

Too Many Modern Versions?

by A. G. Newell

Dr. Newell, who is a librarian in the University of Liverpool, is a valued and frequent contributor to THE EVANGELICAL QUARTERLY especially on matters of literary interest. His qualifications in this area give weight to his question, 'Have we too many modern versions of the Bible?' Dr. Newell wrote this article before the appearance of the New International Version, and it is in no way an attack on the zeal of the evangelical scholars who produced this version.

These remarks were generated by a single sentence which I decided on reflection to delete from an article I had been asked to write on the failure of many evangelical Christians to read secular literature.¹ As it stood, what I had written made sense — at least, to me — but it needed an exploration of its implications. I must make it absolutely clear that nothing I am going to say is to be construed as critical of the intention which motivates those behind almost every translation of the Bible into English — that the Word of God should be made available in a form which will communicate its message as clearly as possible to as many people as possible. When Erasmus published his edition of the Greek New Testament in 1516, he wrote in the preface, 'I wish that the farm worker might sing parts (of the Gospels and Epistles) at the plough, that the weaver might hum them at the shuttle, and that the traveller might beguile the weariness of the way by reciting them.' Tyndale was echoing the notion when he told an opponent, according to John Foxe, 'If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.'² Every true Christian can only applaud these statements.

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So I gladly confess that versions of the Bible in contemporary English have been a feature of this country's church history since the Reformation. A glance through Darlow and Moule's *Historical Catalogue of the Printed Editions of Holy Scripture in the Library of the British and Foreign Bible Society* (1903) will demonstrate this. Apart from the complicated series of versions which culminated in the Authorised Version,³ there has been a steady stream of 'new' translations since the mid-seventeenth century, when the AV finally ousted the Puritan 'Geneva' version to become the standard English Bible. A cursory count through Darlow and Moule turned up 26 translations (including revisions of the Roman Catholic Douai-Rheims-Challoner version) between 1719 and 1897, and I must have missed some. These translations numbered among them at least

¹ 'Only One Good Book?', *Third Way*, i, no. 20 (20 October, 1977), 22.

² Quoted by F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible* (London, 1961), 29.

³ The first mention of a version will give its name in full, but thereafter it will be referred to by its initials, when these are in common use.

two by sterling evangelicals, Philip Doddridge (1765) and Thomas Haweis (1795).

But I wish to consider modern English versions. I take 'modern' to mean at present in use and available, excluding the AV (although we must not forget the remarkable fact that the AV of 1611 remains very much in use and is currently available in numerous different editions). After deciding to try to justify that deleted sentence I looked to see what versions of the English Bible or New Testament we have at home. Excluding translations older than the AV, I found the AV itself, the Revised Version, Weymouth, Moffatt, the New American Standard Version, C. B. Williams, W. F. Beck, the Revised Standard Version, J. B. Phillips, E. V. and C. H. Rieu, the New English Bible, the Jerusalem Bible, F. F. Bruce's Paul's Epistles, the Good News Bible, K. N. Taylor's Living Bible and the New International Isaiah. Twelve of these appear to be in print, as are, in addition, the Amplified Version, the Basic English Version, the American Standard Version, J. N. Darby, the Roman Catholic Holy Name and Confraternity Versions, and the Jehovah's Witnesses' Kingdom and New World Versions. It is quite possible that there may be more which have escaped being listed in *British Books in Print* and *Books in Print*.

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Most of the versions just named are twentieth-century translations. C. Vaughan's *The New Testament from 26 Translations* includes even more: those by J. A. Broadus, Alford, G. Verkuyl's Berkeley Version, W. J. Conybeare, E. J. Goodspeed, Ronald Knox, G. M. Lamsa, Helen B. Montgomery, O. M. Norlie, J. B. Rotherham's Emphasized, and the Twentieth Century New Testament. This is still not a complete list of Bible translations into English. Moreover, it is well known that numerous commentators supply their own translation of the text of the book on which they are writing. As long ago as 1538, Miles Coverdale argued that the existence of various translations of the Bible as a whole or of the New Testament alone was a blessing: 'If thou open thine eyes and consider well the gift of the Holy Ghost therein, thou shalt see that one translation declareth, openeth and illustrateth another, and that in many cases one is a plain commentary unto another.'⁴ All Bible-reading Christians must agree with Coverdale, because we all benefit by comparing translation with translation, whether in our private devotions or in preparation for preaching, teaching or discussion.

