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THE BIBLE IN ENGLISH: AN OVERVIEW[1]

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BIBLE TRANSLATION BEFORE TRANSLATION INTO ENGLISH

Translations of the Hebrew Scriptures became necessary by the third century B.C., when many Jews no longer understood Hebrew. Translation into Greek (the lingua franca of the Eastern Mediterranean) was focused in the large Jewish community of Alexandria. At first there were various individual translations, but by the end of the second century B.C. a standard collection known as the Septuagint was widely accepted. The Septuagint was in effect the Bible of the first Christians and is copiously quoted in the NT. It is not the product of a single translation project, and the styles adopted for the various books differ considerably—some of them departing quite freely from the Hebrew text as we know it. Different manuscripts of the Septuagint witness also to considerable variations in the accepted Greek text. Later Greek versions of the Hebrew Bible were essentially revisions of the Septuagint—some (notably that of Aquila) much more literal.

In Palestine and farther east, Aramaic was the prevalent language among Jews, and a variety of Aramaic versions of the Hebrew Bible (known as Targums) were produced around the same period, though it was many centuries before any sort of standard Aramaic text was established. Targums are typically much freer and even more expansive than the Septuagint and sometimes contain quite substantial interpolations. They are the witness to a developing and quite creative interpretive tradition within Jewish worship and preaching.

Translation of both OT and NT into Latin began very early in the Christian era, and again many independent versions were soon in use. Toward the end of the fourth century, however, Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus to revise existing translations so as to produce a standard Latin version of the whole Bible—the Vulgate—which became the accepted text of the Latin church, so that relatively few manuscripts of the "Old Latin" versions survive.

Translation into Syriac followed a similar course, with the early fifth-century Peshitta version supplanting earlier Syriac translations, some of which had been in existence since the second century.

The other major versions translated directly from the Greek are the Coptic versions deriving from the third and fourth centuries. Subsequent translations into Gothic, Armenian, Ethiopic, and Georgian are known as "secondary versions," since they were made not from the original language but from one of the earlier translations.

The character of these various early translations varied considerably. While some were the work of scholars such as Jerome, who possessed a formidable knowledge of relevant languages, most are not associated with any named translator. The motive of the translators was generally more religious than literary, namely, to make the sacred texts accessible to worshipers who did not know the original languages. The written Aramaic Targums, for instance, were a development from the practice in the synagogue of giving an oral, and in most cases probably extempore, Aramaic interpretation after the Hebrew text had been read.

Such versions are not likely to be marked by verbatim accuracy, and the character of many of the surviving versions from the Septuagint onward indicates that this was not always the primary concern of the anonymous translators. This was to be a significant factor when the Bible began to be translated into English, since it was Latin rather than Greek that dominated Western Europe, while Hebrew was little known among European Christians of the late Middle Ages.

The Problem of Textual Transmission

To return to "the original text" is, however, no easy matter when we are dealing with ancient texts passed on in manuscript form before the days of printing. In Bible translation the issue of *textual criticism* is particularly important and complex.

Until the middle of the twentieth century the earliest surviving manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible dated from the ninth century A.D., i.e., over a thousand years later than even the latest books of the Hebrew Bible were written. But the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, together with a number of other recent discoveries, have now made available to us manuscripts of the Hebrew text written a thousand years and more earlier. The result has been, in general, to confirm the care with which the text had been preserved, even though a number of differences have emerged.

In addition to Hebrew manuscripts, there are full manuscripts of the Septuagint and other versions from the fourth century A.D. onwards, and partial

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texts that are even earlier. These often offer a significantly different reading from the Hebrew text tradition, but this is often to be explained by the freedom exercised by the Greek translator rather than as evidence of a variant Hebrew text to which he had access.

In the case of the NT, the time scale is less extended. There are complete Greek texts of the NT from the fourth century, and many earlier papyri of parts of it have survived, some from as early as the middle of the second century. In all, we have over 5,000 Greek manuscripts of the NT, though the majority of these are later and of lesser value. There is also a wide variety of manuscript evidence for the early versions in Latin, Syriac, and Coptic, as well as numerous citations from the NT books by early Christian writers whose works are preserved. The NT is thus vastly better attested than any other ancient literature. The works of Tacitus, by contrast, survive in only two incomplete manuscripts written many centuries after his time, between them covering only about half of what he is known to have written.

But a large quantity of manuscripts means a large range of variants, since no two manuscripts are exactly alike. Most of the variants are of minor importance—matters of spelling or grammar or of stylistic variation. Where there are differences of substance, in most cases experts are in little doubt as to which represents the original. But there remains a significant number of variants where translators must make a choice regarding the words to be rendered, or whether or not to include a disputed portion of text, which may be as little as one word but may be a whole verse or two. There is room here for sincere disagreement, even among those who are well versed in the discipline of textual criticism, and English versions of the Bible may and do differ accordingly.

Many of the most important biblical manuscripts have been discovered relatively recently, and the science of textual criticism has become far more sophisticated and, one hopes, more responsible. Translations of the Bible made before the present century are likely therefore to be based on less reliable texts. The need for constant retranslation arises not only from the development of the English language but also from the growing availability of evidence for the original texts themselves.

