

Translation *vs* Paraphrase

by A. C. Cahey

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Preface

Scripture easy of translation! Then why have there been so few good translators? why is it that there has been such great difficulty in combining the two necessary qualities, fidelity to the original and purity in the adopted vernacular?

J. H. NEWMAN¹

That something is badly amiss with all the new English translations of the Bible is widely recognised—something much too universal to be explained as a run of bad luck.

I think I may have been the first to notice in public what was later seen to be a peculiar and consistent kind of stylistic failure in the new versions, as my own first response was a letter that appeared in *The Guardian* within a week of publication of the New English Bible New Testament in 1961. The judgement—almost well-established enough to be called a fact—that one after another all the new versions have been stylistically disastrous, has since then been attested by many. Plenty of people have argued, without being refuted, the necessary old case that style is more than the dress of thought, that inadequate style is one aspect of defective meaning, something wrong in the thing itself. The observation that the failure to command a right style for the Bible tells us much about the modern world has also been made more than once. And I still think these are the central things that have to go on being said. They are not, however, the only ones.

What I did not know in 1961, for my Greek was then insufficient to allow me to make the judgement, was that the New

¹ "Literature" (1858) *The Idea of a University*, New York, 1959, p. 279

English Bible New Testament is also plain bad translation, in the sense of being inaccurate and wandering far from the originals. If this is so it tells us even more about the modern world, especially in view of the almost unchallenged confidence of modern translators, and of the clergy who use their work, that they know far more of the original meaning than their predecessors knew.

Mr Capey's book begins by showing this yet more startling if simpler truth: that the new versions are just intellectually disreputable. Of one passage he remarks "This is not simply silly English, it is bad translation;" and here and in many other places he means "bad translation" in the simplest way: these versions are frequently just wrong. This surely is remarkable in itself, and has also occasionally been remarked before, though largely in learned journals which not only are unknown to the ordinary reader of the Bible, but are also just brushed aside by the intellectual establishment which dominates thinking within the churches, and whose great monument these versions are. For the established confidence that the modern versions are at least more accurate in obvious ways than the old is quite undiminished. Any day one may expect to open the daily paper and find rebukes to the King James Bible translators such as "However, the acid test of their work does not lie in the intrinsic literary worth of the volume they produced, but in whether it faithfully confronts its readers with the sense and the force of its originals." We are left to assume that it doesn't, and are called upon to rejoice in our possession of "versions which represent a more accurate original text, which are informed by a greater competence in the original tongues than that which was available in the 17th century, and which reflect the rhythms and vocabulary of contemporary speech."¹ It remains true that the only bit of that that the common reader can contradict immediately is the last, for none of the new versions are anywhere near the rhythms or vocabulary of the speech of any age.

1 *The Daily Telegraph*, 23 March 1992

Mr Capey's contribution to the topic is, I think, not only in establishing beyond contradiction that the recent versions have a very slapdash notion of what it is to be accurate, but also in showing how and why it has come about that, very conscious of having all the resources of modern scholarship at their disposal, and very conscious of their superiority to their predecessors, a generation of expert translators of all religious shades has managed to produce works that are not recognisable as the Bible at all. The scholarship has been no guard against the most basic kind of scholarly failure, infidelity to the text; what is more the infidelity has resulted from a kind of principle, that the meaning has to subserve certain biases and predilections; and what is more than that, the infidelity to the text is a symptom of infidelity *tout court*; the Bible is not to be allowed to have its say because what it says is wrong, by our superior standards of rationality and of what is seen as our advances in Christianity.

The advances are out of Christianity altogether. My eye lights on a Canon of Windsor telling readers of *The Times*¹ to value truth above Christian tradition. Evidently he judges that there is a conflict between the two and that he is in a position to adjudicate, being in possession of a source of truth more reliable than Christian tradition; we are better informed, for instance, about sexuality than our predecessors and therefore we can contradict what the Bible says on the subject of homosexuality without ceasing to be of the Christian tradition. As one not very well informed about sexuality I only observe that this is nonsense about both tradition, language, consistency—and truth; and a peculiar kind of nonsense, the kind behind the new versions of the Bible, which have by and large not made the Bible available to the man in today's street but have reduced it to a form acceptable to today's overconfident modern-bound scholars. Or, one might say, they have made the Bible seem just silly, which it really isn't.

1 30 April 1990

Mr Capey's achievement is to show how a certain kind of scholarly arrogance, a failure to command style, and a collapse of faith, are all aspects of the same thing. The new enlightenment is actually, by the most ordinary intellectual standards, a darkness which turns out to be *the same* as that first fatal failure to notice, for instance, that poetry in one language can only be represented in another by more poetry.

Mr Capey worked out his position over a number of years and in occasional encounters with new versions and scholarly dignitaries; it is fitting that his book should record the process and collect pieces written between 1962 and the present day. In one or two cases I have at Mr Capey's request added postscripts reporting on updated versions of the new Bibles. They don't affect the essential judgement at all, which goes on being true for all of them, and is likely to go on being true until the end of this funny little world. They are self-perpetuating. The new version is published, but then the committee has to go on meeting to keep abreast of new developments &c. Bureaucracy is notoriously self-generating, and the publishers have a good solid vested interest in the permanent committee. A Bible whose built-in obsolescence ensures that it will have to be replaced every twenty years or so has a bigger and better market, so the commercial logic goes, than a Bible that has not changed since the seventeenth century (and which is in perpetual copyright), though it seems impossible that any of the new versions will ever have a circulation anything like that of the old. The theological complexions of the various committees vary considerably, in their own opinion, but they are all the same, these new ones, in all their differences!—"all of a piece, like madness". Mr Capey does much to explain the madness.

Ian Robinson

Foreword

Fundamentalist may be used to denote one who believes in the literal and inerrant truth of the Bible—even in the equality of importance for the believer of the Book of Daniel and the Fourth Gospel. It has recently come to be applied also to the stationary and exclusive position of one who holds (let us say) to the Authorised Version and none other. I do not pretend to be either kind of fundamentalist. I habitually refer to both the Revised Version of 1885 and its successor, the Revised Standard Version: neither could be described as a paraphrase; both are properly and conveniently usable in conjunction with the Authorised, and are of course translations. The three post-war versions examined below invite a different description. I contend that the modern translators, however superior their scholarly equipment, are not the kind of translators that produced the AV, the RV and the RSV; rather, that they seek to convey the “dynamic equivalent” of their text, and that in doing so they achieve paraphrase and even—deliberately, in places—mistranslation. If the AV is to recover the place in our worship which it held until the 1960s, churchmen will need to be persuaded that, so far from its being a bundle of errors and archaisms and the subject accordingly of mirth and ridicule in enlightened circles, it is worthy, as its modern supplanters are not, of our loving and reverent use. To that end this publication is directed.

The pieces collected here have all appeared, substantially in their present form, elsewhere. The first began as a paper

addressed to colleagues at King Edward VII School, Lytham, in 1962, and was printed in *The Use of English* in 1966. The last was written to order, and to a tight word-limit, for Beverley Pyke's symposium *The Incorruptible Church* (1987). Of the others (1986), "The Alternative Voice" was published in *The Lancashire and Cheshire Bulletin*, a local Prayer Book Society paper; "A Good Views Bible?" in *Parson and Parish*; and the title-essay in *The Gadfly*. I am grateful to the several editors both for their original publishing of my work and for their readiness to permit its reissue here; my special debt is to Ian Robinson, without whose generous persistence in the face of procrastination the book would not have got as far as the Brynmill Press.

The text of the Authorised Version of the Bible (otherwise 1611, King James Version) is quoted from an ordinary modern edition.

I

It's New, It's True

Hearing within the space of two hours “the portion of Scripture appointed for the Epistle” on Ascension Day (1962) and the New English Bible’s version of that portion at school prayers was the immediate provocation of my attempt, with the help of the Lower Vth, to define and make articulate a feeling I have had for some time that this latest translation of the original biblical texts, whatever its merits as a translation, is not worth the acclaim it has received—and certainly not the uncritical acceptance it gets from, most recently, Bishop J. A. T. Robinson in *A New Reformation?*. I am not, of course, alone in this opinion: Fr Martin Jarrett-Kerr, who on Eliot’s death registered the poet’s refinement of our language as one of his Christian achievements, observes in *The Secular Promise* that not one literary critic has come forward to approve the new translation. But progressive voices in the schools—the go-ahead headmaster, the up-to-the-minute R.I. Department, even (I have found) the prefects’ room—are becoming so insistent that perhaps an English teacher’s attempt to stem the tide is not quite unnecessary. The beginning of the Acts of the Apostles happens to be a particularly suitable example to consider of the differences between seventeenth- and twentieth-century English, since it is not one of those passages which they whose interests are inimical to poetry are apt to call “poetic” or “moving”. It is in fact a very plain, unadorned *résumé* of the

“former treatise” Luke had made—that “part of his work”, we recall, which contains the Magnificat, Nunc Dimittis and Benedictus. But only someone with a very limited notion of what constitutes good English and fine writing would turn first to such familiar pieces to demonstrate the superiority of the Authorised Version to the New English Bible. That superiority, significantly, is written on the least distinguished pages, in the most ordinary verses:

And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel; Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.¹

One must be grateful to the translators and literary experts who passed the New English Bible as fit for public consumption for enabling us to appreciate the AV. A few years ago one wouldn't have paused at that “stedfastly”—“looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up”—today, with the new translation before us, we are compelled to:

As he was going, and as they were gazing intently into the sky, all at once there stood beside them two men in white who said, “Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky? This Jesus, who has been taken away from you up to heaven, will come in the same way as you have seen him go.”