There are, then, very many modern English translations of the Bible or New Testament currently in circulation. It seems that the most

⁴ Quoted by C. Vaughan, *The New Testament from 26 Translations* (London, 1967), Introduction, 1.

popular (or, at least the best-selling) of modern versions are the RSV, the NEB and the GNB. There are obvious advantages inherent in this situation, which can be summarized as follows: (1) By keeping the Scriptures in the public eye through news items announcing new versions on their appearance and by the presence of copies of various paperbacks and cheap editions in ordinary bookshops, these translations serve to bring the existence of the Word of God before those who might otherwise remain unaware of it. They thus fulfil an evangelistic purpose. (2) The unchurched and agnostic average man and woman are now culturally unfitted to read the AV, whereas these modern versions are deliberately intended to communicate the biblical message to them. Because they find that it is more easily understood than they had anticipated, they are more likely to read the Scriptures in these translations. (3) A variety of translations is beneficial to the Christian who wants to study his Bible in some detail, as Coverdale pointed out, so these modern versions also serve to edify those believers who have little knowledge of Hebrew and Greek.

Why, it may be asked, therefore, too many modern versions? In the present situation where so many English translations circulate in competition without a 'standard', authoritative one, I suggest we can recognize a reflection of the existing state of our pluralist society and culture. One religion, one system of values, one culture take their place on an equal footing with all others. We are permitted, perhaps, to prefer this one to that one, but only on subjective, not objective, grounds. A curious double standard operates in the political sphere (what is right for A is wrong for B), but rarely elsewhere.

My first contention is that the existing multiplicity of available translations of the Bible and New Testament into English tends to make for a measure of confusion. At the lowest level, this manifests itself in the congregation. In my own small church it is not unknown for those present to have brought between them to the service the following versions: AV, RSV, NEB, New International, Living Bible, GNB, and possibly the Amplified. The great usefulness of these translations for private or group study is converted into a hindrance in the public worship of those churches where it is customary for the individual to follow the lesson or reading in his own Bible. I would be inclined to lay some of the blame for the decline of this admirable habit on the difficulties of following the reading from one version in another. An older worshipper, or a younger one, for that matter, will eventually surrender the attempt. We now possess no standard version for public reading.

When evangelical organizations try to encourage their young people to memorize scriptural passages, they are confronted by the same

problem. Some allow the use of a number of different versions. Examining Boards have to make a similar offer. Within living memory, it was usual to expect children to learn certain Psalms and other portions by heart, but they were able to do so from the only version in common use, the AV. The situation encouraged the memorizing of Scripture. Many of us can no doubt recall Christians whose minds were stored with Scripture to a remarkable degree. Today, the number of versions available, many in colloquial language, positively discourages the practice, and I believe that we are the poorer for it.

More important than our current failure to recognize one standard version for public reading is its natural consequence — a certain blurring of exactitude in expression. Where formerly we could explain the meaning of difficult phrases from an agreed, standardized wording, we are now confronted with a variety of phrasing in the first place. If this situation has the advantage of making everybody aware, as perhaps they were not consciously so previously, that the AV is a translation from Hebrew and Greek, it tends also to introduce an element of doubt into the minds of weaker brethren. The relativism which characterizes secular society seems likely to secure a bridgehead in Christian circles at the most dangerous point — the basic attitude to the Word of God.

