

Biblical Translation and the Church

by James Barr

Not long ago different branches of the Church seemed to be univocally associated with certain translations of the Biblical text: Protestantism with the King James Version, Roman Catholicism with the Vulgate and, less centrally, with the Douai Version. Doctrine could be immediately referred to a single standard and official translation. This older situation has in recent years quite suddenly dissolved, and no one quite knows what will take its place. It is far from clear that new translations can or should come to occupy the position which the older ones had. For one thing, there are too many of them, with still more to come, and the search for finality would seem to be an infinite regress. One hears that modern scholarship is solving age-old problems, and this is partly true; but it is also increasing the complexity of factors which have to be taken into account and thus (I suspect) making more remote the possibility that a single translation, fully correct from the scholarly point of view, can be produced. It is not long ago that one heard in discussions of theological education that new and accurate translations might make less necessary the training of ordinands in the biblical languages; but on the contrary, the variety of translations may in course of time make the original languages more indispensable as a means to discrimination (thereby incidentally re-creating something of the situation in which St Jerome himself was led to learn Hebrew!).

An interesting distinction can be made between two types of translation, according as they aim for 'formal equivalence' or for 'dynamic equivalence' (the terms—rather clumsy—are not my own). A formal-equivalence translation tries to create in the new language (e.g. English) a message the form of which is close to the form of the original (e.g. Hebrew), believing that as a result of the closeness of form the effect of the new version on the reader will be close to the effect of the original on its hearer. A dynamic-equivalence translation tries to assess the effect of the original on its readers (or hearers) and then tries to produce a version which will have on modern readers a similar effect; the relation is established through an emphasis on the effect rather than on the form. The difference is somewhat like that between 'literal' and 'free', but is not quite the same thing. J. B. Phillips's 'give one another a hearty handshake all around' is a good example of dynamic equivalence, where a more formal approach would say 'greet one another with a holy kiss' (Rom. 16, 16).

The distinction between the two types, though far from absolute, seems useful and interesting. It is clear that our present time is showing a preference for some kind of dynamic equivalence, and this in turn reflects the changed place of Christianity within the culture. Formal equivalence can well accompany a dominant position of religion in the community; this dominance provides the impetus for the indigenization within the community of the peculiar forms and terms of the biblical language. But where religion is deeply challenged in the community and feels itself in comparative decline, though it may respond by retreating into a private world of formally biblical language, it may also feel that the biblical message must be expressed in the language of the 'man in the street', and that the essence of the Bible can best be communicated if it is unhampered by the load of ideas and terms now archaic.

In this regard the Jerusalem Bible takes a middle course, and I think wisely. This is partly because its stylistic level is, in my opinion, generally well and tastefully chosen in respect of this problem; it neither perpetuates unnecessary archaisms nor (generally) introduces such excessive *aggiornamenti* as to obscure the temporal and cultural distance between us and the men of the Bible. Partly, however, there is another reason: the fact that this is an *annotated* Bible, and that it can therefore present a more formal version of the text itself, while dealing with certain historical and cultural obscurities in the notes. The presence of notes enables this volume to deal with a number of problems which could not be handled in a Bible which presented a plain text and nothing more; not only can they give explanations of archaic terms and customs, but (more important, I would submit, in the special situation of the Roman Catholic Church) they can discuss problems of the relation between certain key texts and their later doctrinal application, and questions of sources, genuineness and historical criticism. All these points I shall illustrate shortly.

The story of the origin of the version is a very odd one, so odd that one hardly finds it credible in parts. The French version was prepared by highly distinguished biblical scholars, many of them of international reputation. It is not, I trust, invidious to say that the working group for the English edition is not, for scholarly reputation, in the same class at all. This being so, it was curious to choose the course of translating the English edition from the original languages and then accommodating it to the French, and especially to the notes and readings of the French. Under the circumstances it seems miraculous that the result is as good as it is. But in consequence the new version is not likely to be used very much by scholars in the way in which, for instance, the New English Bible is used by scholars, just to see what leading authorities made of the text; the history of the version is too confused for that. Moreover, one cannot help seeing peculiar forms of interference from the French, some of which

affect the popular impression of the English. In modern English *holocaust* has entirely lost its original sense (unlike French *holocauste*) and is used only of enormous blazes, genocidal massacres and the like. It has a touch of bathos therefore to read (Lev. 1, 14): 'if his offering to Yahweh is a holocaust of a bird. . .' The same chapter uses *immolate* (French *immoler*): *he must immolate the bull before Yahweh*. *Slaughter* or *kill* would be better English as well as more accurate representations of the Hebrew. But it unwisely breaks away from the French (*mets consumé*) and prints *burnt offering* for Hebrew *ishsheh*, thus using a word they could well have put in the place of *holocaust*. *Holocaust* and *immolate* also give an unfortunately clerical impression contradicting the main tendency of this translation, which is not heavy and professional in effect.

