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We must capture the emphasis on the livingness, the immediacy, of the word in the New Testament. We must realize the particularity of the Bible and that its value lies in its continuity.

PROBLEMS IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

H. Dennett

There are over fifty different versions of the English New Testament (in the whole or greater part) available to the student today, and over thirty of them are currently in print. Some are the work of individual translators, others of a committee. Some are revisions of a previous work, others a completely fresh translation.

In every one of these numerous versions felicitous and vivid renderings may be found, as indeed should be expected. But in spite of the fact that almost all English versions are the product of great labour and careful scholarship, it is only too easy to find in any one of them the harsh phrase, the unhappy choice of a word, the violation of English idiom or the fanciful rendering for which there is no authority in the original. There is in consequence still room for much research into the whole problem of Scripture translation.

It is, of course, notoriously difficult to convey both the precision and texture of a communication in one language to the speakers or readers of another language. An instructive example of this difficulty in the secular field may be seen in a French translation of Carroll's masterpiece, the 'Alice' books. The subtle sallies and frequent play on words simply will not carry over from the English original. If this be so with a merely human composition, however light may be the touch, how much more difficult must it be to translate into another tongue the words of Scripture for here behind the characteristic style of the individual writer is the specific direction of the Holy Spirit.

There are at least four distinctive styles of translation of the New Testament, each of which represents an attempted solution of the problem of conveying to the mind of the English reader the impression made by the Greek original on its first readers. A brief consideration of these diverse styles of translation will underline the whole problem of communication in English of the Word of God.

1. The Literal Style. This style imitates as far as it dare the features of the original Greek, both in syntax and vocabulary. The resulting English is always stiff, and sometimes almost unintelligible. Examples of this style are the translations by Rotherham, Young, and Darby. To a less extent the Authorized and Revised Versions come under this heading. In a literal translation the attempt is made to transport the modern reader back into New Testament times as to a strange land.

2. **The Colloquial Style.** Versions of this type are naturally in modern speech, and their general policy is to bring the New Testament scene into terms of the present day world. There are quite a number of versions of this type, including those by Phillips, Schonfield and the New English Bible in Britain, and the work of Goodspeed and Verkuyl in America.

3. **The Simplified Speech Style.** Versions in this style are produced, in part at least, to meet the needs of the newly literate. Of necessity they must sacrifice some accuracy in conforming to the restricted vocabulary that is adopted. A simplified form of syntax is generally also used. Apart from the special case of *The New Testament in Basic English*, there is *The New Testament in Plain English* by Kingsley Williams in Britain, and Dr. F. Laubach's translation of the Epistles, *The Inspired Letters*, in America.

4. **The Expanded Style.** Here translation encroaches in part upon the domain of exegesis, often with unfortunate results. The two commonly-known versions of this kind are both American. Wuest's *Expanded New Testament* and *The Amplified New Testament*.

The very existence of such diverse types of English versions of the New Testament is an admission of the formidable difficulties encountered in the work of Scripture translation.

It is a fairly sound rule that when a number of versions largely agree in the English rendering of a particular passage of the New Testament, then that passage does not present very serious translation difficulties. John 1.1 and 3.16 are examples of this. It is only translators who deliberately seek to be bizarre who depart much from the older renderings in either vocabulary or syntax. But the converse is also true. There are many passages of which the English renderings are diverse in the extreme, some in fact mutually contradictory. By this suggested rule the opening verses of the Epistle to the Hebrews is a difficult passage indeed, and the first four verses are in consequence very suitable to study in relation to the broad problem of New Testament translation.