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This brings me to my second submission: that the plethora of modern English versions of the Bible raises the question of the relationship of a translation to the original text. We are not in a situation similar to that of a pioneer missionary translator, who has to learn the language of some remote, hitherto unevangelized tribe, sometimes reduce it to writing, and then attempt to translate the Greek New Testament into this 'new' language. The evangelistic purpose must then be primary; the object is to convey as quickly and as clearly as possible the 'message' of the gospel to primitive people who are not only ignorant of the Christian faith, but also, perhaps, capable of only oral communication. The sort of translation appropriate to such circumstances is bare and stark, with cultural equivalents used freely to bring home meanings which cannot be literally translated because of defective vocabulary or cultural dissimilarities. A translation system on these lines will not do in the English-speaking West.

Any new translation published today has to achieve success in a crowded field. It has to stand, willy-nilly, in a great tradition of biblical translation reaching back to Wycliffe and beyond. Once the advertising and reviews have been forgotten, it has got to make its own way in the world. Many serious students of the Bible will probably buy a copy of the first edition, but thereafter sales will depend on its reputation. Although the RV, for example, continues to be prized for its close

translation of its updated original text and thus is frequently used by theological students,⁵ it failed to supersede the AV in popular esteem.

What do we look for in an English translation of the Bible? It must address the society for which it is written, otherwise it will be nothing more than an historical curiosity, like some of the versions in Darlow and Moule's catalogue. While it remains faithful to the original text, it must, therefore, read like acceptable contemporary standard English. Difficult passages ought not to be determined by the theological presuppositions of its translators, nor should theological comments be introduced into the text. (At least the outspoken Puritan glosses in the 'Geneva' Bible were confined to the margin!) The norm aimed at nowadays seems to be what is called the principle of equivalent effect — to give an impression similar or nearly similar to that produced by the original on its contemporary readers or listeners. Usually, equivalence entails the rendering of idioms and metaphors in the original by English substitutes designed to produce the same impression.

A translation must, however, remain faithful to the original, or it becomes a 'free' translation or paraphrase, incorporating interpretive comment. Both these kinds of translation can hide differences in the text they are rendering, which they have either adopted (as the GNB translates the United Bible Societies' Greek New Testament) or established eclectically as they proceeded (as the NEB did). Greater available knowledge of the original text of Scripture, the fruit of modern scholarship, demanded the RV and some later versions. Clearly, any respectable translation must be characterized by absolute fidelity to its underlying original text. If it is influenced in the textual variations it chooses by considerations of style and interpretative bias, as the NEB is alleged to have been,⁶ then it is less than faithful, for such reasons cannot justify the adoption of inferior readings.

From this brief glance at the question of the original text we are naturally led on to consider the matter of inspiration. Most evangelical bases of faith contain something about this. A recent able argument for the Bible's 'infallibility' rather than 'inerrancy' casts no doubt on the crucial tenet of the divine inspiration of Scripture.⁷ The doctrine remains a distinguishing mark of what is still loosely called 'fundamentalism'. The Lausanne Covenant declares, 'We affirm the divine

⁵ The RV is enthusiastically supported by H. F. D. Sparks in the Introduction to his *Synopsis of the Gospels* (London, 1977).

⁶ V. Perry's, article, 'Two Modern Versions Compared', *Evangelical Quarterly*, xlix (1977), 206-19, helped me greatly at this point.

⁷ S. T. Davis, *The Debate about the Bible* (Philadelphia, 1977), 115.

234 Versions of the Bible in everyday English are not only inappropriate; they not only tend to debase taste. They also lose the educative value which the AV possessed in such abundant measure. It is no accident that the castaways in the radio programme 'Desert Island Discs' are automatically provided with the works of Shakespeare and the Bible: these are commonly accepted as the two monuments of the language, for presumably the Bible is the AV. The AV has exercised immense influence on our literature and even on the language itself. When literacy became increasingly coveted by the poorer classes, one of the few books they could afford to own was the Bible, and it served in many a family as a primer with which the children were taught to read. Its influence for good was incalculable, because early impressions are retained, and along with the simple vigorous English of the AV children and adults alike imbibed something of biblical teaching. Times have changed. The nation is largely literate. Every store has racks of paperbacks, with which not even the most modern of English versions of the Bible can seriously hope to compete. The versions offered for distribution should therefore be the best, both in their accuracy of translation from the best possible text, and, I submit, in their style.

