As ‘lawyers’ (30 times), ‘doctors of the law’ (26 times), ‘teachers’ (4 times), ‘teachers of the law’ (twice).

²⁵ E.g. Mark xi.18 (doctors of the law); Luke xix.47 (lawyers). It should, however, be pointed out that in the Second Edition of 1970 the number of these discrepancies is reduced by the substitution of ‘doctors of the law’ for ‘lawyers’ at Matt. xvi.21 and Luke xx.46, and of ‘lawyers’ for ‘doctors of the law’ at Mark xv.31.

²⁶ Gk. νομικοί. These ‘lawyers’ are, of course, the same people as the ‘scribes’, and, apart from a doubtful reading at Matt. xxii.35, they are called ‘lawyers’ only in certain passages in Luke. Some scholars explain the occurrence of the term in these passages on the hypothesis that it was the term used in one of St Luke’s sources and that he reproduced it unchanged when he was following that particular source. If this be so the distinction of usage is of no small importance in Lukan source-criticism. But the N.E.B. blurs the distinction. For example, at Luke xi.45 a ‘lawyer’ (νομικός) raises an objection after the three woes which the Lord has just uttered against the Pharisees, and three additional woes against ‘lawyers’ (νομικοί) follow immediately (Luke xi.46-52): ‘and when he was come out from thence’, the narrative continues, ‘the scribes (γραμματεῖς) and the Pharisees, began to press upon him vehemently’ (Luke xi.53): the N.E.B. translates ‘lawyer(s)’ indiscriminately.

The other contender for the place of the R.V. as the regular text for students today is the R.S.V.; and in a number of academic institutions, I understand, it has been successful. I think this unfortunate, for the R.S.V., though in less degree, suffers from many of the same drawbacks as the N.E.B. Let me list a few random examples where those responsible for the R.S.V., in their quite proper desire to keep abreast of modern scholarship and at the same time break away from what they stigmatize as the ‘mechanically exact’²⁷ approach of the Revisers, have produced something much less satisfactory for the student to work from. At II Sam. viii.12 they read ‘Edom’ for ‘Syria’ (and with no marginal note of explanation). At Amos vi. 12 they translate

‘Does one plough the sea with oxen?’

instead of

‘Will one plough *there* with oxen?’

(again with no marginal note). At I Cor. vii.36-38 ‘betrothed’

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for ‘virgin’ is an interpretative rendering (one possible interpretation is preferred to others): so also, at Heb. xiii.24, is ‘those who come from Italy’ for ‘they of Italy’ (the possibility that the epistle may have been written in Italy is automatically excluded). Again, at Mark ii.19, Jesus says, in the R.S.V., ‘Can the wedding guests fast...?’ instead of ‘Can the sons of the bridechamber fast...?’—‘sons of the bridechamber’ is, of course, a Semitism, and a literal translation helps the student to appreciate the Semitic background of the material he is dealing with. Similarly, while at Luke xxii.15, according to the R.V., Jesus says ‘With desire I have desired to eat this passover with you...’, according to the R.S.V. he says ‘I have earnestly desired...’: the idiomatic Hebrew infinitive absolute, reflected in the Greek and preserved in the R.V., is in the R.S.V. obliterated.

I am well aware that I shall be told that these (and others like them) are relatively minor blemishes, from which even the R.V. is not entirely free, and that the point at issue is that the R.S.V. is so much more up-to-date. ‘The student may lose a little on the swings’, it will be argued, ‘but he will gain immeasurably on the roundabouts.’ I beg to differ. The essence of the argument is that the R.V. should no longer be used because it is out of date—it was ninety years old last year. That being so, I am not myself impressed by the credentials of a proffered substitute which is already twenty-six years old. And I could not be, unless I was convinced that the substitute was on other grounds superior. But I am not. As things are, the Bible student had much better stick to the R.V. as his basic text, and, whenever he wants to be up-to-date, work with the N.E.B. alongside it. He will then be able to get as near to the original Hebrew and Greek as he can get in any readily accessible English version, and he will at the same time be able to get some idea of what the most modern scholarship can do with it.

²⁷ Luther A. Weigle, ‘The Revision of the English Bible’ in *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament* (U.S.A., 1946), p.11.

When we come to the question, ‘What should we use in church?’ we come up against a situation analogous to the one we have encountered already when we were considering the reader who approaches the Bible as literature. Personal preferences and personal prejudices abound. In any congregation there will always be those who want ‘the Bible as we’ve always

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known it’ and resent any change: there will also be those who want to ‘move with the times’ and to have a modern version. And if it is to be a modern version, one parson will opt for one, and another for another. The ideal solution, of course, would be a neat reconciliation of all the conflicting viewpoints. But if not this, why not ring the changes? Why not the A.V. one Sunday, the N.E.B. the next, give Knox and the Jerusalem Bible a hearing every now and then, and, for good measure, occasionally throw in Moffatt or Phillips or somebody else?