—How natural, how colloquial the modern idiom is: “As he was going”! What concentration on earnest faces at the extraordinary phenomenon: “gazing intently into the sky”! The false note is struck in the juxtaposition of the two—the matter-of-fact with the pressurised. And for all the intensity of the gaze, it is a dissociated gaze: something is being looked at, something which (if the punctuation is to be taken seriously) is quite apart from “his going”.

¹ Acts i.10–11

The Authorised Version, characteristically more sensitive to rhythmic accuracy, welds the two clauses into the single meaningful point: “And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up”—The “up”, of course, reinforces the unity of the idea, but it is the “stedfastly” that is specially important. The disciples had fled from the trial of Jesus; only his mother and John, by tradition, were present at the Crucifixion; even after the Resurrection the appearance of Christ was needed to persuade the Twelve of his reality. One wouldn’t describe their previous behaviour at any time as stedfast. Yet here, such has the risen Lord’s influence upon them been, they can at last “look stedfastly”. It is the sense of moral strength that “stedfastly” carries which distinguishes the word so utterly from “gazing intently”—which suggests the disinterested, uninvolved attention of a television-screen audience. Anything more inept I cannot imagine; and that such ineptitude should be a hallmark of accuracy in translation is curious, to put it mildly.

But my point is that the new translation, ironically, is not even accurate—not, at any rate, in any important sense. The attitude of the angels towards the “men of Galilee”, so delicately expressive in the Authorised Version of gentle, sympathetic scorn, so properly critical—“Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven?”—becomes in the new a simple question, flat and devoid of humanity: “Men of Galilee, why stand there looking up into the sky?” And where the Authorised Version very properly has “heaven” (for *ouranos* does duty for both *sky* and *heaven*, like *pneuma* for *wind* and *spirit*) our sticklers for accuracy have introduced “sky”—even though belief that heaven is “somewhere up there” is no longer part of the modern Christian’s outfit. In itself this is a small matter, but when combined with the breakdown in the rhythm it is felt to be a ludicrous innovation: something is badly wrong with a body of literary experts which can turn “looked stedfastly toward heaven” into “gazing intently into the sky” or who can sacrifice the moving incremental

repetition of “into heaven” in verse 11b. The difference isn’t between ancient and modern, but between a living language and a lifeless one—all right in the head, perhaps, but dead from the waist down.

In verses seven and eight we have an even more glaring example of mistranslation:

(a) And he said unto them, It is not for you to know the times or the seasons, which the Father hath put in his own power. But ye shall receive power, after that the Holy Ghost is come upon you; and ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth.

(b) He answered, “It is not for you to know about dates or times, which the Father has set within his own control. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will bear witness for me in Jerusalem, and all over Judaea and Samaria, and away to the ends of the earth.”

It is not the puny literary flourish, the dead metaphor with which the new version closes, that we need to dwell on, but the unfortunate switch from “power” to “control”. Someone in the Lower Vth described “control” as an automation word with implications of a divine button-pusher operating the signal box for the world’s traffic. And so indeed it feels. The New English Bible is right, of course, to attempt a distinction between the two words both of which the Authorised Version translates as “power”: only two Greek words separate *eksousia* and *dunamis*, and Luke clearly intended a difference. But *eksousia* is better rendered “authority” than “control”—for “authority” carries the force that Charles Wesley achieves in his eucharistic hymn with “Author of life divine”, or the force which is conveyed by the representation of Jesus in Hebrews xii.2 as “author and finisher of our faith”. “Authority” is a true translation of *eksousia* because it expresses not only the sense of God’s supreme power but the

sense of him as the originator of *dunamis*, that kind of power which is to enable the evangelistic zeal of the church on earth. The new translation, in distinguishing between “control” and “power”, divorces them, and denigrates the bestowed power in tones which are almost patronising, so that we feel a sense of delegation of jobs from the room at the top. And that (I submit) constitutes a serious mistranslation.

I would say the same of the second half of verse eight. Language, we know, is not a simple matter of communication, a goods train that carries the author's pre-linguistic concept to his audience; some words have an unfortunate habit of offering more than their surface meaning. So that when we read: “Ye shall be witnesses unto me both in Jerusalem, and in all Judaea, and in Samaria, and unto the uttermost part of the earth,” we mustn't be surprised at the thrill of evangelistic hope the words evoke, and unless we are New English translators we won't tie that thrill down to the emotive power of “uttermost” only. The thrill is occasioned by the order: Jerusalem, the focal point of the holy land, comes first: then Judaea, the land which looks towards Jerusalem as its fountainhead and hope; only then are the Samaritans, the dogs under the table, to hear the good news; and beyond Samaria, the frontier nation of the gentiles, is the rest of the world, the uttermost parts of the earth. The order signifies a finely attuned, unconscious theological approach, which is aware of the acute problem facing Peter and the apostles—and it is this order, with its fine sense of balance, which the New English Bible fails quite to maintain; the comma separating Judaea from Samaria in the Authorised has disappeared, and their geographical proximity is made to justify an untheological equality.

Such objections as this were made by the Lower Vth, with whom I rejoice to concur. There wasn't much of our forty minutes left for the projected discussion of 1 Corinthians xiii, which is just as well, for the case against the New English Bible

shouldn't be allowed to rest on such a weighted comparison. But I can't resist recording a few of the tilts the boys made at it. They preferred the insertion of "become as" in the first verse of the Authorised on the grounds that it introduces the forthcoming metaphor more smoothly ("Though I speak with the tongues of men and of angels, and have not charity, I am become as sounding brass, or a tinkling cymbal"); they laughed at the exchange of "clanging" for "tinkling"; and they were horrified at the improper slackness of "dole out" in verse three (AV "And though I bestow all my goods to feed the poor, and though I give my body to be burned, and have not charity, it profiteth me nothing.") I would add that "profiteth" is beautifully consistent with the concept in the subordinate clause of "bestowing" and "giving", whereas the limp "I am none the better" of NEB is merely makeweight language, ballast for the grammar.

And so one could go on, through this famous chapter, verse by verse, phrase by phrase, noting the elegance, the sensitive precision of the Authorised Version beside which the New is unpleasantly arid. Into the much-loved eleventh verse—

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man I put away childish things

—the new translators have introduced a note of impatience with the child, if not of contempt for him:

When I was a child, my speech, my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish. When I grew up, I had finished with childish things.

—The unnecessarily emphatic "*all*" and the wrong tense in "had finished" are minor blemishes. Note, rather, how the points are chalked up, one by one neatly disposed of: "speech", "outlook", "thoughts". And note that these are nouns, not the vigorous, resonant verbs of 1611, for modern English doesn't care for verbs. Water no longer evaporates; evaporation takes place. Water

doesn't boil, either; boiling point is reached. A child no longer understands; he has an outlook. He doesn't think or speak; he has thoughts and speech. The New English Bible is indeed a contemporary document, drawing on the very barrenness of contemporary English, its neutral tones and its flat podgy nouns, and withdrawing from the rich resources of our language as if from a suspicious daughter of Eve. The truth, we are told, is more important than style; and the point is once again missed (as indeed it has been missed ever since the seventeenth century when "a dissociation of sensibility set in from which we have never quite recovered") that thought and language are not divisible but in fact inseparable, and that when the two *are* discussed separately the division bodes ill for poetry and religion alike.

P.S. Whether every charge made above can be made to stick has exercised me for some time. The priority of Judaea over Samaria, which I make much of, depends partly on AV's insertion of a comma and a preposition before "Samaria" and on the assumption that "all" qualifies "Judaea" only. The importance I attach to "stedfastly" is insecurely based, in that "gazing" or "looking intently" is surely a correct rendering of the text. I now see the ineptitude of the change as betraying the modern translator's studied detachment from the event described—and that is how I also now regard the substitution of "sky" for "heaven" and the suppression of the final *eis ton ouranon*. The "up" in "as he went up" is of course redundant, a very English barnacle. Of its omission (from RV too, where, however, it matters less) I now ask: Where, if not up, does the translator suppose the Lord was going?