This short passage is an extreme example of hypotaxis, and in the original it is composed of a single sentence of no less than seventy-two words, with nearly a dozen subsidiary qualifying phrases and clauses. The Authorized, Revised and several other versions retain the single complex sentence form, but this at once raises a problem. One judges that the Greek was immediately clear to its first readers, yet moderns find such complex examples of syntax difficult to follow. What is the right policy here? Is it to be 'faithful' to the original or to consider the limitations of the seemingly less linguistically agile modern readers? If the latter, how far should one go? Quite a number of recent versions break up this long, single sentence into two or three separate ones. Arthur Way, in his *Letters of St. Paul and Hebrews* goes further and uses eight sentences; Dr. F. Laubach as many as ten.

The next problem is that of word order and its attendant question of emphasis. There have been many solemn expositions of Hebrews 1 in which it has been stated that though the human author is not known, the

Epistle was manifestly dictated by God Himself, for it opens with His name. It certainly does so in the Authorized Version, but not in the original. There the stress is on the two initial words, *'polumerōs'* and *'polutropōs'*, which, by the way, are linked by an assonance which it is impossible to reproduce in an English rendering. Apart from this, the stress of an English sentence seldom comes at the beginning.

Here the versions show great diversity. Most of the recent ones open with a word other than 'God', but there is no agreement at all as to the order of importance of the several phrases which follow 'various parts and ways': 'in old time', 'unto the fathers' etc. How is the correct feel and stress of such a delicately balanced sentence to be conveyed to the modern reader?

Then comes what is probably the most difficult question in the passage, how to put into *idiomatic* English the expression 'en huiō', literally 'in Son'. To say 'in a Son' raises unintended implications; 'in His Son' though factually correct, is not a true translation, and it also misses the vital emphasis of the original. Phillips, often a master of paraphrase, simply puts 'in the Son' and leaves it at that. The only way to reproduce in English the full meaning of the original seems to be an explanatory paraphrase such as that used by Wuest, 'One who by nature is Son'. This does at least bring out the point of character which so often marks an anarthrous expression in Greek.

This short passage of Hebrews is also marked by a series of individual words which test all the resources of the translators, e.g. 'aiōn', which certainly means much more than 'world', yet 'age' is not altogether satisfactory. A full discussion of the nuances of this term alone would need an article to itself. Then there is a galaxy of specialized terms, three at least of them occurring nowhere else in the Greek New Testament, a fact which must always make translation more difficult. Among these are 'apaugasma', 'hupostasis' and 'charaktēr', over which translators have floundered wildly. Few have succeeded better than the old Geneva version of 1557 with 'the bryghtnes of the glorie, and the ingrauned forme of his persone'.

There is one Semitism in the passage, 'the word of his power', for which the idiomatic English of today would be 'his powerful (or 'mighty') word'. Compare a similar idiom in 2 Thessalonians 1:7, where the Revised is less idiomatic than the Authorized Version. It is true that readers of the older versions are familiar with such Semitic idioms which have penetrated through the Greek into English, but it is strange to find the example here cited rendered literally in such versions as the Revised Standard and New English Bible, both of which make such claims to intelligibility to the general reader.

Within the confines of this one short passage of four verses there is considerable further diversity of renderings of word, phrase and clause. Some are apt and luminous, others downright clumsy, witness the term 'purgation' in the N.E.B.

Without straying unduly into the field of interpretation, a translation should surely attempt to bring out evident implications of a term in the original text. Perhaps the most percipient work on the Epistle to the

Hebrews is still that of Bishop Westcott, and one example of such an implication may be taken from his notes on these opening verses. It concerns the word *ekathisen*, which he states 'expresses the solemn taking of the seat of authority, and not merely the act of sitting'. Yet such otherwise careful versions as Moffatt, the R.S.V., Schonfield and the Amplified are content with the plain 'sat'.

Although in the space available it has been possible to examine but a single New Testament passage, and a short one at that, the points here made could be paralleled in many others. It is admitted that even Homer could nod, and it is beyond expectation that any one translator should excel all the time. Yet it seems that there is still much room for research not merely into problems of verbal, and still more important semantic equivalence in translation, but into the deeper one of conveying to modern ears the real atmosphere and background of the New Testament documents.