Apart from the influence of the French, there are many stylistic points worthy of comment. I would have chosen another word than *leprosy* in Lev. 14–15; especially *leprosy of houses* must seem grotesque in a version often otherwise modern, and at least a note could have been added to explain it. Even in humans the disease is clearly not leprosy in our sense. *Wadi in the wadi of the Willows* (Isa. 15, 7) is, I think, insufficiently naturalized in English; suitable for scholars and Orientalists, to the average reader it suggests sahibs and pith helmets. It is exotic to write at 2 Sam. 22, 30:

*with you I storm the barbican
with my God I leap the rampart.*

I doubt if I would have known what a *barbican* is; it suggests to me only a housing development in London, and produces the kind of occasional unintentional comic effect which is unfortunate in Bibles. Again, Hos. 8, 10:

*Right; let them rent them among the nations,
I am going to disperse them this minute;
that will soon put a stop to their anointing kings and leaders*

gives too everyday an impression of a bustling, businesslike, no-nonsense God.

Biblical style had many conjunctions, mostly approximate to *and*, familiar in the traditional *and it came to pass that* and such phrases. These are, perhaps rightly, eschewed by the new version, but the result is sometimes excessively staccato, giving something of the effect of a cross-talk act, or an impression like those children's books with *Look, Jim has the ball. Jim will run with the ball*. Thus:

*Seeing the crowds, he went up the hill. There he sat down and was joined
by his disciples. Then he began to speak. This is what he taught them:*

Sometimes on the other hand the effect is excellent:

*'Do you intend to kill me as you killed the Egyptian?' Moses was frightened.
'Clearly that business has come to light', he thought.*

Matters of decency are always a difficulty, involving the relations between sex and religion. I like *became the father of* for traditional *begat*, but am less happy with *the man had intercourse with his wife Eve* (traditional *knew*), which seems to me a little prissy and newspaperly, a little on the lines of the *intimacy took place* of the *News of the World*. I would say *took*. Potiphar's wife says *sleep with me*, which is exactly right. A disastrous error is *since sex is always a danger* (1 Cor. 7, 2) for literal *because of fornications*.

The accuracy of the translation, as in many other modern versions, is quite good so long as one has in mind the general effect, as produced upon a reader reading fairly fast and a few pages at a time or listening to liturgical reading; but as soon as one tries to penetrate more deeply and determine more exactly what is being said (as for example in preaching on a detailed point or in discussing a controversial matter in a discussion group), the degree of accuracy becomes more restricted and the occasional slips or unnecessary paraphrastic renderings impair the average reliability of the whole (for those who cannot check against the original). Further, in the Old Testament in particular, recent decades have seen a stream of identifications of meanings previously unknown and now discovered through comparative philology; relatively few of these are adopted, and in this respect the version is philologically conservative. One may safely predict that the Old Testament of the New English Bible, when it appears, will incorporate many of these newly identified meanings. Many such identifications are as yet far from certain, and their disregard by the Jerusalem Bible by no means proves the latter wrong; but users should be aware that this potential deficiency is there.

An even greater uncertainty is the decision to print *Yahweh* consistently in the Old Testament. In its favour it may be urged that this is the original word, that it is a personal name, and that the use of *Yahweh* gives a freshness and sense of involvement in the ancient situation itself. But after hesitation I have felt that the decision is wrong. This is partly quite personal; as an Old Testament and Semitic scholar, who has lived extensively among Jews, I have myself become shy of pronouncing *Yahweh* as an everyday thing. Secondly, there is a temporal difference running across the Old Testament period—*Yahweh* suits the earlier stories, like Cain and Abel, the burning bush, Moses and Jethro, Elijah—but I am more doubtful of it for Ezra or Daniel. Thirdly, I fear that the use of *Yahweh* may (certainly against the intention of the translators) tend in a sort of Marcionite direction; it may suggest that this is not the real God, but something approaching another God, a barbaric ancient tribal deity with an outlandish personal name of his own.