2

The Alternative Voice

Bishop Hanson and the Bible

On 13 November, 1984, in response to a request from the Rector of Wilmslow for help in bringing into line a dissident party in the parish, Bishop Richard Hanson wrote down a series of observations on the AV *vis-à-vis* the modern translations represented in the Alternative Service Book. A month later I submitted to the P.C.C. a note of reply on behalf, as it were, of the dissident party, but the P.C.C. evinced no interest. I then expanded the note into an essay subtitled “Bishop Hanson and the Bible”, which was published in January 1986. Bishop Hanson saw that essay, but was taken ill and died before the present version—which expands and contracts parts of the original—could be completed. I have not attempted to expunge from the revision all reference to his letter, for both the substance and the detail of my case depend from it. The letter is in refreshingly direct and documented opposition to the retention in our worship of the translation which, as recently as 1956, was in common and unquestioned use in the Church of England.¹ There

¹ If any reminder is needed of the difference between then and now, see *Thomas Cranmer: Two Studies* by Charles Smyth and Colin Dunlop, originally published (by S.P.C.K.) to commemorate the four hundredth anniversary of Cranmer’s martyrdom, and reissued by the Brynmill Press Ltd to celebrate the five hundredth anniversary of his birth. For Canon Smyth and Bishop Dunlop, the Book of Common Prayer and the Authorised Version of the Bible provided both the frame and the character of Anglican public worship; the prospect of the two books’ continued life in the religious consciousness of the nation was not for them in question.

are no disguises, none of the customary “Of course I love the old Bible, but, reluctantly, we must recognise / come to terms with / accept that . . . &c.” For Bishop Hanson the choice is sharp and clear, and he challenges us to make it:

Are people really anxious to know what the Bible says, assisted by all the resources of modern scholarship, or do they in the last analysis prefer pleasant-sounding language to a serious search for truth?

Much as I value pleasant sound in language (nostalgia, too), I readily acknowledge that the serious search for truth is our primary obligation and the wilful indifference to scholarship deplorable. In seriously searching for the truth I shall argue, however, that the given examples of Authorised Version’s inadequacy or incorrectness don’t in fact serve the bishop’s case quite as usefully as they are designed to do; and I shall question whether the “‘up-to-date’ translations [convey] the original sense far better than the AV ever could do.” But first I must take account of the scholarship that Bishop Hanson summarises for us. I can’t, in my ignorance, pretend that the resources of the modern translator are nothing worth; I can, however, suggest that a wrong sort of authority may be claimed for them.

“Judged by modern standards,” writes Bishop Hanson, AV “is a most inadequate version”; the translators

did not know anything about the background of the *koine* Greek in which the N.T. is written; they were deprived of philological knowledge which has thrown a great flood of light upon the meaning of many passages in the O.T. . . . They had a very narrow manuscript list upon which to decide their choice of readings. They had no papyri at all. . . . They did not even have Codex Sinaiticus. Their text of both O.T. and N.T. . . . was woefully bad. Indeed in their day the science of palaeography was in its infancy.

The remarkable thing about this list of deprivations and restrictions is, surely, that it is true; and that, being true, it leaves us wondering how King James's committee managed to produce anything at all—anything at all comparable, that is, with the Revised Standard Version commonly accepted by scholars today. The explanation can only be that the text which the AV scholars translated is not so very different from the manuscripts preferred by RV and subsequent committees, and that the actual errors perpetrated or endorsed in 1611 were correctible in 1885 without wholesale modernisation. The substantial agreement of the various manuscripts is surely more significant of “*the Bible*” than the innumerable differences in detail. “Let us agree,” says Ian Robinson, “that . . . perhaps as many as twenty places that were still obscure in the Revised Version of a hundred years ago [have now been made plain]. But what follows? Was the Bible then not really a possession of our forefathers who read it with a devotion we seem unable to contemplate? Was it only a pseudo-possession of Bunyan or Wesley because they lived before modern scholarship?”¹ And D. L. Scott, on being shown Bishop Hanson's letter, remarked that when he

learned about the basics of textual criticism it was pointed out that despite all this wealth of new manuscript evidence that has come to light in the past hundred years, no important point of doctrine is seriously affected by any of it, certainly not by any of the major variant readings.²

Among the examples that Bishop Hanson adduces in support of his claims for modern scholarship is AV's inclusion of the “heavenly witnesses” in 1 John v, part of which the Prayer Book sets as the epistle for the Sunday after Easter: “For there are three

1 “*Interpretation*” as *Heresy*, originally published in the *Lancashire and Cheshire Bulletin*, a local Prayer Book Society publication, September 1985, and reissued by the Brynmill Press

2 In personal correspondence. Mr Scott was editor of *Parson and Parish* and of *Faith and Heritage*.

that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word and the Holy Ghost; and these three are one. . . .” This passage, he says (rightly enough), is “certainly of later interpolation and not scriptural at all and . . . gives a completely misleading idea of what the writer was saying;” and he puts the blame for its inclusion in AV on the fact that “the science of palaeography was [then] in its infancy.” But let us give credit where credit is due. The 1928 Prayer Book followed the 1885 Revision is excising the verse, whether on palaeographic grounds or on the reasoning of Erasmus I am not equipped to say. But in his Greek New Testament—“pioneer work, accomplished [in 1514] amidst apparently insuperable difficulties and at [great] cost of time and brain”—Erasmus “rejects as spurious the verse about ‘the three witnesses’;” and when he restored it in the third edition, a manuscript containing the words having come in his way, “he was careful to point out, in a note, that this one MS. did not convince him of the genuineness of the text.”¹ We may hazard a guess as to why the AV committee determined to include the verse despite such authoritative reservations: we are in no position to commend modern research at the expense of a Renaissance scholar who, “intent upon buying the truth, was not prepared to sell it.”

The companion illustration of palaeography’s findings is “the gospel for Ascension Day”: “They set Mark xvi.14 to the end which was certainly not an original part of Mark and can hardly be regarded as belonging to the N.T. at all.” Here Bishop Hanson overreaches himself. The fact that the passage in question seems to have been added by another hand than St Mark’s does not mean that it is inauthentic. “Even if the ending of Mark is not ‘scripture’,” writes Mr Scott, “it is thoroughly scriptural, being a summary from the other gospels—at any rate if ‘condemned’ (RV) is substituted for ‘damned’, as it is in the 1928 Prayer Book, which also provides an alternative gospel for Ascension Day.” None of the post-war translations that I have seen takes the axe to

1 E.F.H.Capey, *The Life of Erasmus* (Methuen, 1902)

the unoriginal passage—though all follow RV in appending a note to the effect that it is not found in the oldest manuscripts. “It is now generally agreed,” declares *Peake’s Commentary*, for all the world as if the discovery were the achievement of modern scholarship, that xvi.9–20 is “not an original part of Mark.” In fact, Erasmus had earlier “pointed out [its] dubious authenticity,” noting that “according to Jerome the Greek manuscripts of his day gave it as an appendix and some Christians in that day did not accept it.”¹ That the modern translators should effectually have followed Jerome and Erasmus, in retaining the passage while disputing its origin, suggests, if not a direct debt, at least a precedent to be acknowledged and honoured. The AV committee’s unannotated retention of the passage arguably implies nothing more unscholarly than a decision not to baffle the vulgar with the doubts that had not dissuaded Jerome or Erasmus from retaining it. Hensley Henson’s general caution is in place here:

Results of critical investigation have not the same character, or the same claim on our acceptance, or the same power over us, as the results of religious conviction; and any confusion between the two, any attempt to clothe critical conclusions with the authority of Divine credenda, and to read into the necessarily provisional results of historical inquiry the vital and immutable character of Divine Truth, will surely draw in its train consequences hurtful to honest criticism, and not less hurtful to honest belief.²

Bishop Hanson gives us one other specific example of AV’s shortcomings. Observing the committee’s ignorance of common Greek and philology, he remarks:

One result of this was that in one passage, that set for the epistle for the Sunday after Easter (Philippians ii.5–11), they produced a translation of *harpagmon* which was the exact

¹ R. H. Bainton, *Erasmus of Christendom* (Collins, 1969)

² Quoted in Charles Smyth, *Church and Parish* (S.P.C.K., 1955)

opposite of the meaning St Paul intended to convey (“... thought it not *robbery* to be equal with God” instead of “... did not think it *a thing to be prized*...”).