Translation of the Bible into English

Early English Translations

In medieval England, Latin was the language of literate people. Direct access to the Bible was restricted in practice to the clergy and monastic orders, and their Bible was the Latin Vulgate.

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Perhaps the earliest renderings of biblical texts into English are in the Old English poems of Caedmon (seventh century). These are sometimes based on the Bible and amount virtually to free metrical versions of parts of the biblical text. Translations of parts of the Bible into Old English are said to have been produced in the early eighth century by Bishop Aldhelm of Sherborne (Psalms) and by Bede (John's gospel), but these have not survived. Probably the earliest actual translations preserved are those inserted between the lines of the Latin text of medieval manuscripts, notably the Northumbrian version inserted by Aldred into the Lindisfarne Gospels in the tenth century.

The first extant independent Old English version of the gospels, known as the Wessex Gospels, comes from the tenth century, as does Aelfric's translation of Genesis through Judges. But with the Norman conquest, translations into English virtually ceased, as Norman French became the language of the literate.

In the fourteenth century Richard Rolle produced a prose version of the book of Psalms in his south Yorkshire dialect, together with a verse-by-verse commentary, and copies of this work were made in other dialects. An anonymous Middle English version of parts of the NT for use in monasteries is also preserved from the fourteenth century.

But it was John Wycliffe (c. 1330–1384) and his associates who first attempted to put an English Bible into the hands of laypeople. Wycliffe, master of Balliol College, Oxford, was a "Reformer before the Reformation." His attacks both on the privileges of the church and on such Catholic doctrines as transubstantiation earned him the Pope's condemnation for heresy. His guiding principle was the supreme authority of the Bible. The "Wycliffe" translation is probably mostly not by Wycliffe himself, but the project was at the heart of his aim to restore the Bible's authority in the life of church and nation. It was based not on the original languages (which were not available then in England) but on the Latin Vulgate, which it translates so literally as to be sometimes almost unintelligible to those who do not know Latin. A revised version, produced after Wycliffe's death, probably by his secretary John Purvey, shows more respect for English idiom; the reviser's prologue states a remarkably modern-sounding aim: "to translate after the sentence and not only after the words . . . ; and if the letter may not be followed in the translating, let the sentence ever be whole and open [plain]."

The Lollard movement, which arose from Wycliffe's work, provoked fierce opposition from the church establishment. A provincial synod convened by the archbishop of Canterbury in 1408 issued the "Constitutions of Oxford," which forbade the production or use of vernacular Bibles without a bishop's approval. But Purvey's revised translation (rather than the earlier Wycliffe version) con-

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tinued nonetheless to be widely read and circulated. It was, in effect, *the* English Bible throughout the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries.

THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY

Two major factors separate later English translations from those of the fourteenth century. The first was the rediscovery in European scholarship of the Hebrew and Greek languages and the growing availability of biblical texts in the originals. The second was the invention of printing.

The first printed Hebrew Bible appeared in 1488, and the first printed Greek NT in 1516. The materials were therefore available for a translation from the originals to be printed in English, and William Tyndale (1494–1536) was the first to take up the opportunity. As one of the foremost champions of the Reformation in England, Tyndale was constantly engaged in controversy and spent his last twelve years in exile on the continent, where he was eventually burned as a heretic. His English NT was printed in 1526—not in England, where there was still strong official hostility to a vernacular Bible (particularly one suspected of "Lutheran" connections), but at Worms, from where it was smuggled into England and met with an enthusiastic black market.

The German connection is significant, since only four years earlier Martin Luther had printed the first German NT. Much of the cross reference and comment that accompanies Tyndale's translation is clearly based on Luther's. But the translation is Tyndale's own, based on Erasmus's 1522 Greek NT and using a vigorous, idiomatic English style that would be the basis of all subsequent English translations until the twentieth century.

Tyndale is by far the most significant figure in the story of the translation of the Bible into English. In addition to his NT, he also began the translation of the OT. He published the Pentateuch in English in 1530 and prepared translations of some other books subsequently incorporated into "Matthew's Bible" (see below). But he devoted more time to revising his NT; the extensively revised 1534 edition became the definitive text on which subsequent translators drew.

The first complete English Bible to be printed (in 1535) was the work of Tyndale's friend and associate Miles Coverdale (1488–1569). Its title page describes it as "translated out of Douche and Latyn into Englishe," as Coverdale made no claim to be an expert in Hebrew and Greek. But his NT was essentially Tyndale's, revised in the light of German versions, while his OT incorporated elements of Tyndale's and Luther's work based on the originals. It was his version of the book of Psalms, subsequently incorporated in the Great Bible of 1539, which became the Psalter of the English Book of Common Prayer.

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"Matthew's Bible" (1537) was compiled by Tyndale's associate John Rogers, writing under a pseudonym. It is in fact the work of Tyndale, as far as he had reached (including the unpublished parts of the OT), the rest being drawn from Coverdale. It is notable as the first English translation to be published "with the king's most gracious license." Bible translation had at last received official approval.

