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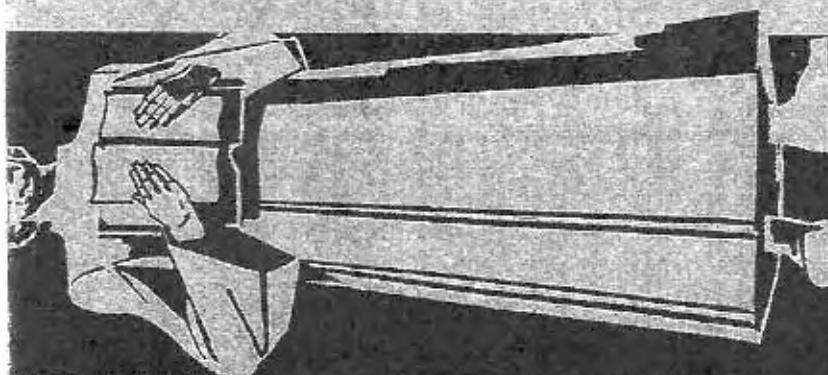
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# The New English Bible: Old Testament

WILLIAM F. MEYER

EVERY TIME A NEW translation of the Bible appears in print, the question is immediately raised whether there is a need for it. From a theological perspective the answer could well be negative, unless, of course, recently discovered paleographic evidence warrants revision of the *textus receptus* or etymological insights provide conceptual nuances that were previously obscured. From a linguistic or cultural perspective the reply would naturally take a different form because the meaning of words within a culture constantly change and demand repeated up-dating. Even for the scholar, theologian, or parish pastor relevant translations are valuable tools. They not only provide stimulating insights or a fresh approach to shop-worn phrases but also keep one closely in touch with the idiomatic understanding of the language that is spoken.

The standards for judging the merit of one version over another have never been absolutized. The approach adopted in this evaluation survey may not be consistent with your own or that to which you have been previously exposed. However, in order that you may make an evaluation on the basis of this survey, the following criteria served as a basis:

- 1) It must be translated from a good Hebrew text, because no translation can be better than the text it translates.
- 2) It must faithfully represent in English the effect that the original language was intended to have on its readers. A word-for-word translation (literal) is meaningless. On the other hand a translation is not a paraphrase or a commentary, nor does it provide the translator the license to correct (alter) the text to make it mean what the translator thinks it ought to mean.
- 3) The translation must read well in English. There is no theological or literary justification for clinging nostalgically to the phraseology of the earlier version. If one is more comfortable in reading grandmother's Bible, then grandmother's Bible is what he should read.

Overtures for the production of this translation began in May 1946 by the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland. In January 1948 invitations were extended and accepted by the Presbyterian Church of England, the Society of Friends, the Churches in Wales, the Churches in Ireland, the British and Foreign Bible Society, and the National Bible Society of Scotland to participate in the development of this translation. C. H. Dodd served as vice-chairman and

director of the project. S. G. Driver, a noted Old Testament and Semitic scholar, served as joint director since 1965. The work was published by the Oxford and Cambridge University Press.

The purpose of the translation was to provide the public with a Bible "in the language of the present day, inasmuch as the language of the Authorized Version, already archaic when it was made, had now become even more definitely archaic and less generally understood." To meet this need, "the translators have endeavored to avoid anachronisms and expressions reminiscent of foreign idioms. They have tried to keep their language as close to current usage as possible, while avoiding words and phrases likely soon to become obsolete. They have made every effort not only to make sense but also to offer renderings that will meet the needs of readers with no special knowledge of the background of the Old Testament."

The text upon which this translation is based is the Leningrad manuscript (9th-11th cent. A.D.) edited by Ben Asher as it is presently printed in R. Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* (3rd edition, 1937). The editors indicate that they have taken into account the variant readings of the Qumran Scrolls, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the LXX, the Peshitta Version (Syriac), the Targums, and the Vulgate.

The original text contains ambiguities that are not easily resolved. However, the task of the translator is to preserve the ambiguity but at the same time he is not excused from the task of determining whether careful study of the text will dissipate the ambiguity. Job 19:25-26 has long been problematic for the best Semitic scholars. If the translator follows the MSS closely, he has no choice but to propagate the traditional reading:

For I know that my Redeemer lives, and at last he will stand upon the earth; and after my skin has been thus destroyed, then from my flesh I shall see God, whom I shall see on my side, and my eyes shall behold, and not another. (RSV)

Those who look to the pre-context of this passage are no doubt influenced by Eliphaz's "judicial" argument against Job and Job's immediate reply in the same idiom (cf. 15:8 and 16:19f). If this idiom is kept in mind, then Job's appeal in 19:25ff is a likely emendated rebuttal.

But in my heart I know that my vindicator lives and that he will rise last to speak in court; and I shall discern my witness standing at my side and see my defending counsel, even God Himself, whom I shall see with my own eyes, I myself and no other. (NEB)

Gen. 1:14 contains a progressive series (signs, seasons or festivals, days, and years). If "signs" refer to astronomical phenomena, then the succeeding items of the series should be an inclusive progression—festivals, seasons, and years—marking a time continuum. The

difficult item in the series is the word for "seasons or festivals." Ex. 13:10 suggests that it is a definite event—"appointed time" (feast of unleavened bread). The series in the Hebrew is well understood if it is translated "they shall be for signs (astronomical), festivals, seasons, and years", without the attributive use of "signs" as the translators here infer—"and let them serve as signs both for festivals and for seasons and years."