The bishop’s preferred reading is not, on the surface, dissimilar to that of the 1885 Revision: “counted it not *a prize*...”—which was duly followed in the 1928 Prayer Book. The modern translations, however, where they don’t paraphrase (the Jerusalem Bible has Christ *not clinging* to equality with God), seem to have taken their cue from the RV footnote, *a thing to be grasped*—grasped, dare we say? in the spirit of rapine or plunder, as a buccaneer boards his prize. We now think of “a thing to be prized” in the sense of “highly valued or esteemed”; and certainly that sense, if it were correct, would be consistent with the self-denial in the balancing clause of “emptied himself, taking the form of a servant” (Wesley and RV). But it is not correct. The Revised Version, on the other hand, though it may (without our attention to its footnote) mislead us today, *is* correct, and imaginatively so. Southey’s *Life of Nelson* was still, in 1885, favourite reading in the public schools, and Captain Marryat popular far beyond them; the only limitation on AV’s “robbery” was its acquired signification of petty theft, of the kind associated with Sikes and Fagin, rather than the grand lawlessness of a Drake or a Frobisher; and “counted it not a prize” effectually revised AV’s “robbery” upwards to an eminence appropriate to the design, the throne of God.

So far from being exact opposites, then, “robbery” and “prize” are variations on the one idea, and of the two “robbery” has the longer life—as the Revised Authorised Version (1982) appreciates in reinstating it. Either way it’s a shocking idea, and complex: it would be a prize indeed to take the throne of God; Christ, subsisting with the Father, does not so regard it; he is there by right, not as a robber; is not to be pushed out and down, as Lucifer properly was, but voluntarily “lays his glory by, [and]

wraps him in our clay” (Charles Wesley). Whether the idea is comprehensible, so much being packed into so little, and losing more than it gains by explication, is beside the point; but St Paul may mean to relate *harpagmon* to his injunctions in the earlier verses, “in lowliness of mind each counting other better than himself” (3) and “not looking each of you to his own things” (4), just as subsequently (12) he seems to reflect Christ’s obedience in that of the Philippians.

In taking the Revised Version as my standard, I do not mean to suggest that modern scholars may not sometimes know better; simply that the “hugely better establishment of the text” has tended to confirm rather than to unsettle the basis on which the Jacobean scholars worked, and that their relative ignorance has proved rather less than disabling. But of course I am pleased to see that in Bishop Hanson’s chosen examples there has been no scholarly advance on RV, a translation to be respected not only for its scholarship (it provided the base from which the Revised Standard Version developed) but for its fidelity to the style and rhythms of its predecessor. “Modern translations must,” the bishop insists, “be in modern English.” —They mostly are, or try to be, today: but *must* they? Is modern English all we poor moderns possess? “To be out of step with our ancestors is not always a good thing. It is parochial and . . . it is undemocratic; tradition is the democracy of the dead, a refusal to commit everything to the judgement of the minority of people who merely happen to be walking about.”¹ The principle behind the 1885 Revision was the same as that behind AV itself, not to create a *new* English Bible but to make a good one better. The English Bible was already made, much having gone towards the making,² and could not in 1885 be unmade by the respectful application of scholarship. Inaccuracies and misleading archaisms were to be emended (as Wesley had emended them, substituting for example

1 Quoted in W. W. Robson, *The Definition of Literature* (1984)

2 See Gerald Hammond, *The Making of the English Bible* (Carc Janet Press, 1982).

“*the name . . .*” for “a name which is above every name” and, in another famous passage, “citizenship” for “our *conversation* is in heaven”); but confidence in their additional resources did not lead the revisers to suppose that nineteenth-century language should displace the inherited religious English of 1611. (*Whose* nineteenth-century language? they might have asked, had it crossed their minds for a moment that the little bit their contemporaries were inevitably adding to the accumulated and still very much alive big bit carried disproportionate weight.)

I am reluctant to claim for the AV/RV that this is a beautiful language with the numinous properties that reflect the kind of faith with which the translators approached their task. Reluctant, not because I think the claim hard to make, or even open to serious dispute; but reluctant because the apologist for modern translations characteristically admits the beauty in order to recoil from it. Thus Dr Gerald Coles senses “a . . . danger. By using old very beautiful language and forms of worship people enjoy the words but may miss the message We [should] worship God in our language, not in an old language.”¹ And Bishop Hanson declares that “the archaic, early seventeenth-century language, charming though it is, must be largely incomprehensible to young people. . . . The air of archaism which inevitably suggests that the religion commended in the lessons of the BCP is archaic is removed [from the ASB].”

The assurance that Bishop Hanson shares with Dr Coles is expressed so often—and as often in the more brutal form of “*They* used the language of their day, so why shouldn’t *we* use the language of *our* day?” (no question there of so much as a nod in beauty’s direction)—that something must be said to disturb it. This “charming” language, which until recently appears not to have been “largely incomprehensible” to anyone but to have worked itself into the consciousness of the race (consider the columns devoted to AV and Prayer Book in the Oxford

1 In a letter to the Editor of the Wilmslow Parish Magazine, January, 1981

Dictionary of Quotations, 1942),¹ is not in fact characteristic of its time (any more than Bunyan's, which is generated by it, is characteristic of *his*). If our language, which George Herbert so patently *liked*, was "at its full flowering" in 1549–1611, where else than in Bible and Prayer Book are the full flowers to be seen? The question is not rhetorical. There was no general style of English prose for the translators to draw upon. Taking a sentence at random from *The Unfortunate Traveller*, Q. D. Leavis remarks that Elizabethan prose was "high-spirited, breathless, and frequently inconsequential" and "requires slow reading and unusual mental activity to follow the sense . . .":

With Nashe, *as with his contemporaries generally*, everything that comes to the author's mind irresistibly provokes an illustration and is only too likely to blaze up into a metaphor, which is then pursued for its own sake until it palls or is deserted for another more tempting; ultimately there is a leap back to the point of departure and a fresh dart forwards, with the same result as before. . . . Nashe's reader is following a hare-and-hound trail, and *the twentieth century is out of training for cross-country work . . .*²

The point is surely ready to be taken?—That the Prayer Book and the English Bible are not typical of their time, even if they could have been composed at no other time. The ordinary written English of the period, complains Canon G. A. Williams, in what for my purposes is a note complementary to Mrs Leavis's, was "classical in form, tortuous in style and tedious in expression"³: relatively accessible examples are Cranmer's Preface "Concerning

1 See Note 1, p. 21. Cranmer, says Bishop Dunlop, "has been spiritually present at some, perhaps most, of our closest experiences of God—present not merely as one of the great cloud of witnesses, but as mouthpiece and interpreter." —The allusion to Hebrews xii.1 implies the preacher's confidence in his congregation's recognition of a well-loved and immediately applicable phrase in the common vocabulary of their religion.

2 Q. D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (Chatto and Windus, 1932); my italics

3 Canon G. A. Williams, "The Cranmerian Doublet", in *The Lancashire and Cheshire Bulletin*, May, 1985

the Service of the Church” (1549) and the Epistle Dedicatory to the King (1611). For various reasons, including the fact that they are translations, designed to match their great originals, the language of the Prayer Book and of the Bible has its roots in deeper soil than the merely contemporary styles and practices could have allowed it. “The Bible depends on the rhythmic two-beat speech-phrases that were the staple of the verse tradition of Anglo-Saxon and Middle English,” observes Ian Robinson, and “the repetitive phrases of the Prayer Book are often enough rhythmically regular Anglo-Saxon half-lines”:

to have and to hold from this day forward
 for better for worse for richer for poorer
 in sickness and in health to love and to cherish
 till death us do part.¹

This is the soil that the 1885 Revisers and the 1928 proposers (the latter given a new lease of life as recently as 1966–75) did not think of denying themselves the use of. It simply would not do to dismiss their efforts as a preference for “pleasant-sounding nostalgic language [over] a serious search for truth”. The absence of anything pleasant upon the ear in the New English Bible provides no guarantee of the seriousness of its scholars’ search for truth.

The “hugely better establishment of the text” enjoyed by the NEB translators seems to have been accompanied by a certain disregard for the common reader, whose trust in the will of the scholars to do an honest job has been betrayed. The NEB gives not so much a translation of the text in modern English as an unconscious accommodation of the text to the personal scepticism of the scholars and to the “intelligent doubt” they mean to stimulate in the modern reader. In the passage under review there are two “connectives”, one grammatical one stylistic, between the earthquake and the angel: both are retained by AV/RV; neither by NEB. The earthquake is not separable, as the NEB

1 “Religious English”, in *The Survival of English* (1973, Brynmill Press, 1988)

separates it, from the descent of the angel: earth and heaven combine in the demonstration of divine activity. A “violent earthquake” (NEB) might lead us to wonder how the women kept their feet, when all around were losing theirs. The earthquake is not in fact violent but “great”, befitting the miracle of the resurrection; and the enactment of the miracle affects the women differently from the guards. The New English Bible’s nasty-spirited angel hints that the divine wrath awaits the soldiers, and he’ll let them sweat a while (“‘You,’ he said [to the women], ‘have nothing to fear . . . [unlike some others I could mention]’”). But the real angel is indifferent to the soldiers, who, for all that they have witnessed the same things as the women, are outside the household of faith, and have not *beheld* anything: *idou*, the “lo” or “behold” which is twice given the angel to utter, the narrator also uses first to introduce the earthquake and then to herald the appearance of the Lord; *idou* is thus, from the evangelist’s pen, no mere rhetorical flourish, discardable or paraphrasable as “suddenly”, but a religious word with a “connective” function. I write as a believer: that is to say, I report what I find in reading as responsively and responsibly as I can in this ignorant present what was written for my edification 1900 years ago. But if, underneath, you don’t really believe in miracles or angels or the extraordinary acts of God, even your scholarship may not be enough to disguise the fact. And so, as Ian Robinson remarks, you represent the angel as “obviously an impostor . . . a usually reliable source, flustered by an impossible brief”.¹ “That is what I had to tell you,” concludes this unangelic angel, relieved to have discharged a message he was constrained to deliver even though he didn’t believe a word of it.