I have suggested that modern versions of the Bible in simplified, basic, colloquial or idiomatic English may make for trivialization by lowering Scripture to the level of similarly expressed secular writing, by destroying the penumbra of sanctity appropriate to reverent worship which surrounds the AV and those versions which follow in its tradition, and by forfeiting the educative influence formerly exercised by the AV. Perhaps more important than these losses is the possibility that by being conveyed in colloquial modern language the biblical message itself — the content of the Bible — may become trivialized. The French say, 'The style is the man': if the style is pedestrian, common, journalistic, everyday, then the content is likely to be the same. Style and content are one and indivisible. The pungent common speech of first-century citizens and slaves won't do for a world which has known the presence of Christianity for 2,000 years and has been accustomed to literary versions of the Scriptures in the vernacular for the last 400 years.

Of course, it is possible for the Word of God to be rendered in the English of the popular press. But such a translation runs the very real risk of debasing, trivializing its content. Do we really want to use versions that translate Gn. 6:1 as 'Now a population explosion took place upon the earth', or 1 Sa. 17:32 as ' "Don't worry about a thing," David told him. "I'll take care of this Philistine!" ' ?¹⁰ This colloquial style

¹⁰ *Living Bible.*

debases what it is trying to convey; it reduces the narrative almost to the level of a strip cartoon. Who is going to take Goliath seriously if the boy David can dismiss his threat so glibly? The language is appropriate to Superman or Captain Marvel, perhaps, but not to an historical godly hero. Such things are not for the literate. They will inevitably reduce his estimate of and his reverence for the content of the Bible.

To recapitulate. The great variety of modern versions of the Bible and the New Testament available serve purposes of evangelism, communication and edification, challenging the unbeliever and assisting the understanding of the Christian. While welcoming these important benefits, I have argued that we have to take into account a number of disadvantages. (1) This very multiplicity makes for confusion in the public reading of the Scriptures, discourages the practice of memorizing and encourages doubt as to the meaning of the original text. (2) Each new version ought to possess sufficient merit to justify its existence. (3) Belief in inspiration renders it imperative still to consult the original text through reference works and commentaries. (4) The more idiomatic modern versions make for trivialization, helping to incapacitate us for the reading of good secular literature, depriving the Word of God of an appropriate medium for its essentially serious message, jettisoning the educative potential of the AV tradition, and, most important, tending to debase our appreciation of the very content of Scripture. I am prepared neither to suggest exactly how many modern versions would be sufficient, nor to indicate which I would select for withdrawal from circulation! But I have tried to express as rationally as I can my conviction that there are too many and that this situation inevitably gives rise to certain significant undesirable consequences.

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Let the late Stevie Smith have the last word:

Why are the clergy of the Church of England
Always altering the words of the prayers in the Prayer Book?
Cranmer's touch was surer than theirs, do they not respect him?
For instance last night in church I heard
(I italicize the interpolation)
'The Lord bless you and keep you *and all who are dear unto you*'
As the blessing is a congregational blessing and meant to be
This is questionable on theological grounds
But is it not offensive to the ear and also ludicrous?
That 'unto' is a particularly ripe piece of idiocy
Oh how offensive it is. I suppose we shall have next
'Lighten our darkness we beseech thee oh Lord *and the darkness of all who are
dear unto us.*'
It seems a pity. Does Charity object to the objection?

Then I cry, and not for the first time to that smooth face
Charity, have pity.¹¹

What the poet felt about the Prayer Book on aesthetic grounds, I believe
to hold good also for the English Bible.¹²

¹¹ *The Collected Poems of Stevie Smith* (London, 1975), 335.

¹² A stimulating collection of essays on this topic will be found in *New Universities Quarterly* 23 (1979), 259-305; three literary scholars criticize modern biblical and Prayer Book versions, and Professor Kenneth Grayston defends the NEB on the grounds that translation is impossible anyway.