The stage was thus set for an "authorized version," which was to be placed in every church in the land, so that "your parishioners may most commodiously resort to the same and read it." Coverdale was entrusted with the task of revising the "Matthew" Bible for this purpose, and the resultant version, issued with a preface by Thomas Cranmer, is known as the Great Bible (1539). This remained the officially recognized Bible until the reign of Elizabeth I. It was in all essentials the work of two men—Tyndale and Coverdale.

But it had one significant weakness. Apart from those Hebrew books Tyndale had translated, the rest of the OT (Coverdale's work) was not based on the Hebrew text. This was one of the motives for an extensive revision eventually published as the Geneva Bible of 1560 (so called because it was first printed in Geneva and was the work of men closely associated with the Reformation movement on the continent). This translation was not, as hitherto, the work of one man but of a group of scholars—the first English "committee translation." Its popular title, "the 'Breeches' Bible," derives from its translation of Genesis 3:7, where Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together to make themselves "breeches."

The Geneva Bible was an immediate success and quickly supplanted the Great Bible, not only in private use, but in church use as well. This was the Bible of the Elizabethan church and of Shakespeare. An official revision of the Great Bible—the "Bishops' Bible" of 1568—never seriously competed with the Geneva Bible in general usage.

King James's Bible

James the First did not share the general enthusiasm for the Geneva Bible, largely on account of the notes published along with the text, which were felt to be partisan. So at the Hampton Court Conference summoned in the year after his accession, it was agreed to produce a new version, without commentary, "to be read in the whole Church, and none other." The work was entrusted to a large group (forty-seven in all) of the best scholars available, who represented a range of theological opinion and so could not be stigmatized as producing a partisan text.

The King James Bible of 1611 (generally known in Britain as the "Authorized Version") claims to be "newly translated out of the original tongues," but

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the translators did not start from scratch. The clause in the title adds, "with the former translations diligently compared and revised." The translators were, in fact, instructed to take the Bishops' Bible of 1568 as the basis of their work. The phrases of Tyndale's NT can often be heard, though the committee tended generally to revise in a more literal direction. But their preface ("The Translators to the Reader," unfortunately not included in most modern editions) makes it clear that they did much more than merely revise the Bishops' Bible (which, after all, was not based directly on the Hebrew text in many OT books), working in detail from the original texts.

The translators, well aware of the range of possibilities both in the reading of the original text and in the understanding of its words, added marginal notes, not of the "commentary" type the king disliked, but to indicate reasonable alternative renderings. In answer to the criticism that such notes undermined the reader's confidence in the text, they sensibly replied that "they that are wise had rather have their judgments at liberty in differences of readings, than to be captivated to one, when it might be the other."

They chose to avoid "concordance" translation, whereby the same English word is always used for the same word in the original. Indeed, they seem to have set store by variety in style, so that at times they vary the English renderings of a given word where the same word would have conveyed the sense perfectly well.

In these and other ways the KJV marked a significant advance on earlier versions, so that even without royal backing it would probably have supplanted even the Geneva Bible in both public and private use. Given the king's strong endorsement as well, it was assured of success. The term "Authorized Version" is not quite accurate, since it was never (like the Book of Common Prayer) imposed by Act of Parliament, but the clause "appointed to be read in churches" on its title page indicates its quasi-official status. For English-speaking Protestants from the mid-seventeenth century until 1881 there was, in effect, only one English Bible.

There is, however, one major weakness the 1611 version shares with all its predecessors—one that is no fault of its translators. The Hebrew and Greek texts available in the sixteenth and early seventeenth century were much inferior to what is available today, and at many points the words rendered by the King James' translators are not what is now agreed to be the original text. This problem is particularly serious in the NT, for which they were dependent on the Greek text issued by Stephanus in 1550. This text, misleadingly known as the "Received Text" (Textus Receptus), was based on the few Greek manuscripts then available, which were late in date and represented the Byzantine type of

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text that most scholars now believe to be a revision (and in some places expansion) of the original. In a few places no Greek text at all was available, and Stephanus's text was taken from the Vulgate, translated back into Greek. The most notorious example is the Trinitarian text in 1 John 5:7 that occurs in no Greek manuscript before the fifteenth century, where it is clearly derived from the Latin. The discovery of earlier texts and the advances in textual criticism mean that there are now serious textual questions to be set against the undoubted literary qualities of the KJV.

The above discussion may have suggested that Bible translation into English was an exclusively Protestant enterprise. Certainly Protestants took the lead, but a Catholic response began with the publication of the Rheims NT in 1582, followed by the OT published at Douai in 1610. This "Douai Bible" was deliberately based not on the Hebrew and Greek but on the Vulgate, the version prescribed by the Council of Trent. Its style was so much based on the Latin as to be quite obscure, and a major revision was undertaken by Bishop Challoner in the eighteenth century. A further revision of the Douai-Challoner NT, known as the Confraternity Version, was published in America in 1941.

Translations in the Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries

The KJV had no significant rival for 270 years. There were of course a number of individual efforts at Bible translation, some of them worthy attempts to update the KJV (including one by John Wesley in 1768), others quite eccentric. But none made much lasting impression.