I would not seriously dispute with anyone who took this point of view. We live in an age of ‘liturgical experiment’, and our duty, I suppose, is to experiment. Yet a number of persons assembled in church is not just an aggregate of individuals. It is a congregation. And any particular congregation is part of a much larger whole—the Church (with a capital ‘C’). Are there any special considerations to be borne in mind when we are selecting a ‘church’ version (whether we spell ‘church’ with a small ‘c’ or a capital)?

So far as a version for use in church (with a small ‘c’) is concerned, what is essential is that it should have a natural dignity, suited to its liturgical setting. What may be suitable for private reading (and, indeed, popular) may turn out to be not nearly so effective when read publicly in church. This does not mean that we should confine ourselves to the traditional ‘Biblical style’. A good modern style can be just as effective. But it does mean that we have got to be careful. For example, I doubt the suitability for reading in church of ‘They heard the sound of God the Eternal walking in the park’ (Moffatt),²⁸ or of ‘Give each other a hearty handshake all round’ (Phillips).²⁹

A Church version (with a capital ‘C’) raises further complications. These centre on the word ‘accuracy’, how important we think it to have an ‘accurate’ Church version, and what precisely ‘accuracy’ in this context means. Let me illustrate from what may appear at first sight a digression on the Psalter.

The translation of the Psalter in The Book of Common Prayer is for all practical purposes Coverdale’s version of 1535. In 1958 an Archbishops’ Commission was appointed to revise

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it. Once again, it was not a new translation that was asked for, merely a revision, ‘designed to remove obscurities and serious errors of translation’. The Commissioners

²⁸ Gen. iii.8.

²⁹ Rom. xvi.16.

reported in 1963 and *The Revised Psalter: the amended text as approved by the Convocations* was published in 1964.

The Revised Psalter can be, and has been, criticized at a number of points. In the first place, it is very much more ‘earthy’ than its predecessor. ‘Thou shalt guide me with thy counsel: and after that receive me with glory’ becomes ‘Thou guidest me with thy counsel: and ledest me along the path of honour’.³⁰ When Joseph was in prison in Egypt, the ‘iron’ did not ‘enter into his soul’: he had an iron collar put round his neck.³¹ Jerusalem is not ‘built as a city that is at unity in itself’: she is a ‘city whose houses stand close together within her walls’³²—a real slum, in fact! And, whereas we are used in Psalm xxiii to ‘though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil’, we now have ‘though I walk through the darkest valley...’:³³ with the disappearance of the mention of death (many feel) disappear also the particular associations of this particular psalm, and, consequently, much of its religious value. From the more narrow liturgical angle, the elimination of the ‘saints’ from Psalms cxlviii and cxlix³⁴ is certainly an impoverishment when these psalms are sung in their normal course on the evening of 31 October, if at no other time.

Again, there are in *The Revised Psalter* many changes, which, if they do no great harm, do not seem, in a liturgical context, to do any good. For instance, ‘I am become like a pelican in the wilderness’ reads now ‘I am become like an owl in the wilderness’.³⁵ In this season of Lent we reflect on Our Lord’s temptations. For my own part I find it difficult enough to imagine what it must feel like to be alone in the wilderness as a man. Much more difficult to imagine what it would feel

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like to be a bird. But I defy anyone to assure me that he can honestly tell the difference between what it would feel like to be an owl in such a situation from what it would feel like to be a *pelican*. In other words, if we are using the Psalter liturgically, what do things like this matter?³⁶

Please do not think I am calling in question the scholarship of those responsible for *The Revised Psalter*. I am not. What I am calling in question, though, is the assumption shared by the Archbishops who appointed the Commission, the Commissioners themselves, and (I take it) most other people—the assumption that what is required in a modern liturgical Psalter is a reproduction as far as possible in English of the meaning of the Hebrew original, and that for the removal of ‘obscurities and serious errors of translation’ the standard of reference should be the traditional Hebrew ‘Massoretic’

³⁰ Ps. lxxiii.24.

³¹ Ps. cv.18.

³² Ps. cxxii.3.

³³ Ps. xxiii.4.

³⁴ ‘Servants’ is substituted at Pss. cxlviii.14. and cxlix.9, and ‘godly’ at cxlix.5, although the Hebrew word is the same in all three verses.

³⁵ Ps. cii.6.

³⁶ It might, perhaps, be argued, that inasmuch as the pelican is a fish-eating waterfowl and is therefore absurdly out of place in the wilderness, his appearance there gives even more point to the Psalmist’s simile.

text, except in so far as this obviously needs emendation in the light of modern scholarship.

