

though it could perform an independent apologetic, juristic or social function to which it is not adapted and for which it was not essentially designed.

## The New English Bible

### A SURVEY OF THE CRITICS

'Well, if that's what St Paul meant, I disagree with St Paul'. This remark is attributed to 'no less a person than a master of a college in one of our older universities', who had enquired what it was that was read in chapel that evening and had been told it was the N.E.B. The story is told by Dr Wickham, Bishop of Middleton, in the *Guardian* (14/3/61), as an example of the impact of the new text. Impact, certainly, and most of the reviewers have agreed about this. But the remark also suggests that it might be questioned whether it was the impact intended by St Paul.

A first enquiry is about whom the version is written for, and whether it is reaching its aim. Fr Alexander Jones in *Scripture* (July '61) says, 'It is only fair to remember that a translation is made with a determined public in view. Now the N.E.B. is not designed as a tool for biblical theology, and indeed it is reasonable to suppose that a theologian would know his Greek and need no N.E.B.; it is a faithful, somewhat free, easy-to-read translation, addressed (as I have seen suggested) to unbelievers and even potential unbelievers, conciliatory . . . and supremely competent'. Yet the theologian is entitled to turn to a version in a difficult passage, when the version conveys an interpretation. The translators themselves mention this question of interpretation when speaking in their introduction of not feeling obliged to render the same Greek word everywhere by the same English word: 'we have found that in practice this frequently compelled us to make decisions where the older method of translation allowed a comfortable ambiguity. In such places we have been aware that we take a risk, but we have thought it our duty to take the risk rather than remain on the fence' (p. ix). Dr Witham in 1730, in his preface to his revision of Rheims, says: 'It must needs be own'd that many places in the Holy Scripture are obscure and hard to be understood . . . They must be obscure in a literal translation, as they are in the Original'. But it is a far cry from 1730 to 1961 and the N.E.B. translators remark that 'if the best commentary is a good translation, it is also true that every intelligent translation is in a sense a paraphrase' (p. x), and after all, Knox had already said much the same.

The *Modern Churchman* (April '61) suggests that the new text is intended 'for the man in the pew, the man in the street who rarely or never enters a church, and for the child in our schools'. *Punch* (22/3/61), however, adds that 'the man in the pew loves religious language: the man in the pulpit increasingly distrusts it', so that the new version will 'delight the man in the pulpit and startle the man in the pew'. For it is written in 'contemporary' English (Intro. pp. ix, x), so that once more the Scripture is 'plainly laid before [men's] eyes in their mother tongue', as Tyndale said, quoted by J. K. S. Reid in *Religion and Education* (SCM) (Summer '61), who adds that 'the language in which the N.T. is written is for the most part everyday Hellenistic Greek . . . used by common people for common purposes.' In this connection V. S. Pritchett in the *New Statesman* (17/3/61) asks 'What is current speech?', and while criticizing the version for being 'rather business-like' adds that 'the translators can argue that no speech is so current as administrators' or committee English'. And a member of the Church of Scotland was reported as saying that it was 'better to read the Bible as if it were a newspaper than not to read it at all' (*Observer* 19/3/61).

In general the text has been well received. The *Sunday Times* (19/3/61) included a headline 'Church Songs of Praise for the New Bible', and four months after publication the Cambridge University Press were able to report that since the initial sale of one million copies, world sales had reached a further one and a half million, with no serious sign of falling off.

The bulk of the reviews were concerned with literary style. Raymond Mortimer in the *Sunday Times* (19/3/61) called the 'language excellent beyond anything one could reasonably hope', while John Masefield in the *Times* (14/3/61) said that 'the re-tellings . . . are admirable', and Prof. Henry Chadwick in the *Daily Telegraph* (14/3/61) gave as his 'final verdict [that it] brilliantly succeeds in its aims', but that some phrases 'grate on the ear' though 'the end of Rom. 8 attains something like distinction', and J. C. Maxwell in the *Spectator* (17/3/61) gives 'an overwhelmingly favourable verdict from the literary point of view'. But Prof. Robert Graves in the *Observer* (19/3/61), under the headline 'An Uneasy Compromise' urges the weakness of a translation done by a committee ('a sacred book must be all of a piece') and calls the new text 'a literary freak: a book without a writer', to which Donald Davie in the *Spectator* (17/3/61) replied that the King James Bible could be condemned by the same token—as indeed could the original N.T. itself. *Punch* (22/3/61) said in particular of Revelations that the rendering was 'flat with little poetry about it', and deplored the 'pedestrian tones of these descriptions of eternity'.

The care and honest scholarship of the work is recognized by all, and many have specially praised the use of modern knowledge in illuminating the text (as in the case of the R.S.V. and the *Bible de Jérusalem*), and Prof. Frederick C. Grant in the *Journal of Biblical Literature* (Philadelphia, June '61—the only American notice I have been able to see) specially points out certain 'advances in N.T. translation', though Prof. Robert Graves in the *Observer* accuses the translators of neglecting papyrus evidence on Gal. 4. 14 and of failing to provide

a corrective note on Matt. 27.9 (though both these points could be debated), and attacks heavily certain renderings, notably the opening of I John with 'that weakest word in the language, "it", which turns out to be the Word of Life itself.