But the KJV, for all its good qualities, inevitably became dated in two respects: on the one hand there was the increase of knowledge about the Hebrew and Greek texts noted above, but there was also the fact that no language stands still, and the "biblical language" of 1611 became increasingly remote from ordinary speech. And, of course, the KJV itself was not faultless—even in its own time. So a Revised Version (hereafter RV) was produced in 1881 (NT) and 1885 (OT) by a committee set up by the Convocation of Canterbury, drawing on the best biblical scholarship of the time.

A parallel revision process was carried out in America, and the two committees kept in touch with each other's work. But the American revisers were not prepared to follow such strictly conservative guidelines as the British had. The resultant *American Standard Version* (hereafter ASV) of 1901 is thus of recognizably similar character to the RV but not identical (notably in its use of "Jehovah" instead of "the LORD" to represent the divine name).

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The RV was deliberately a "revision," not a new translation. Its compilers aimed to keep as close as possible to the familiar wording, even retaining "all archaisms, whether of language or construction, which though not in familiar use cause a reader no embarrassment and lead to no misunderstanding." Where errors needed to be corrected or the language was now misleading, they aimed still to follow the style and diction of the KJV as closely as possible. On one point, however, they clearly felt differently from the 1611 translators in that they aimed, wherever the context allowed, to use the same English rendering for the same original word.

One feature of the new version that seems commonplace to us but was a major contribution to intelligent understanding was the layout of the printed text. Instead of each verse being printed as a paragraph in itself, with no indication of where a new section began, the RV printed the text in sense-paragraphs (though retaining verse numbers for reference). In the poetical books and in some other poetical material (though surprisingly not in the prophetic books), the text was set out in verse-lines rather than printed like prose.

In the reconstruction of the text to be translated, the RV represents a huge leap forward and was welcomed as such by most biblical scholars of the time (though with lively exceptions, such as the redoubtable Dean Burgon, whose fury at the loss of such familiar texts as the Trinitarian formula in 1 John 5:7 knew no limits). The RV was widely accepted as the "proper" text to use in schools and colleges. But the pedantic and archaic style of translation resulting from the revisers' principles was not calculated to excite the reading public, and it seems never to have caught the public imagination. The KJV remained most people's Bible.

But the principle of retranslation was now recognized, and during the first half of the twentieth century many new versions began to appear. Most of them were the work of individuals and could claim no official status. The following list of versions published before 1950 may give some idea of the gradual opening of the floodgates: The Twentieth Century New Testament (1902); R. F. Weymouth, New Testament in Modern Speech (1903); F. Fenton, The Holy Bible in Modern English (1903); J. Moffatt, The New Testament: A New Translation (1913; complete Bible 1928); Jewish Publication Society version (1917); E. J. Goodspeed, The New Testament: An American Translation (1923; complete Bible 1927); G. W. Wade, The Documents of the New Testament (1934); C. B. Williams, The New Testament in the Language of the People (1937); The New Testament in Basic English (1941); R. A. Knox (1945; complete Bible 1949); The New World Translation (of Jehovah's Witnesses [1950; complete Bible 1953]).

Two of these versions may be singled out for special mention. Moffatt's vigorous version (which sometimes reflects Scottish rather than English idiom)

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made a decisive break from "Bible English" and introduced many for the first time to a Bible in which the characters spoke like real people. Like all individual translations, it is at the mercy of the translator's preferences and ideas. It may be questioned whether it helps many ordinary readers to find at the beginning of the Gospel of John, "The Logos existed in the very beginning, the Logos was with God, the Logos was divine," while the introduction of Enoch into the text of 1 Peter 3:19 is a rather wild scholarly guess.

Moffatt's version remained a solo effort, with no authority but his own. R. A. Knox's version, on the other hand, received the official endorsement of the Catholic hierarchy and so stood alongside the Douai Bible as an official version. Like the Douai, it is a translation of the Vulgate, though with careful attention throughout to the original languages. Knox explained his principles in an important book titled *On Englishing the Bible* (1949). Prominent among them is the desire, while writing natural English, to avoid being merely contemporary. Rather, he aimed to produce such good, timeless English that it would not seem dated, even in two hundred years' time. Time will tell, but unfortunately for Knox's version it was only another twenty years before a much more widely read Catholic translation—the Jerusalem Bible—appeared.

But while this trove of individual Bible translations was being produced, the inadequacy of the more "official" RV (and its American counterpart) was increasingly felt, and a movement began toward a more extensive revision in the KJV tradition. The result was the Revised Standard Version (hereafter RSV) of 1946 (NT; whole Bible 1952), a revision by an American committee of the ASV.

The committee's aim was a thorough revision that nonetheless retained the "qualities which have given to the King James Version a supreme place in English literature." The RV and ASV had retained the archaic verb endings ("-est," "-eth") and the use of "thou" instead of the singular "you"; the new version abandoned these archaisms, except for retaining "thou" where God is addressed. The ASV's use of "Jehovah" was dropped again in favor of "the LORD." Clearly obsolete forms of expression were replaced, and the language has an altogether more modern feel, though it is far from colloquial.