I question this assumption, partly because I do not think we can get back to the Hebrew original of the Psalms (however much we may want to), and partly because I do not think that as Christians, using the Psalms in Christian worship, we ought to want to.

If there is one thing that modern study of the Psalter has demonstrated, it is that many of the Psalms are very ancient: some may be Davidic, some even earlier, and some may have been in origin not even Hebrew at all. They were collected together over the years, and they were freely adapted to meet the liturgical requirements, first of Solomon's Temple, and then of the Second Temple after the Exile. They were added to, edited, arranged, and finally 'canonized' as the Psalter that we know. The traditional 'Massoretic' text of the Psalter is usually dated to about the beginning of the Christian era; and this 'Massoretic' text is the effective Hebrew original to which appeal is made. But it is 'original' in only a very relative sense. Behind it lie something like a thousand years of textual

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history and tradition, the details of which we can only dimly discern.

So we cannot, in fact, get back to the 'original' Psalter. But ought we to want to?

In the Church we are using the Psalter in Christian worship; and Christians have used the Psalter from very early times. It was the Hebrew Psalter, true, that the Christians took over initially; but outside Palestine it was always the Septuagint Greek translation that was used and quoted. And it was in its Septuagint Greek form that the Psalter was built into the Church's liturgical and spiritual life and contributed its quota to the development and formulation of Christian doctrine.

It is this point especially that needs to be remembered when we are considering translations of the Psalter for use in worship. The Septuagint in some passages differs markedly from the Hebrew. Most early Christians were ignorant of this, and, even when they were not, unconcerned about it. So attached were they to what I may call 'the Septuagint tradition' of the Psalter, that in the Western Church, not only did they refuse to use in worship St Jerome's new translation from the Hebrew, but they even replaced it in the official Vulgate by his earlier translation from the Septuagint. The Vulgate was, of course, one of Coverdale's sources; and so the Septuagint tradition got into our Prayer Book Psalter. What is important for us to notice is that it is this Septuagint tradition in that Psalter which is responsible for many of the 'obscurities and serious errors of translation', to which the attention of those commissioned to revise it was directed—the 'pelican' and the 'shadow of death' among them.

I have no wish to extend this digression, except to say that in my own humble opinion what the Commissioners were invited to do was to take a step in the wrong direction. We are familiar enough today with complaints about the Psalms being sub-Christian and unfit for use in Christian worship. Why then deliberately remove from them what

Christian overtones they have accumulated, because those overtones are not part of ‘the Hebrew original’? And if ‘the Hebrew original’ be taken to be the Hebrew ‘Massoretic’ text—then to tie ourselves to Jewish tradition in the form in which it was expressed at one particular

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point in time (say A.D. 100), to the exclusion of the Christian tradition of the centuries, seems to me to come perilously near what St Paul (in the Greek) called ‘judaizing’.³⁷

The Psalter is, of course, *sui generis*; and what I have been saying about it is not applicable in all respects to the other parts of the Bible that we use in worship, whether as Lessons, Canticles, Anthems, or Antiphons. Nevertheless, I hope that what I have said will serve to underline my final point—that, when we are choosing a Church version, accuracy (as it is customarily understood) is a less important consideration than it is when we are choosing one for the Bible student, or even when we are choosing one just to read ‘as literature’.

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<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

³⁷ Gal. ii.14.

The earliest translation of the Hebrew Bible is the Old Greek (OG), the translation made in Alexandria, Egypt, for the use of the Greek-speaking Jewish community there. At first, just the Torah was translated, in the third century B.C.E.; the rest of the biblical books were translated later. The whole Hebrew Bible was likely translated into ancient Greek by the middle of the second century B.C.E. As a result, some biblical books, such as Daniel, Jeremiah, and Job, are longer or shorter in the OG version of the Bible than they are in the MT. We now know from discoveries in the Dead Sea region that these alternate Hebrew versions were circulated alongside the versions that became the MT. It is not clear that one Hebrew version was preferred over the others.

Introduction: The Bible was not written in English -- not even "King James English"! Most of the books of the Old Testament were originally composed in Hebrew (with a few portions in Aramaic), while the entire New Testament was originally written in Greek (although some books may also incorporate Aramaic sources). Thus, what most people today read are not the original biblical texts, but other people's translations of the scriptures. But why are there so many different English translations of the Bible? And why can't churches or scholars agree on just one translation? No or NIV Bible Translators. The NIV's Commitment to Accuracy. Bruce Waltke is one of the world's leading Old Testament scholars, having taught at several respected evangelical schools, including Dallas Theological Seminary, Regent College, Reformed Theological Seminary, and Westminster Theological Seminary. He helped supervise archeological excavations at Gezer, Israel, and has contributed to two major English translations of the Bible: the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the NIV. Dr. Waltke joined the CBT in 1977 and began as a translator of NIV in 1974.