This brings us to the legitimacy of paraphrase or of recasting sentences to give a more English rendering. Such recasting was a deliberate policy: 'to replace Greek constructions and idioms by those of contemporary English' (Intro. p. ix). Mgr Barton in the *Clergy Review* (April '61) chooses I Tim. 6. 11-16 to set the new version alongside Rheims of 1582, noting how slight the variation is, but with N.E.B. deliberately breaking up the long Pauline periods, perhaps gaining in clarity but losing in 'magnificence'. Sometimes, however, it is losing more than that. 'Here we are at the crossroads of translation', writes Fr Alexander Jones in *Scripture* (July '61) in what is probably the best assessment of N.E.B. so far: the question of 'resistance to paraphrase'. In the effort to be readable, N.E.B. can sometimes fall down by seriously obscuring certain theological notions. Prof. Chadwick in the *Daily Telegraph* (13/3/61) considers the opening of St John's Gospel: 'decisive and defensible, but the overtones of Genesis are lost, and something of the mystery also'. Fr Leonard Johnston in the *Tablet* (18/3/61), after praising the 'freshness' of the version, indicates the danger of a rendering like that of John 1. 12 (literally) 'to them that believe in his name' as 'to those who have yielded him their allegiance', thus obscuring both the words 'believe in' and 'his name' by an easy-sounding phrase; similarly 'Christ's blood' in Rom. 5. 9 is obscured by his 'sacrificial death', and Fr Jones points out the similar obscuring of the word 'flesh' which occurs ten times in Rom. 8. 3-9 and has been covered up entirely by phrases such as 'lower nature'. If this is an improvement in readability, is it 'ethical'? Fr Martindale in the *Month* (June '61) suggests similar dangers in that famous pitfall in Phil. 2. 6, and questions whether one 'ought to wish an ancient document to be made to sound as if it were written today . . . A man may be unable to say exactly what he means, like St John, by "beginning" or "was" in his Prologue. There is a mind behind every word'. One of the best reviews was in the *Times Literary Supplement* (24/3/61) with so minute an examination of the rendering of a number of Greek words and phrases that one cannot give any details here, but the conclusion is a statement of great importance: 'If one's concern is what the N.T. writers mean, it is excellent. It is otherwise if one wants to find out what the documents actually say'.

The question of the choice of a Greek text is perhaps one for the specialist: which manuscript or group of manuscripts or edition is to be followed? Both *Scripture* and the *Times Literary Supplement* examine the question in some detail, but it is sufficient here to say with the *Tablet* that 'the translators have not given preference to any one form of Greek text, but have decided each reading on its own merits'.

Comparisons will readily be made with the two recent major versions: Knox and the R.S.V. Several writers pointed out that the R.S.V. stands apart, as

being 'explicitly a revision on the basis of A.V.' (*Tablet*), but several made comparisons with Knox: the new version has not the euphony (*Sunday Times*), elegance (*Spectator*), warmth (*New Statesman*) of Knox, whose text 'was full of his mannerisms—to the fury or delight, according to taste or temperament, of readers' (Fr Martindale in the *Month*), 'whetting the appetite for the pleasant task of re-reading him: perhaps there is something to be said, after all, for a version that is the work of one man' (Mgr Barton in the *Clergy Review*). Fr T. Corbishley was reported in the *Sunday Times* (19/3/61) as remarking that the idea of N.E.B. was very similar to that of Knox, and he thought there was an influence of Knox's version on N.E.B.

Lastly, what of Catholics and the N.E.B.? Mgr Barton in the *Clergy Review* said that 'it is not clear whether any invitations were ever sent to either Catholics or Jews', but Fr Corbishley was reported in the *Sunday Times* (*ibid.*) under a headline 'Catholics seek Bible-for-all' as saying that N.E.B. would almost certainly be discussed at the Council, but that a number of details would have to be modified if it were to be entirely acceptable to Catholics. And the fact remains that at the moment when the N.E.B. was being planned in 1946 Ronald Knox's N.T. was just out (1945), and as the N.E.B. was taking shape in 1948 Ronald Knox's O.T. was nearly ready (published 1949 and definitively 1955), so that the Catholics were at that time just taking possession of their second 'official version'. This may be part of the explanation of the somewhat sad little parenthesis on every blurb; but whether agreement on every point with the age-long Catholic tradition of the Word could have been reached or could be attempted is another question.

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## A Canadian Notebook

The facts are unassailable. The second largest country in the world is only eight per cent inhabited, and three-quarters of its eighteen million population live within a hundred miles of the United States border. One third of its industry—three-quarters of its powerful petroleum interests—is owned by outside investors, the great majority of them American. Sprawled out in endless miles of forest and ice, Canada lies strategically between the unsleeping rivals. Whether Canadians like it or not, the facts of geography and economic necessity, and perhaps the very hope of survival, place the senior member of the British Commonwealth firmly at the mercy of her southern neighbour.

Of course there are the Canadian Guards and the endless singing of *God Save the Queen* (in Ontario, at least). Victoria Day is a holiday ('I expect you celebrate