Poetic material was set out more consistently in lines, and in other ways the typography was brought into the twentieth century, as illustrated by the use of quotation marks for direct speech.

The careful attention to developments in textual criticism that marked the RV was carried further in its successor. One interesting feature is the appearance (thirteen times) in Isaiah of notes that attribute the reading adopted to "one ancient ms." This is the great Isaiah scroll from Qumran, discovered in 1947 and published just in time for the committee to take it into account. Since this scroll

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dates more than a thousand years earlier than the Masoretic manuscripts on which previous translators depended, it marks a significant move forward in translating the Hebrew Bible, comparable with the influence of the great fourth-century codices on the RV of the NT.

Updated readings of the Hebrew and Greek texts and (relatively unadventurous) attempts to introduce more modern idiom inevitably attracted conservative criticism and vilification for the new version, including the widespread assertion that its translators were determined to undermine the divinity of Jesus. Looking back now it is hard to see what the fuss was all about, since the RSV is far more conservative and reassuringly familiar in its language than most more recent versions (each of which in its turn has received the same treatment). But the long dominance of the KJV had encouraged a resistance to change that the archaic style of the RV had not seriously threatened but that now awoke with vigor.

From the New English Bible to the Present Day

The RSV was still essentially in the tradition of Bible translation going back to Tyndale. It was a revision, not a new translation. We have noted above some more radically new translations in the first half of the twentieth century, but these remained individual contributions. There was still no genuinely new translation, carried out by a representative body and commanding wide recognition.

The New English Bible (hereafter NEB: NT 1961; whole Bible 1970) was the pioneer. The committee that produced it was set up jointly by many of the Protestant churches in Britain and contained many of the most respected biblical scholars of the day. They were "free to employ a contemporary idiom rather than reproduce the traditional 'biblical' English" and were assisted by a panel of "trusted literary advisers." The resultant style is certainly "new," though many ordinary readers have found it too literary, even donnish. But its publication marked a new era in English Bible translation. Many others soon followed. There follows a list, in chronological order and with minimal descriptions, of the more important committee or "official" translations (of very varied character) up to the time of writing. Because of the proliferation of new versions in recent years, the list necessarily becomes much more selective toward the end. (In most cases the NT was published first; dates given are for the whole Bible.)

- The Jerusalem Bible (1966), a new Catholic translation based on the French *La Bible de Jérusalem,* is stylistically elegant and widely used by Protestant readers. A New Jerusalem Bible (1985), following a new edition of *La Bible de Jérusalem* in 1973, is the work of Henry Wansbrough, with an even more elegant and readable style than its predecessor. It also took significant steps toward inclusive language.

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- The New American Bible (1970), produced by members of the Catholic Biblical Association for the Roman Catholic bishops of America, has a more formal style. The NT, rather hastily prepared, was replaced by a new translation in 1987.
- The New American Standard Bible (1970) was a conservative attempt to update the ASV of 1901. Its English style is sacrificed to literal translation. It is little used outside America.
- The Good News Bible (1976; also known as Today's English Version) was produced under the auspices of the United Bible Societies and designed to be especially helpful for those for whom English is a second language. It uses language that is "natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous," following the principle of dynamic equivalence (as advocated in the works of Eugene A. Nida). The result is a vigorous and uncluttered style particularly welcomed among younger people for whom "Bible English" is an unfamiliar language.
- The New International Version (1978) was translated by a committee representing the evangelical constituency primarily in North America. An Anglicized version was also produced. The NIV has a moderately contemporary style that reads well in public or in private. It is currently the best-selling version in English. An inclusive-language edition was published in Britain in 1996. The New Testament edition of Today's New International Version, a version based on the NIV and incorporating inclusive-language changes, has recently been published.
- The New King James Version (1982) preserves the textual features of the KJV, but with modernized language and spelling. It is a rather quixotic enterprise, inspired by the dominance of the KJV in America and a backlash against modern textual criticism.
- Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text (1985), replacing the Jewish Publication Society Bible of 1917, is a totally new translation, using an "idiom for idiom" rather than "word for word" principle.
- The New Century Version (1987), an evangelical translation intended for young people, deliberately simplifies difficult language, with a good degree of imagination and rhythmic feeling.
- The Revised English Bible (1989) is a major revision of the NEB, with a much improved style and fairly consistent use of inclusive language.
- The New Revised Standard Version (1989) is a very extensive revision of the RSV, with the last of the "thous" removed and with the most comprehensive attention to inclusive language yet attempted.

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- The Contemporary English Version (1995) is an American Bible Society version taking further the aim of the Good News Bible, with a view especially to oral reading and to those who do not have English as a first language. It uses inclusive language and has a considerably more paraphrastic style than most recent versions.
- The New Living Translation (1996) is a major revision of the Living Bible (see below), now not by one person but by an evangelical committee. It self-consciously moves away from paraphrase to "thought for thought" translation and so is much more mainstream than its predecessor.