The charge of infidelity to the text is seriously intended. Whether it would everywhere be seriously received is open to question. For, as Ian Robinson shows us in his *“Interpretation as Heresy*, the assumed freedom to interpret is coming to replace,

1 *Ibid.*

among the enlightened, the ordinary act of reading in which “there can be good or bad readings, right or wrong readings, and no two readings will be quite the same” (my own reading of the nasty-spirited angel may be bad or wrong, but it is not an act of “interpretation”). Thus the principle of “dynamic equivalence” so qualifies the ordinary meaning of equivalence as to release the translator from the obligation to adhere to his text; he may now interpret where at one time he would have felt obliged merely to translate: he may, as the Revised Standard Version does, interpret 2 Corinthians xi.29, “Who is made to stumble, and I burn not? as a statement, “. . . I am indignant”; he may even, as the Good News Bible does, transmute the “cloud” of Hebrews xii.1 into a “crowd”. The extreme form of this doctrine is “that language is never meaningful in itself but always in our interpretation of it”, and that the Bible is accordingly a base upon which we are free to construct our own meanings. “I personally do not know whether the grave was empty or not,” Bishop Jenkins’s modest disavowal at Easter 1985, is an extreme case of the extreme form of the doctrine, it being unambiguously clear in the gospels that the grave was empty; and whether we choose to believe or disbelieve what we read there, only an interpreter-heretic would have the nerve to exhume “the alternative rational and plausible explanation” that the disciples stole the body. Perhaps it is not yet quite futile to retort, with Mr Robinson, that “it is only in common speech, where there is agreed meaning and not infinite interpretation, that what he says can have any sense at all.”¹ It may yet be possible to reverse the current of anarchic individualism, which has allowed Bishop Spong the freedom not merely to “interpret” but to describe the biblical precepts that don’t suit his book as “mistranslation”.

1 *“Interpretation” as Heresy*, *op. cit.*, note 2, above. In view of my heavy debt here to Mr Robinson, I should add that this paragraph in no way represents the course or the character of his own argument.

3

Translation vs Paraphrase

The Authorised and Jerusalem Versions Compared

The second lesson at Evensong on the last Sunday after Trinity is magnificently suited to the occasion. It is Hebrews xi.17–xii.2, where the incremental repetition of “by faith . . .”, in the review of individually great figures from the seed-time of our religion, creates a collective witness to the great God’s watch over the pre-Christian Chosen, men “of whom the world was not worthy”. The given examples humble and fortify and exhilarate us—and (for there is no “yet” or “but” in a true rendering of the qualification)—

And these all, having obtained a good report through faith, received not the promise: God having provided some better thing for us, that they without us should not be made perfect. Wherefore seeing we also are compassed about with so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and the sin which doth so easily beset us, and let us run with patience the race that is set before us, looking unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith; who for the joy that was set before him endured the cross, despising the shame, and is set down at the right hand of the throne of God.

We do not know (the church has never thought it knew for sure) who wrote the Epistle to the Hebrews; but it did not require the undisputed authorship of St Paul for it to find its way into the canon. For here, unmistakably, is true religion, showing a God-

given sense of proportion in which encouragement, exhortation and promise are perfectly arranged. I cannot copy or quote these verses and remain quite calm: my enthusiasm, verging upon tears, is aroused by the language—which, also unmistakably, is the English language, English in one of its finest expressions. The translator seems to have been so inspired by his text, and so confident of the capacity of English to match it, as to want to weave a similar unity of sense and style. If the reader at Evensong drew breath with a “This is the word of the Lord,” I would be sorely tempted to cry “Amen”; for here indeed is a classic case of the power of the AV to affect both heart and mind, to stir our wills in meeting our need to know “what the Bible says”.

The Jerusalem Bible appears not to have attempted anything of the sort. A general distrust of rhetoric, accompanied by a scientist’s notion of language as the dress of thought, or a communication-system whereby a separable “message” is transmitted, causes the translator to miss the many-splendoured thing that his text provides for him.

With so many witnesses in a great cloud on every side of us, we too, then, should throw off everything that hinders us, especially the sin that clings so easily, and keep running steadily in the race we have started. Let us not lose sight of Jesus, who leads us in our faith and brings it to perfection: for the sake of the joy which was still in the future, he endured the cross, disregarding the shamefulness of it, and from now on has taken his place at the right of God’s throne.

If we had to listen to that at Evensong, we would know where we were and (unless too young to remember) would be able to recall the Authorised Version as the lesson unfolded. But the act of recall would serve only to remind us of what we had lost, of the beauty that has—with scant justification and a plethora of assertion—been censured for hiding the truth. That truth should be ugly I had almost forgot: for the truth, on inspection, appears to be the

possession of the AV rather than of the JB. The emphatic and emphatically placed “Wherefore seeing . . .” in the Greek and the AV becomes in the JB a logician’s cool mid-sentence “then”. The strongly verbal “compassed about” is paraphrased as an adverbial phrase—a peculiarly inept phrase, in that “on every side of us” reads (as does “at the right of . . .”) literally rather than metaphorically. The JB, like the NEB its ugly sister, fails to see that the emotional experience of being compassed about generates the metaphorical “cloud”, and that the writer thinks through his metaphor towards the accumulated “witnesses”, which only then define the cloud: and so the JB’s witnesses, instead of constituting the encompassing cloud, are made to figure *in* the cloud, as if the cloud were merely the place where they happened, incongruously and meaninglessly, to find themselves. This is not simply silly English, it is bad translation. “Let us not lose sight of Jesus,” says the JB, in a failure of tone as well as of sense, there being no negative to take account of. The failure of tone stems in fact from the mistranslation of “the lying-before-us-race” as “the race we have started”, which in turn prompts what looks like a failure of belief in the paraphrase of “the lying-before-him joy” as “the joy which was *still* in the future” (my italics). The AV, by contrast, understands perfectly the reflection of “the race that is set before us” in “the joy that was set before him”—a reflection that recreates the rhetorical correspondence shown in the Greek. AV similarly understands the rhetorical effect of “*despising* the shame”, for which neither the Jerusalem Bible’s “disregarding . . .” nor the New English Bible’s “making light of . . .” is a warrantable substitute: the modern translator’s deliberate refusal to convey the given sense of his text suggests, at the very least, his disregard for the reader.

We should, then, take with a pinch of salt the Jerusalem Bible’s claim to have kept “as close as possible to the literal meaning of the ancient texts”. Not that a literal translation is necessarily always the best: the Authorised Version’s representation of “. . . these all [as] having obtained a good report” is preferable to

the exact rendering of them in RV as “. . . having had witness borne to them”. But the Jerusalem Bible’s claim, which assumes the primary obligation on a translator of the intention to keep to his text, needs to be qualified: “as close as possible” signifies, in the translator’s practice, “as close as our principles of elucidation and paraphrase allow”; while by “meaning” is meant “the original sense modified to match the expectations of today’s church”. Three examples, chosen not quite at random:

1 In the *Nunc Dimittis* “pagans” is substituted for “gentiles”, presumably because all “nations” have now been introduced to the faith and most of us are distantly descended from gentiles.

2 In Acts i.9–11, where the disciples witness the Ascension, the incremental repetition of “into heaven” is dismembered: the sky is substituted for the heaven they look towards, “heaven” being retained for the Lord’s destination only. (It wouldn’t do, would it? to ask the modern reader to believe that heaven is “up there”.—All right for St Luke, of course, and for first-century fishermen).

3 St Matthew’s adjective “great” (viii.23ff.), applied both to the storm that threatens to sink the ship and to the calm that ensues from the Lord’s rebuke, is interpreted first as “violent” and second as “all was calm again”: thus the controlling greatness of God which St Matthew reflects through the double use of the one adjective is blurred. The modern translator cannot duck the fact that the disciples believe Jesus to be in command of the winds and the waves; but he can go some way, by altering the evangelist’s *Lo* or *Behold* to “without warning” and by prising the “calm” away from the Lord’s rebuke, to meet the modern sceptic’s deduction from the sudden squalls and equally sudden calms that are said to be commonplace on the sea of Galilee that no miracle was actually performed.