The notes provide a great deal of helpful information; I do not always agree with it, but its positive importance and value is indisputable. At points of high doctrinal concentration it is particularly important that the note indicates applications which have

become current, and by doing so implicitly distinguishes between such applications and the meaning of the passage itself; so for example in the Messianic and Mariological interpretation of the promise to Eve (Gen. 3, 15). I am not satisfied, however, with the note on that other key Old Testament text, Isa. 7, 14. The translation given is *the maiden is with child*. Pointing out that the Greek version reads *the virgin*, the note says that this is 'more explicit' than the Hebrew, and is 'an important witness to an early Jewish interpretation, an interpretation adopted by the evangelist'. It is true that *parthenos* is a Jewish translation, but it is not probable that it was meant in the sense 'virgin' by the translator or the Jewish users of the Greek text. The Greek version was not here 'interpreting' in the sense 'virgin', it was just giving a rough rendering in about the same sense as the 'maiden' of the Jerusalem Bible. The Greek of Isaiah is a notoriously imprecise rendering. It was the Christians who, having the word *parthenos* before them, interpreted it in its more narrow and specific sense.

An important service rendered by the notes is that they will accustom the reader to some perception of the different sources in the documents, something which a Bible without annotations can hardly do. In Gen. 21, Ishmael must, by comparison with chapters 16–17, be fifteen years old; but his mother Hagar, driven out, has to carry him like a baby. The tension is at once relieved when the note points out that the sources are different, one not being the continuation of the other. The provision of occasional notes of this type, dealing at specific points with practical difficulties in reading, and not confusing the reader with massive and ambitious schemes of source-reconstruction, will probably do more to indigenize the habit of source-criticism than any amount of abstract debate.

Here, of course, we touch the vital question of the Pontifical Biblical Commission and the application of its decisions about matters of historical criticism. These are handled in the Introductions to major sections of the Bible, such as the Pentateuch (p. 7ff.). I find these Introductions disappointing. Some of them are far more conservative than the general impression conveyed by the Bible as a whole. There is no attempt to give an adequate impression of the case against the authorship of St John's Gospel by the son of Zebedee, or against Pauline authorship of the Pastoral Epistles, and there is almost as little attempt to explain the case for the document Q and the dependence of Matthew on Mark. Yet Deutero-Isaiah is more or less accepted, and the positive values accruing from this should have led to a more open policy on the other questions of authorship and source. At some other points it is hard to know which side of the fence the writers of these Introductions are coming down on, and one wonders if they may have adopted persistent waffling deliberately, as the best policy for coping with decisions of the Biblical Commission. Thus (about the Pentateuch):

And indeed the Documentary Theory in its classical form is once more in the melting-pot. Continued effort to give it further precision has served only to show that the task is impossible. [This is hardly a reason for the melting-pot, in my judgement.] Moreover, the literary problem is yielding to the historical; what oral or written sources lie behind the 'documents' is a question now more urgent than the problem when the text assumed its final form. The new approach is less artificial and literary; it is closer to realities and to the conditions of life. [What are these?]

But in practice the annotations assist the reader out of a tight corner again and again by a simple reference to sources or documents, melting-pot or no melting-pot.

The theory of an Aramaic Matthew, from which Mark was derived, followed by a Greek Matthew, which was derived from Mark, is, I suppose, conceivable, but its presentation as the primary hypothesis looks to the outsider like an obvious attempt to reconcile dogmatic requirements with scholarly research. In many of these matters one suspects that the Introductions come from before the Second Vatican Council and that a much freer impression would have been given if they had been written anew for this edition.

The older-fashioned Protestant would have gone through this work, no doubt, looking suspiciously for places at which text or explanation have been distorted to fit Roman doctrine. In a more civilized and ecumenical way we can put it as follows. It has been thought a good idea that a common Catholic-Protestant translation might be attempted as an ecumenical effort, and one may ask hypothetically what places there are at which, had there been non-Catholic representatives on the working group, they would have resisted the interpretations adopted. One such is at Matt. 13, 13, 'they look without seeing and listen without hearing or understanding'. The note explains this as 'a deliberate and culpable insensibility which is both the cause and the explanation of the withdrawal of grace'. 'The withdrawal of grace' involves a series of theological conceptions which would never have achieved acceptance in an ecumenical undertaking. It is interesting, however, that the error (if it is an error) lies in the notes rather than in the text. It is, in fact, much harder to promote partisan doctrinal views by systematic tendentious translation of the Bible than suspicious minds have often fancied. In the early centuries Jews and Christians both suspected each other of tampering with the scriptural text in their own favour, and at the Reformation Protestants thought something of the same kind about the Vulgate; but there was relatively little ground for these suspicions, in proportion to the extent of the Bible as a whole. Notes, on the other hand, being free productions of the modern commentator, and being likely to influence the whole perspective in which the reader understands the text, have to be scrutinized with some care.