Following the lead of the NEB, most recent committee versions, while drawn up by biblical scholars, have profited from the help of literary consultants. This feature, together with the continuing advances in biblical scholarship and textual criticism, means that Bible translation has entered a quite new phase since 1960. No previous generation (not even that of Tyndale and of the KJV) has been so well served with versions that both communicate effectively and can be relied on to convey the original sense as nearly as it can be ascertained. (It should be noted, however, that not all translations aim to be idiomatic; mention will be made later of an approach that prefers a deliberately "foreign" idiom in order to retain the features of the original language.)

Alongside these committee or "official" versions, the spate of individual versions has gone on increasing. Even to list them would be impossible. I mention just three that have been influential:

- J. B. Phillips, recognizing that young people no longer understood "Bible English," produced his famous *Letters to Young Churches* (the Epistles) in 1947 and completed the NT in 1958 and *Four Prophets* in 1963. His style is lively paraphrase, sometimes colloquial to the point of inelegance, but vigorous and arresting. In the days before the Good News Bible, Phillips filled a significant gap, particularly for younger readers, and is still widely read today.
- A more idiosyncratic paraphrase is the Living Bible of Kenneth Taylor (1971), in very colloquial American idiom and giving clear expression to the author's conservative theology. ("The theological lodestar in this book has been a rigid evangelical position.") But as a result of aggressive marketing it was for a time probably more widely read than any other individual version. It is replaced by the New Living Translation (see above).
- Eugene Peterson's *The Message* (1993) is a recent move along similar lines to the Living Bible, using powerful contemporary American idiom and

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> perhaps better described as an interpretation than as a paraphrase. It aims to use "the same language in which we do our shopping, talk with our friends, worry about world affairs, and teach our children table manners."

All these versions are, or intend to be, in "standard English" (though transatlantic variations have made "Anglicized editions" of some primarily American versions necessary). But attempts have also been made to translate the Bible or parts of it into non-standard English; I possess, for instance, *The Gospels in Scouse* and *Chapters from the New Testament translated into the Wensleydale Tongue*.

Some such versions are relatively lighthearted, but a more serious and scholarly version is W. L. Lorimer's *The New Testament in Scots* (1983), based on a lifetime of study of the Scots language. Here is Matthew 5:14–15: "Ye ar the licht o the warld. A toun biggit on a hill-tap canna be hoddit; an again, whan fowk licht a lamp, they pit-it-na ablo a meal-bassie, but set it up on the dresser-heid, an syne it gies licht for aabodie i the houss."

Translations have also been made into various forms of Pidgin English. Here are the first four beatitudes from Matthew 5:3–6 in a West African pidgin, as translated by the Mill Hill Fathers in Cameroon:

> Bless he live for people whe them de poor for heart;—
> na country for Heaven he go be them own.
> Bless he live for people whe them get strong heart;—
> them go chop country.
> Bless for people whe them de cry;—
> them go cool them heart.
> Bless for them people whe them de hungry for be holy;—
> them heart he go full up.

SOME ISSUES IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

We have noted that some English versions were made from the Latin (notably Wycliffe, Coverdale, Douai, Knox), and even today many translations made into African, Asian, and Latin American languages are (regrettably but understandably) made from an English version by translators who do not know Hebrew and Greek. But modern English translations are themselves routinely based on the Hebrew and Greek. The question that remains, however, is which Hebrew and Greek texts should be used.

THE TEXT TO BE TRANSLATED

The dramatic increase in known manuscripts and advances in text-critical method mean that we are no longer in the position of the KJV translators who

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had to depend on only a few late manuscripts. The translator who is not an expert in textual criticism can with a great deal of confidence work from the currently published critical texts. But where manuscript evidence is divided, critics are sometimes not in agreement, and a translator must take sides over the omission or inclusion of a suspect verse or over which of two words is more likely to have been in the original text. At such times, at least a basic acquaintance with the highly specialized science of textual criticism is needed.

A helpful innovation introduced into the United Bible Societies' edition of the Greek New Testament is a rating of each disputed reading from A to D, where A indicates the editors' virtual certainty over the text they chose to print, while D indicates that they had great difficulty in making up their minds. This Greek NT was designed for use by translators, who are thus allowed to share the textual critics' dilemmas and to know where they may responsibly part company from them. A companion volume, Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (1971, 1994), explains in laypeople's terms the basis on which each decision was made and the reasons for disagreements among the editors. With such helps, the translator is on much firmer ground. Nothing comparable exists for the Hebrew text, where the issues and methods are quite different.

Literal versus Dynamic Translation

Any translator is faced with the competing demands of the desire, on the one hand, to be as faithful as possible to the original and, on the other, to produce a version that communicates well and is a pleasure to read. The more disparate the structures of the languages involved, the greater this tension becomes.

But for the Bible translator there is the additional feature that the very words of the text to be translated are regarded by some potential readers, and perhaps by the translators themselves, as the product of divine inspiration. The form, as well as the content, of the original may thus come to be regarded as sacrosanct, the only acceptable version thus being one that mirrors as closely as possible the grammatical structures and lexical range of the Hebrew or Greek text. Such an attitude resembles the Muslim insistence that there can never be a "translation" of the Quran, only interpretations, because it is the Arabic text itself that is the locus of divine inspiration.