Readiness to paraphrase in order to elucidate obscurity is one thing: the impulse to alter a meaning to suit the present age, quite another. Comparison of the Revised Version of 1 Thessalonians v.14–18 with the Jerusalem Bible’s is instructive:

And we exhort you, brethren, admonish the disorderly, encourage the faint-hearted, support the weak, be long-suffering toward all. See that none render unto any one evil for evil; but always follow after that which is good, one toward another, and toward all. Rejoice always; pray without ceasing; in everything give thanks: for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus to you-ward.

“The effect in the Jerusalem [version],” remarks Andor Gomme,¹ is that “everything is weakened;” and he cites the substitutions made for “exhort”, “disorderly”, “rejoice”, “pray without ceasing” and “the will of God”:

And this is what we ask you to do, brothers: warn the idlers, give courage to those who are apprehensive, care for the weak and be patient with everyone. Make sure that people do not try to take revenge; you must all think of what is best for each other and for the community. Be happy at all times; pray constantly; and for all things give thanks to God, because this is what God expects you to do in Christ Jesus.

The “weakening” has no warrant in the text; it is entirely the paraphrase-product of a timorously modern mind, even to the reduction of “. . . and toward all” to the socio-religiosity of “. . . for the community”. It is a weakening that would have been incomprehensible to the scholarly Wesley, who anticipated the RV in the emendation of “fainthearted” for the AV’s “feeble-minded”, and whose brother supplied the Methodist societies with the hymns of such scholarship:

To God your every want
In instant prayer display;
Pray always; pray, and never faint;
Pray, without ceasing pray!

—No accommodation there to the reductionists: the Wesleys

¹ “The New Religious English” in Brian Morris (ed.), *Ritual Murder*, Carcanet Press, 1980. Dr Gomme’s own comparison at this point is with the AV.

would have shared Dr Gomme's conviction that "Paul meant exactly what he said: everything we do must be turned into prayer: whatsoever ye do, do all to the glory of God"; for their exhortation to unceasing prayer is not theirs only but a conscious appeal to their authority for uttering it.

Charles Wesley's hymns bear witness to the influence of the English Bible upon the religious imagination of the race. It is an influence that seems, in the hands of the Wesleys, to recreate itself, so that we take back to our reading of the Scripture something of the passionate vitality and wit originally inspired by it. An eighteenth-century wit gives us this good report on the epistle set for the sixth Sunday after Trinity, Romans vi.3-11:

More of thy life, and more, I have,
As the old Adam dies:
Bury me, Saviour, in thy grave,
That I with thee may rise.

—where the rhyme-scheme collaborates with the grammar to achieve the total "personal-objective" effect. But we do not halt at appreciation of the verse: we are recalled to its source in the pastor-scholar's concentration of St Paul's complex thought, where the events of Christ's death and resurrection generate their dependent metaphors. (It is the failure of Bishop Jenkins to acknowledge the basis of the metaphors in actuality that makes his professed adhesion to St Paul so absurd: the newness of life granted to the believer derives from the one who, crucified, dead and buried, conquers death by ceasing to be, what he unmistakably was, a corpse.)

No one could doubt, from the AV, whether St Paul believed the ideas that he struggled to find expression for, nor, from his hymns, whether Wesley adhered to the apostle's belief. In the Jerusalem Bible's series of explanatory statements, on the other hand, we see not only a capricious infidelity to the text but a failure of tone which is also a failure of belief:

You have been taught that when we were baptised in Christ Jesus we were baptised in his death; in other words, when we were baptised we went into the tomb with him and joined him in death, so that as Christ was raised from the dead by the Father's glory, we too might live a new life. If in union with Christ we have imitated his death, we shall also imitate him in his resurrection. [6] We must realise that our former selves have been crucified with him to destroy this sinful body and to free us from the slavery of sin. [8] But we believe that having died with Christ we shall return to life with him: Christ, as we know, having been raised from the dead will never die again. Death has no power over him any more. When he died, he died, once for all, to sin, so his life now is life with God; and in that way, you too must consider yourselves to be dead to sin but alive for God in Christ Jesus.

It is the weakening of the three appeals to the reader's *knowing* that is especially serious. The "knowings" are not identical in the text, but whatever their differences each is a strong word serving what becomes a common purpose. In the JB they have been reduced to makeweight words, designed to soften the edge of hard theology by saying nothing themselves and yet saying it reassuringly. The first is the challenging question, "Know ye not . . .?", which the JB paraphrases as "You have been taught that . . .", where the tone is that of a teacher, recapitulating yesterday's lesson—not a very intelligent teacher, either, for what has to follow is not in fact an illustration *in other words* but the next step in the apostle's thought. "Knowing this . . .", introducing verse 6, becomes "We must realise that . . .", a formulation which exchanges the growing knowledge of Christ the redeemer (cf. "More of thy life, and more, I have . . .") for a matter-of-fact statement of the case—as if St Paul were not so much grappling with a difficult idea as unloading on his pupils a pre-considered opinion. The third "knowing" is "knowing that Christ being raised from the dead dieth no more"; and again the JB lowers the

temperature, dismissing the “knowing” in the tone of a lecturer’s flattery of his audience—“Christ, as we know, having been raised . . .”. Thus doth the JB sell the reader short.

The AV’s fidelity to the text is partly a matter of respect for the forms of the primary language, partly a matter of sensing the quality of *belief* in St Paul and wanting to reproduce *that* in English. The two are not strictly separable, for the principle of fidelity stems from belief in the unique authority of the Bible and acceptance of a peculiar obligation upon the translator. The AV scholars knew (*sic*) that they were translating into English, not other and ordinary books which could legitimately be adapted and modified in the process, but the Word of God. The moderns know no such thing. Their scholarship has led them to suppose, not just that some manuscripts are more reliable than others, but that mistakes have crept into the most authentic. It is but a small step from scholarly caution to the kind of indifference towards the text that we have observed in their paraphrase. Such indifference seems to lead to the unspoken assumption that, the words having been written and copied by ordinary mortals, the canonical books do not comprise the Word of God at all. And if the Bible isn’t the Word of God, why stop at scholarly establishment of the text? Why not give it, in the guise of modern English, the benefit of modern man’s capacity for interpretation and dilution? Thus “When a man dies, of course, he has finished with sin” (along with reading, writing and his bank account, of course) is allowed by the JB to do duty for the obscurely compressed verse 7 in Romans vi. No one would suppose, if he hadn’t the RV to hand, that St Paul is groping here towards the idea of “justification from sin”, of the displacement of sin by “righteousness” when we die (the AV settles for the less clumsy idea of liberation from sin). Impatient with the obscurity, and antagonistic anyway towards “righteousness” (which it generally represents as “integrity”), the JB offers to do the apostle’s work

for him; and so denies the reader what ordinarily would be regarded as his right to know, not what the JB thinks he can stomach, but what St Paul actually wrote.

St Paul's letters are incorporated in our worship, not primarily that we may be edified by excerpts from his complex thought, but in perpetuation of an ancient tradition of the church—namely that what the apostle once wrote to particular assemblies in Rome or Thessalonica continues to be, by virtue of its apostolic origin, authoritative for the Catholic and Apostolic Church. Along with the gospel, the epistle (or a “portion of Scripture appointed *for the epistle*”—my italics) enjoys a special place in the Eucharist, not because it provides a lesson “relevant” to our condition (Wesley or Watts may well have something more suitable to say), but because it represents “The Word of the Lord” (in a way that Wesley and Watts do not). The claim is absolute, and makes no concessions to the peculiarities of the present, changed “thought-forms” and theological fashions, or other differences between the modern world and a remote corner of the Roman Empire 1900 years ago. This absolute claim is not met by substitution of a paraphrase for the real thing, however understandable the paraphrase, however strange to us the real thing. It is an irony unintended by the compilers—affected themselves by a form of indifferentism—that their rubric in the Alternative Service Book should direct the minister to declare, not *Here endeth the Epistle*, but *This is the word of the Lord*, of his reading from such modern versions as the Jerusalem Bible.

4

A Good Views Bible?

“Often,” declares the apostle in the Good News Bible (2 Corinthians xi.27), “I have gone without sleep; I have been hungry and thirsty; I have often been without enough food, shelter, or clothing.” These privations, first reported nearly two thousand years ago, are still readily understood, and if not personally experienced are at least recognisable as the lot of our fellow men in parts of the world today. Here is the superficial strength of the Good News Bible: that in conveying the written message of God to men it consciously addresses itself to the present, representing the ancient as idiomatically modern.