The notes of this Bible are, in general, sensibly directed towards the general reader and appropriately balanced between background information (historical, archaeological and textual) and theological assistance. In this they shine in comparison with some volumes of the recent *Anchor Bible* (New York), which consist mainly of a translation (which scholars do not much want) and brief annotations justifying it (which, being highly technical, are unintelligible except to scholars) and in which the theological interest is sometimes negligible.

For notes on textual matters I think there should have been a short introduction explaining for the lay reader the history, background and status of the textual witnesses and the procedures of correction and conjecture; how else is he to know the reliability and validity of readings thus established? Some of the maps are miserable, but perhaps all readers, like the reviewer, have long abandoned hope from maps in Bibles and begun to wish, after following St Paul's journeys along these different dotted lines, that he had been shipwrecked on his first journey rather than his last.

Now a point of real importance for the way in which this translation may serve to fit into the continuity of tradition in the Roman Church. As a non-Roman Catholic who is also a student of St Jerome and an admirer of the Vulgate, I find it strange how little effort is made by the new version to retain contact with the Latin text. The increasing use of the vernacular presumably should not mean that the Vulgate is to be dropped like a sack of potatoes. I certainly do not mean that the translation should have been done from the Vulgate, or even that the Vulgate should have been taken into account in the doing of the translation. But I do think that notes might do something to build a bridge to the Latin rendering, and make it intelligible from time to time how the latter was arrived at. Otherwise will not readers be at a loss to understand what relation the Vulgate has to the transmission of the meaning of the Bible, and will it not seem as if the Vulgate, so long central and authoritative, has suddenly dropped out of existence, leaving traces only in a few notes and in the cross-references where the numbering systems are different (p. xiv)? When the French edition was written, after all, the situation was different. Its perspective was in the first place more scholarly and less popular; all those concerned were more familiar with the Vulgate; and it was not yet clear how great and sudden would be the increase of the use of the vernacular in both liturgy and Bible-reading. These things have suddenly changed, and no one seems to have observed how the Vulgate, which could once be presupposed as central, now seems to pass unnoticed. The preface gives a table informing us what books were in the Hebrew Bible and another for the Greek Bible, but for the Latin Bible there is no such table, but only a small note clarifying the diverse numberings of the books of Esdras. It is not explicitly stated that the books contained

in the Jerusalem Bible are those contained in the Vulgate, and the list of books 'in biblical order' (p. x) should presumably read 'in the order of the Latin Bible' (if this is indeed what is meant, for the position of 1–2 Maccabees is different from that of familiar official Latin editions). The indications about what is 'apocryphal' in the table of the Greek Bible (p. xiii) are quite confused and confusing, to say nothing of being ill calculated to please the Greek Church, parts of whose Holy Scripture are declared to have been 'not accepted by the Christian Church'. These are not academic matters; the layman is often very interested in knowing just what books are in his Bible and why, and a brief but responsible historical survey should have been furnished.

There are a number of bad misprints, of which the most spectacular known to me is 'Pay for peace in Jerusalem' (Ps. 122, 6). The rendering of the Psalms, as is widely recognized, is one of the most unsuccessful parts of the work, and the only good thing I can think of to say about it is that it knows nothing of the fevered Ugaritophile fancies of Father Dahood's version in the *Anchor Bible*.

To sum up, then, this is not a version to turn to in order to obtain the finest scholarship available, but it is for the most part a readable and serviceable Bible which the reader can use and from which he will learn much, most of it sensible and reliable. But it also has many weaknesses which, to a degree greater than would be true of most comparable modern Bibles, seem to suggest hasty and haphazard planning and inadequate consideration of the issues involved. Usually, when a translation of the Bible is produced, one feels that, bad or good, it should be left as it is for what it is. In this case, however, certain of the defects I have mentioned could be alleviated through relatively small amendments, such as re-writing of the Introductions, and this will have to be done, in any case, for the misprints. As I pointed out in the beginning of this article, the possibility of a definitive version of the Bible seems to be receding; and even if one were, hypothetically, to imagine a Catholic English Vulgate for the twentieth century, I am sure the Jerusalem Bible could not be it, for its weaknesses and unevennesses are too great. The service which it will render, and I believe not without honour, will be as a study-instrument for the Catholic Bible-reading layman.