A recent example of a translation that deliberately reproduces the features of Hebrew language rather than using natural English idiom is Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses* (1996). Fox follows the principles of Martin Buber (1878–1965), conveniently set out in a recent English translation of some of Buber's writings titled *Scripture and Translation*. Buber believed that the impact

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of a text, particularly of the biblical text, cannot be reduced merely to its "meaning" but that the form and sound of the words are equally important and must be retained in a translation. The result, as found in Fox's translation, is intentionally foreign to the English ear and aims to impress with its strangeness rather than to eliminate the cultural and linguistic distance between the original text and the modern reader. To translate merely "sense for sense" is to lose the power of the original.

A less literary concern probably underlies those translations, ancient and modern, generally characterized as excessively literal (such as Aquila's Greek OT, the first Wycliffe translation, the New American Standard Bible). Such versions intentionally subordinate natural idiom to the "faithful" reproduction of the sacred text. The alternative is "paraphrase," a label often used as a term of disapprobation—paraphrase allowing the translator's own ideas to intrude into the text, so that on this view the authority of the original is relativized.

Over against this literalistic tendency stands the philosophy of translation that has come to be known as "dynamic equivalence" (more recently, "functional equivalence"). This philosophy is especially associated with the work of Eugene A. Nida, having come to prominence particularly in the context of the continuing enterprise of translating the Bible into the thousands of languages that so far have no Bible version. On this view, what matters is not the form of the text but its content, and it is the translator's responsibility to render that sense into the target language in whatever way will best communicate to native speakers of that language, without regard to such matters as the grammatical structure, word order, vocabulary, or cultural features of the original. Translations produced under this philosophy are typically more free, readable, and elegant and can fit more comfortably into the cultural context of the intended readers—but they are often suspected of having adulterated the sacred text.

The Good News Bible, produced for the Bible Societies, was a self-conscious paradigm of dynamic equivalence. But in fact virtually all English versions of the last half century have accepted the principle of translating idiom for idiom rather than word for word, even though the degree of freedom exercised has varied. Thus, even the relatively conservative New International Version, regarded by some as veering toward literalism, while it lists as its first concern "the accuracy of the translation and its fidelity to the thought of the biblical writers" (notice "thought," not "words") also affirms that "faithful communication of the meaning of the writers of the Bible demands frequent modifications in sentence structure and constant regard for the contextual meanings of words." The resultant translation claims, with considerable justification, to be in "clear and natural English."

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The Problem of Religious Conservatism

Conservatism—in the sense of resistance to change—seems to affect people in matters of religion more readily than in other areas. Thoroughly modern people with radical political views may nonetheless be staunch advocates of the KJV and the Book of Common Prayer. Saint Luke long ago summed up the typical reaction to change in matters of religion: "The old is good" (Luke 5:39 NRSV). This is a hurdle every Bible translator must face.

Shortly after *Good News for Modern Man* (the New Testament of the Good News Bible) was published, I attended an English-speaking service in a remote hill-station in Nigeria. After reading a passage from the new version (designed for precisely that sort of situation where English was, at best, a second language), the Nigerian leader of the service put the book down, saying, "Now we will hear it from the real Bible," and he proceeded to read the same passage from the KJV. This devotion to the KJV as "the real Bible" is still to be found in many English-speaking congregations, after decades of "better" translations being freely available. To talk of a corrupt text and of language that does not communicate to most people today cuts no ice: The Bible is expected to speak in Elizabethan English. The colloquial language employed by Tyndale so that the Scriptures would be accessible to the ploughboy has thus become, with the passing of time, the esoteric language of religion, and the more remote it becomes from ordinary speech the more special and holy it seems.

The task of Bible translation is much easier where there is no existing version to be supplanted. I met a translator who had been commissioned to produce a dynamic new translation for a tribe in Zaire who already had a Bible version translated from the KJV and thus quite remote from the current form of the language. He told me how he read out of his fresh, new, colloquial version with pride and how the hearers commented favorably on the ease of understanding but then pointed out that, of course, it wasn't the Bible! It almost seems that, by definition, the Bible must be remote and unintelligible.

But the Bible, or most of it, was not written in a special "holy" language. The Hebrew prophets spoke in vigorous contemporary idioms, and the New Testament writers used "market Greek." A translation that will do justice to the intention of the original writers must put intelligibility before the maintenance of traditional language that no longer communicates effectively.

Public and Private Reading

In our day when the reading of books is an overwhelmingly private activity, we need to remember that the biblical books were written in a period of

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widespread illiteracy and that many of them were most likely originally designed for public reading. And even today, while most books are translated for private reading, Bible translators have to reckon with the fact that their work is likely to be read aloud in church as part of an act of worship.

One implication is that a translator must beware of expressions that may be perfectly clear in print but ambiguous or worse when heard orally. There is no visible punctuation to guide the hearer, and one cannot be sure that the skill of every church reader is sufficient to avoid misconstruction of sentences where punctuation is the only way of differentiating two meanings. Some translation committees have therefore wisely made a point of having their proposed translations read aloud before agreeing on them.

