

CONCERNS IN BIBLE TRANSLATION:

INTRODUCTION

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When church historians, writing in perspective, describe the era in which we live, it is possible that they will have little to say about the "God is Dead Movement" but considerable to say about the phenomenon of Bible translation which we have observed and continue to observe. Evangelical scholars do well to consider their relationship to this significant activity. Is the present translation of the Scriptures into the English language a waste of time, as some affirm? Ought conservative scholars to by-pass this program in favor of writing commentaries, as a friend of mine suggested recently? Or, as one reputable scholar contends, should we not *rather* be out in missionary and evangelistic work, seeking to convert the unbeliever? Moreover, is it not true that the average member of the Evangelical Theological Society is sufficiently conversant with the original languages of Scripture that he can be somewhat unconcerned about the matter of English translations? Certainly he is well qualified to use such translations judiciously, irrespective of failings they may have.

If the scholar's sphere of activity was limited to the study and the classroom, it is reasonable to suppose that he might, indeed, have no great concern for any particular rendering of the Bible into English, but that is not the case. For most of us, English is our native tongue. When we worship, this language becomes the vehicle by which God speaks to us and we to Him. When we lead in worship, it is the English Bible which we almost invariably use. When we teach Bible classes in the Church or in the Sunday School or in the home, we employ an English version. We memorize Scripture not in the Hebrew or the Greek but in our own language. Large portions of the Christian literature which we read refer to the Bible in translation, and it is the English Bible which is represented by the wall plaques in homes and which is quoted in the newspapers and secular magazines and through audio-visual communications. In fact, the culture of which we are a part, when it has anything to say about God's revelation, generally employs the English Bible, and we cannot dissociate ourselves from the culture at this point. It is *ours*. We ought, therefore, to be concerned with the merits of the English version or versions which we use.

But think of the Christian whose only Bible, so to speak, is the English Bible. How well does the translation he uses represent the original? And how well does it communicate God's word to him? Is it not true that he will have only those versions which have been made available to him by scholars? An unlettered person is himself not well prepared to do translation work. Yet whose work will he use? If he uses a translation prepared by the unbeliever or one with a low view of Scripture, he will be the loser, for the translator's point of view almost

inevitably appears to some extent in the finished product. If he uses a translation in outmoded language, he will also be the loser, for the language of another day and another culture does not speak with clarity to the common man today. No, he is dependent upon the Bible-believing scholar for help. That help might conceivably be in the form of evaluating and annotating English versions which have come to us in one of the ways we have suggested above, but it might also be reflected in translating activity itself.

Now by what criteria does the average layman judge an English translation? If we were to take a poll, we might expect to get a variety of answers, but *positive* responses would probably be for the most part something like this: "I like it." "I understand it better." "It has good format." "It is easy to use." "It meets my need." "It reads well." Some of the answers are better than others, but they all ignore the most important criterion which a Christian should employ in relation to a rendering of the Word into a language other than those in which the Bible was originally given. That criterion is "accuracy." Is the version a true representation of what God has spoken? The style of language, the format and success in communication are indeed important, but if the words of the Bible are the words of God, the child of God needs to know where these words start and where they end, and he must have the assurance that they have been expressed correctly in the English words which are employed in the translation. The ordinary Christian is not qualified to judge such matters. He needs the help of well-informed fellow-Christians who have a high view of Scripture and who have inquired diligently into the accuracy of the translation at every point.

We do well to ask ourselves whether the view of Scripture to which the Evangelical Theological Society members subscribe is meaningful among Christian scholars only or if it is just as pertinent for other Christians. If so, and if the average Christian is somewhat helpless in applying this doctrine as it relates to the accuracy of the Bible translation he uses, surely those who can help must come to his rescue. Passages which have traditionally been recognized in the English-speaking world as Scripture but which are unsupported by our present manuscript evidence ought to be rejected—at whatever cost. Conjectural emendations, unsubstantiated by objective evidence, ought to be avoided. The unity of Scripture should be recognized in the work of translation as, for example, where the original text may well be understood in more than one way, either consonant with the teaching of the Bible at other points or in contradiction to it.

If the evangelical scholar is to do much for himself and his non-professional brother in relationship to an English Bible which is accurate and trustworthy, he must operate in at least four capacities, as theologian (in the broadest sense), as linguist, as historian and as psychologist. In other words, he must possess all possible relevant factual knowledge and then labor to the fullest extent in the realm of communication so that the

very words of God will reach the mind and heart of the English reader of Holy Writ. Nor is the task of communication an easy one. The so-called "Fielding Report," just issued by the American Association of Theological Schools, has much to say about the realm in which the theological professor lives and moves and has his being as over against the world of life and thought which characterizes the man in the pew. It pictures these realms as, for the most part, unrelated worlds, and asserts that very inadequate bridges of communication are presently in operation between the two. This would suggest that in our English Bible translations, as in other matters, the scholar needs to learn much about how to serve those who live in this other world. In the October 1965 issue of *The Bible Translator* (Vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 169-70), William A. Smalley passes the sweeping judgment that "... it seems unlikely that the R.S.V., like the A.S.V., will be more than a very temporary, passing phenomenon in the history of versions." His words are based upon the conclusion that the language of these versions is not that of the common man, and experiments have substantiated the fact that well-educated young Americans are faced with difficulties of understanding these versions. To be sure, some of the difficulty may be explained on the basis of the theological and biblical illiteracy of our generation, but comparative studies show convincingly that it is possible to put into more understandable English, and with commensurate accuracy, many difficult passages.

Leaving aside for the moment the question as to who might receive the greater benefit from the most faithful rendition of the Scriptures into English—whether the scholar or the man on the street—we are bold to suggest that there is no more important activity in all the world than that of bringing the Word of God to men everywhere in the languages they understand. *All* men need to hear God speaking to them and to have just as full assurance as possible that at every point they may rely upon the full accuracy and truthfulness of the Bible text which is before them. To translate the Bible with a high degree of success in these respects taxes to the utmost the gifts with which the Lord has endowed Christian scholars. We must study the Scriptures *diligently* in order to translate them. Far from being a waste of time, attention given to the translation of God's Word should have the highest priority among those who hold to the lofty view of Scripture enunciated by the Evangelical Theological Society.

Whether therefore for themselves or for others, the members of the Evangelical Theological Society do well to be more than onlookers when it comes to Bible translation. Theirs should be the responsibility for knowing the facts, for making the facts known, and quite possibly, for participating in the actual work of translating. We await with expectation the contributions of our panelists to the most relevant problem of the translating of God's Holy Word.

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