There is, however, a price to pay for the kind of immediacy that the GNB purposes to achieve: the price is fidelity to the text, and the price is paid even in such apparently simple statements as those quoted. The relation of hunger to lack of food is so close in English as to make the second statement redundant—a curious blot, surely, in a writer who is demonstrably pressing example upon example of the things he has endured. In fact, St Paul offers to distinguish between “watchings often . . . fastings often” on the one hand, and “hunger and thirst . . . cold and nakedness” on the other. True, there is a common denominator: they are all “things that are without”, as distinct from his inner man’s concern, “the care of all the churches”. But “fasting” implies something willed, or at least a cultivated habit (cf. *breakfast*); both “fasting” and

“watching” (which is not the same as “to go without sleep”, though it certainly includes that) suggest a degree of voluntary exposure to discomfort; and it is to these two active rather than merely passive sufferings that St Paul restricts his use of the adverb *often*.

In misapplying *often* to encompass the “insufficient shelter and clothing”, the GNB deliberately blurs the distinction that the text, however obscurely, is attempting to make. The distinction may seem too nice for us to preserve, embedded as it is in the whole catalogue of woes that constitutes the epistle for Sexagesima Sunday, and it may be remote from the interests of a church for which the injunction “Always fast and vigil, always watch and prayer”, is increasingly unfamiliar. But that is not for the translator to decide. The translator owes nothing to the supposed interests or limitations of his contemporary reader; his proper loyalty is to the text before him, and thence to the reader who necessarily trusts him to do an honest job. In the GNB preface, “faithfulness in translation” is held not to require the reproduction in English of “the parts of speech, sentence-structure, word-order and grammatical devices” of the Greek; but this legitimate freedom is combined with an alien imposed constraint upon the translator—he is to make the effort “to use language that is natural, clear, simple and unambiguous”. The preface seems unaware that St Paul (the case in point) signally fails to meet three of those conditions, or that the grammar of a language has a bearing upon the capacity of that language to create and to intend meanings. Tied to the scientist’s notion of language as a means of communication, a goods train to carry the pre-determined information from writer to reader, the author of the preface effectually directs the translator to treat the epistles as a series of statements, and leads him into the temptation of clarifying the ambiguous and of simplifying the complex. In treating ambiguity and complexity as defects to be remedied, the translator overreaches himself.

The overreach is to be seen at its most trivial in the substitution of “[not] enough . . . shelter, or clothing” for the “cold and nakedness” of the original. The Good News Bible, not satisfied with the picture St Paul presents of unaccommodated man, is impelled to explain why he is cold and to interpret his nakedness as an exaggeration (“ . . . Surely he isn’t starkers, knocking about in the altogether?”—No: but only not so because the tone of that disbelieving question is too close to *Steptoe & Son* and not close enough, by miles, to *King Lear*). More serious is the rendering of verse 29b: “When someone is led into sin, I am filled with distress.” (Cf. the RV: “Who is made to stumble [the AV’s “offended” is misleadingly archaic], and I burn not?”) The Good News Bible’s relaxed indifference towards sentence-structure and grammatical device allows the reduction of St Paul’s rhetorical question to a statement, his bold and combative passion to the smug assurance of self-righteous concern. The apostle “burns”, and so baffles the reader. The RSV says he is “indignant”; the NEB has his heart “blaze with indignation”. I don’t offer either conjecture (for that’s all it is) as a satisfactory alternative to the Good News Bible’s essentially sinful “distress”: there are other forms of metaphorical burning besides the heat of indignation (shame, for one). The point to make is that the modern translator, looking always to be readily understood, is tempted to take liberties with the text that would have been unthinkable a hundred years ago. No longer content to know in part, he must needs know now even as he is known; even if what he pretends to know is what he does not know.

The Good News Bible’s easy-going habits are liable to soften the impression of its scholarly intentions. In the epistle for Palm Sunday, Philippians ii.6–11, the “form of God” and the “form of a servant” are gratuitously exchanged for the “nature” of God and of the servant. No doubt the translator, if he didn’t want to cite the NEB as his authority, could enlist the second of the Thirty-

nine Articles in support of his own doctrinal purity; but that is not in question. St Paul contrasts forms and shapes, not natures; his imagery is not abstract but sculptural. In pushing St Paul's word aside the translator presumes to speak *for* him, as if the apostle can't quite be trusted to find the "right" word to convey the wholesome doctrine of God-become-man. At the same time the scholar in the translator is at work, giving us the "always" of "He always had the nature of God"; for something a little stronger than "*being* in the form of God" does seem to be required: the Son subsists with the Father (cf. "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God . . ."). But St Paul uses an indefinite participle, not a finite verb. The translator's finite verb ("He . . . had . . .") plays havoc with the scholar's "always"; the translation collapses under the weight of a sentence-construction that can't decide whether Christ declines to *become*, or declines to *remain*, on an equality with God; and so a pathetic footnote has to be supplied to resolve, by agreement to differ, a problem that would not have arisen had St Paul's grammar and diction been adhered to.

We have rights, as readers. We have the right to presume, when we open a book, that it represents as closely as possible the text as the author consented to leave it. From a translator we have the right to expect an intentional correspondence between his version and the original. The case against the GNB is that it is found wanting in this correspondence—not wanting as the AV may frequently be found wanting, and as the RV in due course, building upon the work of scholars in the interim, found it wanting emendation—but wanting in a sense of obligation to the original Hebrew and Greek. No analytical concordance could be supplied for this version, which both lexically and grammatically is a modified and often consciously erratic paraphrase—so erratic, indeed, that "O"-level candidates in Scripture and lay readers in training are alike warned off it. Two further illustrations may serve to press the charge.

The word *Christian*, singular and plural, is found twice in Acts and once in 1 Peter, but is never used by St Paul. The Good News Bible, however, offers us “Christians” in place of “brother” and “brethren” in 1 Corinthians vi.4–6—in order, presumably, to represent St Paul as addressing an Evangelical coterie which, sensitive in the latter years of the twentieth century to the charge of “sexism” (a very young word for a very recent accusation), might not wish to draw upon its own head or that of the apostle the wrath of militant feminists. Absurdly timorous, fearful of the truth? Or arrogantly sure that it knows better than St Paul, whose passionate *alla adelphos meta adelphou* (“but brother with brother . . .” as the AV faithfully renders it) hammers the point home in characteristic style? Whatever the motive behind the alteration, something vital is lost by it. *Brother* and *Christian* are not interchangeable: *brother*, in St Paul’s deployment of it, is not neutrally denotative of a type or group but creative of the character of the church, that peculiar people which is born not of blood, nor of the will of the law courts, but of God. Habitually, as here, St Paul does not so much report the truth as generate it from specific and local occasions.

Tinkering with the text is one thing; pulling it about to fit a pre-determined idea is quite another. The GNB claims for the vision of Isaiah “in the year that king Uzziah died” (vi.1–5) that the Lord’s “robe [fills] the whole Temple”, whose “foundations . . . shake”; and represents the doomed man—doomed because he is sinful—as allowed a privileged glimpse of the throne of God *despite* his disqualifying sin. The first error is trivial (as every bridesmaid knows, the robe is not to be confused with the train); the others are substantial. The *threshold*, through which Isaiah attains his vision, moves to the cries of the seraphim one to another; the house itself, the temple of the Almighty in his glory, is not so jerry-built as to be affected by the joyful acclamation, and the smoke that fills the house is not (as the GNB manages to

suggest) that of trembling masonry but of incense swung in honour of the Lord of hosts. The vision is granted before Isaiah can reflect upon the penalty attached to it. "I saw the Lord, . . . high and lifted up": there is no penalty at this stage, no consciousness in the witness of wrong within; the young man ponders nothing earthly-minded as he beholds "the Lord sitting upon a throne" in the year that King Uzziah died—of all years the least promising, the least "suitable" for such revelation. No man, Isaiah knows (his memory unconsciously jogged by sight of the six-winged seraphim who "veil their faces to the Presence"), can look upon the face of God and live. In seeing the Lord, he is "undone"; his "unclean lips" and his dwelling "in the midst of a people of unclean lips" are secondary. When the key clause is recast in verse 5 it carries not only the record of the vision but Isaiah's "fear and trembling" at having seen it: "Woe is me . . . for mine eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts."

The GNB will have none of this. In obedience again to its Evangelical constituency it misconstrues Isaiah's reflections to suit its ideal reader ("Yet I have seen the King . . ."—the excitement of the contrast is all). In doing so it shows itself to be contemptuous of the reader as well as cavalier towards the text: "This interpretation will suit him better. . . . The passage *ought* to have been written thus . . ." Not that every reader minds: each, privately, will read what he will read, and the GNB devotee is known to take "today's English version" not only for granted but with gratitude. But that the General Synod of the Church of England should dignify this version by authorising it to be read in churches suggests a culpable ignorance or indifference in the responsible committee.¹

1 Of the four versions used by the Alternative Service Book, one only is a genuine translation—the (American) Revised Standard Version, which in fact is adopted for the Old Testament lesson on Trinity Sunday. Unhappily, the RSV substitutes for the ringing magnificence of "with twain he did fly" the effete little clause "with two he flew", which is as memorable in its way as the words it does duty for.