The interpreter of Gen. 1-4 is constantly burdened with a seemingly free use of two forms for "man" (*adam* and *haadam*—a man and the man). How he translates these forms has little effect on the understanding of the text. But at some point, generally at 3:20 or 4:1, the context suggests that *adam* be read as a proper name. NEB is consistent in that it always translates *adam* "a man" or "Adam" and *haadam* "the man". However, one wonders why the consistency is maintained in 4:1 (the man) when in 3:21 man is already a proper name—Adam.

No doubt many readers of this translation will question the advisability of the term "brood" in Gen. 3:15 in place of the more familiar "seed". A careful study of the term "seed" in the Old Testament will reveal that its common usage is to designate the seed or offspring of humans and only twice that of animals (Gen. 3:15, 7:3). Here the translators have provided the reader with a nuance that is extremely important; namely, the generic collection of all succeeding offsprings of both the woman and the serpent.

The familiar Ps. 8:4 passage deserves comment. The reading of this passage has always been determined by one's theological presuppositions. But the question constantly arises whether it is better to translate "man . . . son of man" or make them a synonymous parallelism "man . . . mortal man" (generic usage). The translators without a doubt reveal their colors when they translate the phrase with the latter.

The translations of the Psalms, generally, are easily read and understood. They preserve both the parallelism of form and meter. But one wonders whether "waters of peace" (Ps. 23:2) is clearer than the traditional "still waters". If one has any knowledge of the characteristics of sheep, he would opt for "still waters", because sheep only drink from calm, quiet waters; never from rushing or whirling waters.

Until the translators provide the reader with an explanation for their translation, the best of minds will be perplexed with the choice of "Once upon a time" in Gen. 11:1 for the familiar Hebrew phrase "and it came to pass, and it was", especially since they never translate *wayyahi* in this manner in any other context or even in 11:2. It seems apparent that two possibilities for understanding this twist are evident; either the incident of the tower of Babel is to be understood just as a story or this phrase is an introductory clause to the remaining accounts in Genesis.

A perusal of the translation indicates a number of effective and well-chosen terms to convey the intended meaning of the original text. Gen. 2:23 "from my bones" preserves the original intended relationship; Gen. 2:22 clarifies the slang "built", when referring to a shapely woman; Gen. 3:1 and 3:13 "crafty" and "tricked" enhance the serpentine subtlety; Gen. 12:15 "courtiers" effectively interprets the original "prince"; Gen. 20:1 "journeyed by stages" explains nomadic movements; Ex. 32:6 "pilgrim feast" sets the celebration in proper context; Job 1:7 "ranging" comes closest to Satan's patrolling function; Ps. 150:3 "fanfares" distinctively reminds one of Al Hirt's trumpet trills; Is. 7:14 "young woman" solves the perpetual problem of the traditional "virgin"; Hos. 1:6 and 9 "Lo-ruhamah" and "Lo-ammi" finally identify the characters by their proper name; Amos 1:3 "crime after crime" conveys meaningfully and idiomatically the poetic "for three transgressions . . . and for four"; Amos 4:3 "straight out" removes the adumbrated translation of the original "and you shall go out through the breaches, every one straight before her"; Zech. 9:9 preserves the Hebrew parallel construction but clearly identifies the foal as a male and the offspring of an ass.

If the stated purpose of providing the readers with a translation in the language of the present day by removing the archaic expressions would have been carried out to perfection, then it is unfortunate that a number of unfamiliar or archaic expressions crept into the translation. Job 1:4 "foregather" is less familiar or clear than "went" (KJV) and "go" (RSV); Ps. 2:1 "hatch their futile plots" adumbrates the clearer "plot in vain" (RSV) and "impotent mutterings" (Jerusalem Bible); Ps. 2:10 "learn your lesson" muffles the intent of the original which the RSV effectively caught "be warned"; Prov. 1:18 "waylay" may be British but does nothing for the cowboy-Indian culture of America "set an ambush" (RSV); Amos 3:5 "striker" is only understood by anyone familiar with the process of trapping.

A cardinal rule that should be observed in translating is the faithful reproduction of the intended meaning of the original text. Eccl. 12:12 "use of books is endless" misses the whole point of the context. The Jerusalem Bible and the RSV come much closer when they translate "writing books involves endless hard work" and "of making many books there is no end" respectively. Amos 3:2 "for you alone have I cared" destroys the theological significance of this passage. Yahweh's relationship with Israel was not exclusive; rather it was one of intimacy. Here the Jerusalem Bible "You alone of all the families of earth, have I acknowledged" or RSV "You only have I known of all the families of the earth" effectively develop the contrasting relationship. Amos 6:1 "shame on you" childishly plays down the threat of the original "woe" (cf. Is. 5:8 and 20 for consistency).

The value of a translation can only be determined by the user. Those who are familiar with the NEB New Testament translation

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will welcome its Old Testament compendium. The format is similiar in that summary headings precede each context, the poetic verse structure is maintained, and ample footnotes indicate the difficulties encountered in the original. With the recent publication of the Jerusalem Bible, the search for a modern translation is suddenly confused, especially since their similarity is greater than their differences. But no translation will outdo the relevant translation of Job 18:11 "The terrors of death suddenly beset him and make him piss over his feet", which should remind one immediately of Satre's vivid description of the men awaiting execution in *The Wall*.