The makeup of a typical congregation makes heavy demands on a translator's skill. There will be some who love the reassuring old words of the KJV and others whose concern is to hear language that communicates directly in lively, contemporary style. Some will set great store by the dignity of the language, others by its freshness and ability to challenge. To satisfy all tastes is an impossible task, and the translator who has a sensitivity to public reading will usually settle for a compromise.

The wide range of types of translation now available, while potentially confusing for a newcomer, does allow those responsible for public worship the opportunity to select a version suitable for each particular group or occasion. Some versions, however, are not designed for public reading. More literal versions that do not read like idiomatic English may nonetheless be helpful for close, analytical study of the text by those who are not able to work in the original languages. On the other hand, a colloquial paraphrase such as the Living Bible, which would often be unsuitable for public reading, may arrest the attention of a new Bible reader and suggest new ways of looking at the text.

Inclusive Language

By the end of the twentieth century, the traditional English use of "men" to mean "people" and "he" as a pronoun for an unspecified person of either sex became increasingly unacceptable, and Bible versions have been adapted accordingly. Thus, while the RSV, the JB, the NEB, and the NIV had used the "generic masculine," their revisions in the 1980s and 1990s have gone to great lengths to be inclusive (or, as some now prefer to say, "gender-accurate") wherever the original did not appear to be gender-specific.

Such accommodation to modern sensibilities is easily lampooned as trendy and politically correct, but it is, in fact, a matter of good translation. Thus the

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Greek *anthrōpos* (human being), while masculine in form, is clearly differentiated from *anēr* (a male person), and to use the same English term "man" for both was always liable to distort the sense. It has taken modern sensitivity to exclusive language to alert us to the poverty of the English language in this respect and to send us in search of better ways to convey the sense of the original.

But, of course, Hebrew and Greek also use generic masculine pronouns and terms of address such as "brothers" when clearly the whole church community is in view. In the current climate of thought, many female readers feel excluded by such terms, and so if a translator continues to offer literal (masculine) renderings, the effect is actually to misrepresent the biblical writers, who did not have only males in mind.

On the other hand, there is sometimes room for debate over whether the original did intend to be inclusive. The patriarchal culture lying behind much of the masculine language of the Bible is itself also part of the data to be translated, and it is a fair question as to how far the translator may properly obscure it.

There are certain well-tried devices to avoid gender-specific language, such as turning singular generic statements into the plural (and thus substituting "they" for "he"), or using the first or second person in place of the third where the context allows the sense to be conveyed in this way. Words like "people," "humanity," and "mortals" can be used in place of "man," "mankind," and "men." But there is the danger that by reducing the range of vocabulary available, the translation may be made less elegant (e.g., by too many uses of "people" in a short space). And there are disputes as to how open English idiom is to accept terms such as "humans" and "humankind," or whether it allows a "whoever" to be followed by a "they." Usage is fluid, and judgments as to what is currently acceptable will vary. But the issue will not go away, and it is hard to imagine any new translation in the future perpetuating the generic masculines of the traditional versions.

There are further problems for the Bible translator in this area. "Fishers of men" (Mark 1:17) is a well-loved phrase that aptly echoes the preceding mention of "fishermen." It is hard to see how an inclusive version can retain the familiar phrase or match the elegance of the wordplay. Or what about Jesus' regular self-designation as "the Son of Man," a very masculine phrase that means literally "a human being"? If "the son of man" in Psalm 8:4 becomes "human beings," what are we to do with Hebrews 2:6, where on the basis of that verse the writer sees the psalm as pointing to Jesus? Even with the generous use of footnotes, such issues are not easily resolved, and the Bible translator does not have the luxury of writing a commentary on his or her text!

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All this has to do with biblical ways of speaking about people. Feminist discomfort with masculine language about God (a masculine devil seems to have been found less offensive) has not yet been reflected in mainstream Bible translation. This theological movement is a different issue from the exclusion of half the human race by the use of generic masculine pronouns, and translators have rightly not seen it as their business to address it.

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NOTES

1. This is an adapted version of an article ("The Bible in English") contributed to *The Oxford Guide to Literature in English Translation* (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2000, reprinted by permission). Originally designed for a nontheological audience, it covers

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ground that theologically informed readers will take for granted. But I hope that its attempt to stand back for an overview of the nature of the translator's task and of the way the task has been undertaken over the years will prove of some interest, even to those who know it all already! I am delighted that the editors chose to include this article in a volume honoring Ron Youngblood, whom I have known in his capacity as a translator since 1990 when I joined the Committee on Bible Translation responsible for the NIV. Ron had already served on that committee for many years before I arrived, and I owe him much for the insights I gained from his long experience and exemplary care as a translator. His sense of fun and keen eye for the ridiculous have enlivened many a heavy session. I respectfully salute him with one of his favorite "biblical" expressions: "Ho, such a one!"

2. Translations of the Bible into English have been detailed in the text and are not listed again here.