5

Fidelity in Translation

It is *truth* we claim for the Prayer Book, isn't it? . . . We have done more work on the internal relations between that truth and its expression than anyone, on the necessity of the kind of language we find in the Prayer Book for any religious truth. But it is truth that we rest on: our whole faith expressed here and in the English Bible *as it is expressible nowhere else in English*.¹

I italicise the last clause to emphasise the apparently outrageous claims that we are forced to make on behalf of what, among literary artefacts, matters most to us who endorse as self-evident Bishop Graham Leonard's statement that "the Christian faith is revealed by God and is proclaimed and lived to enable men and women to obey God." Revelation is not of course confined within the pages of the AV, and no doubt there are many who would assent to the bishop's statement while feeding their faith on modern translations; and I readily acknowledge that modern translations may serve various purposes, of the individual reader or among consenting adults in private. So why "forced"? And are we really being *pushed* into an outrageously exclusive position, to stick out like a sore thumb from behind the parapets of conservatism, there to gaze bleakly down upon the massed liberal ranks of the Church of England at prayer?

¹ Ian Robinson, "Grounds for Hope", *Faith and Worship*, Autumn, 1986

We are indeed forced to resist a trend which, encouraged by scholars to whose open minds questionable data and tentative conclusions are meat and drink, has led to a decisive break with the principles of translation represented by the AV, the 1885 Revision and the American RSV, and to the adoption in their place of the habit of paraphrase. The new philosophy calls much in doubt—not all, for we can pick our way through a modern translation, recalling step by step what the Bible used to look like—not all, but enough to persuade us in our turn sceptically to examine the claim of the Good News, the Jerusalem (old or New), the Living or the embryo feminist version¹ faithfully to represent in English the Holy Scriptures. Here I will only return to scrutinise examples from the New English Bible, which is the examining boards' permitted alternative at "O"-level, not to the Authorised, but to the RSV.

1 Hebrews xi.37–xii.2

"Banal or hollowly rhetorical" is one recently published description of modern translations.² Generally, the NEB eschews what it distrusts as rhetoric in the AV, and serves the present age with what it supposes are homespun colloquialisms ("one and all" for "these all", xi.39), fraternal intimacy ("And what of ourselves?" for the irresistible conclusiveness of "Wherefore seeing we also . . .", xii.1), and topical allusions ("refugees" for "wanderers", xi.38). Behind the consciously updated idiom lies the editorial hand of the paraphraser, who knows better than the original writer what we need to be told. The tautological "distress and misery" is duly substituted for the "oppression" and "maltreatment" that the Greek provides for (xi.37): it is as if the editor, wearying of the stonings and the sawings-asunder, has put a pencil through *kakouchoumenoi* and said: "That's enough tormentings." "They were too good for this world" (xi.38) rivals,

¹ This is understood to be in preparation in the States.

² Alan Wilkinson, *Dissent or Conform?* (S.C.M. Press, 1986)

for sheer obtuseness, the moment when the Prodigal is said to feel the pinch (Luke xv.14): the cliché conveys quite the wrong sense, for those “of whom the world was not worthy” are—and the AV rendering enables us to take the point—the very ones whom the world deemed unworthy.

The case against the NEB is thus not simply a matter of style, and the blandishments of its apologists (“Of course we love the old language, but the new explains things better . . .”) should be resisted as the mixture of nonsense and disingenuousness that they are. To avoid having to reproduce the familiar formulations the NEB lands itself in all sorts of trouble. “These also, one and all” is not just stylistically inept; it misapplies *kai* to make “these” refer to the “refugees” only, when in fact “these all” constitute this “great cloud of witnesses” that compass us about. The “cloud” is properly itself, and is defined by the “witnesses”: it is not the simile that the NEB offers us (xii.1), but a metaphor which derives from the religious experience of being “compassed about”, an experience that has accumulated in intensity and vitality through the full course of Chapter xi. And the character of our Lord, our knowledge of him as he sets his face towards Jerusalem or endures the agony in the garden, the NEB alters by the paraphrase of “despising the shame” as “making light of the disgrace”. (Cf. also p. 35, above.)

It is tempting to regard the vices of the NEB as signs of incompetence among the translators, redactors and literary experts; and indeed there is abundant evidence of the various degrees and kinds of incompetence that we can barely touch on here. At the same time, there is evidence of a capacity to translate accurately and purposefully, and so to offer (albeit at unpredictable moments) genuine help to the student. The question arises: Why the generally lax attitude towards the text, when the sleepers are really as awake as my cat? Our second and third examples prompt a disquieting answer.

2 Acts i.1–11

By offering us one English word for two different Greek words the AV blurs the distinction between the *authoritative* power of God and the *enabling* power to be bestowed on the apostles in due season (i.7, 8). The NEB, alive to the difference, marks it by altering the first “power” to “control”. Why, then, in i.10–11, does it turn a blind eye to the equally deliberate iteration of *eis ton ouranon*, “into heaven”? Did the reasoning in committee go something like this?—“Heaven, we know, is not ‘up there’: St Luke, who knew no better than the fishermen whose account he is relating, assumed it was: fortunately, the ‘sky’ can be substituted for ‘heaven’, except once for the ascending Lord’s destination: and if we separate his ‘going’ from the apostles’ ‘gazing’, we shall have snuffed out a regrettable superstition.” (Cf. above, pp. 14ff.) But whatever the reasoning, does not the manipulated translation (for that’s what it is: a manipulation to flatter the intellectual) call in question, not just the integrity of the enterprise, but the faith in which the translators approached their task?

3 Luke i.26–38

The scholar’s predilection for a healthy scepticism filters through the provided translation at the very beginning of the gospel, in the address to Theophilus: “those things which have been fulfilled among us (RV and RSV, i.1) is replaced by “the events that have happened among us” (which seriously weakens the significance of the retained “among us”), while “the certainty of those things” (i.4) dons academic dress as “authentic knowledge” (the RSV’s “truth” suggests that Theophilus may have been misinformed). Academic indifference—that cultivated detachment from traditional belief and from the assumption that the Scriptures are holy—transpires through the account even of such a key passage as the annunciation. The NEB has the angel address, not “a virgin betrothed to a man”, but “a *girl . . .*” (i.27); and gives this girl’s

baffled retort to the angel's promise, not as "How shall this be, seeing I know not a man?", but (following the RSV) as "How . . . , when I have no husband?" (i.34: 1961) (One imagines that the absurdity of the reason, rather than scholarly qualms, led to the qualified reinstatement of "virgin" in the 1972 edition.) Things are said at the annunciation which the sceptical scholar can't duck: "The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee . . ." But the scholar can go some way towards reducing their impact, towards turning a true story into a legend: he can dispense with the text ". . . with God nothing shall be impossible" (AV and RSV: 1.37) and substitute the variant "God's promises can never fail." (RV) The latter may be the truer reading. In its own form it is quite as absolute in its assertion and in the required response from the reader. Its adoption by NEB, however, excites the suspicion that the *certainty* of things that are *not ordinarily possible*—and that is demonstrably St Luke's faith, right through to the meticulously detailed resurrection evidence, and beyond—is not unequivocally shared by these translators.

We need biblical scholars today, as we needed them in 1611. But it is by faith, as the AV translators so clearly understood, and not by scholarship, that we respond to the miraculous events that lie at the heart of our religion—events which, as Ian Robinson remarks,¹ without our faith in them would not be what they are. Small wonder, then, that withdrawal of faith in the event will show through a translator's version of the event. How is it, otherwise, that we respond *believingly* to the AV accounts of the Incarnation, the stilling of the storm, the Resurrection, and find ourselves invited to read as modern liberals the modern relation of the same events?² The reader has always been free to say, "*That*

1 "Grounds for Hope", *op. cit.*

2 Alan Wilkinson, in a letter to *Faith and Worship* (Autumn 1987), makes a similar observation in urging a quite different point: "Compare the AV account of the annunciation with that of any modern translation, or the Preface and Sanctus in the Book of Common Prayer with their equivalents in the ASB. The mock vigour of the ASB arises more from an effort to suppress doubt than from a struggle to express faith."

I can't believe." The sceptical scholar, however, prompts him to go one crucial step farther: "Of course you don't believe in a god who intervenes in the natural order: *You* are no cultic idolator! Read *my* version, and you won't be expected to, no matter that the original writer—culturally conditioned, poor fellow, by the superstitions of his time—believed that God moved the stone."

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