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Fidelity or Wishful Thinking in recent New Testament Translation?

E.A. Russell

The initial impulse to write this paper was the appearance of yet another translation of the four Gospels, a translation which is remarkably fresh and original, immensely suggestive and luminous, whose claim on the cover is fully justified that it is "largely devoid of traditional 'biblical' phraseology." /1 We shall be looking at this translation later. The paper was also prompted by the fact that experience of class translation from Greek into English has underlined the difficulty for many of escaping from the "numinous" phrases of the Authorised or King James Version into modern idiom. On occasions, some manage to find, with undoubted distinction, a considerable flair for good modern style and expression. Yet on the whole it may be suspected that all too frequently such a gift is not developed. Pressures of the ministry can be prodigal of time and opportunities or incentives for exercising such a literary or scholarly flair diminish, if they do not disappear altogether.

But the importance of escaping from archaic forms of expression does not end with a College farewell. The cultivation of a fresh and vigorously relevant expression is all of a piece with showing that the church is related to the life of today and not fossilized in the "translationese" and traditions of remote generations. The problems of achieving an effective modern translation are, of course, not easy. The Greek of the NT is no longer assessed, as it used to be before the findings of the Egyptian papyri, by Classical norms. Rather the books of the NT are most frequently written in what we might describe as "semitized" Greek, i.e. a Greek that reflects a Hebrew or Aramaic background. It is a Greek immensely influenced by the Septuagint, the "Bible of the early church", itself written in "semitized" Greek. /2

But the problems for the translator are not only rooted in the first century of the Christian era. From 1611, the date of publication of the AV, this version has dominated the English-speaking world. The spate of modern translations has threatened its dominance to some extent, but there continue to be certain pockets of the English-

speaking church which are loth to put any other version in its place. And we should not be over-impatient with the Protestant churches which, like most traditions in Northern Ireland, have had their reverence for the Scriptures and the high view of their inspiration fostered by the seventeenth century version. Literary critics like T.S. Eliot can speak of the AV as "an exemplar of English prose for successive generations of writers" while, at the same time, describing the New English Bible as a "combination of the vulgar, the trivial, and the pedantic". /3

Yet language today is changing rapidly and Greek words which found effective English renderings in the seventeenth century can be distorted by the change in meaning of the English. Two illustrations will suffice. One is perhaps well-known. It is the AV phrase "Take no thought" which occurs on three occasions in Matthew chapter 6, relating to food, clothing and the morrow. In the seventeenth century it meant to "distress oneself", "vex oneself". Indeed the expression "to die of thought" meant "to die heart-broken". /4 The expression "take no thought for to-morrow" has given rise to attacks on the Sermon on the Mount on the ground that it encouraged a reckless regard for the future. /5 The Greek term, however, behind such a phrase is merimnaō which means "Be not anxious". Again in Luke chapter 13, v7 we have the question, "Why cumbereth it the ground?" "Cumber" in the seventeenth century meant "vex" or "injure", but is misleading today and does not render correctly the Greek word katargeō, (spoil) . /6 Modern Greek can at times be sharply contrasted with Classical, or show merely a slight but important shift. Perhaps we may illustrate from the Athens daily newspaper Avriane of the 28th March, 1981. One column had the following heading: 60,000 aftokinēta ephugan apo tēn Athēna. The word ephugan in Classical and NT Greek has the meaning "fled" and thus gave the impression that such a flight was due to the fear of earthquakes. In modern Greek, however, the word means "leave" and what we were being told was that on a stated holiday 60,000 cars left Athens! The point then is made that language is a changing entity whether from the first century or the seventeenth, not to speak of the remarkable advances in the science of translation.

The two basic criteria for effective translation from the Greek NT into English are reliability and readability. /7

It is surprisingly difficult to achieve both. The Revised Version of 1831 was a trustworthy translation. By its attempt to translate the same Greek word by the same English word and to introduce as few alterations as possible, consistent with faithfulness, it produced a good students' version. But its very fidelity was its own undoing from the point of view of the reading public. It never replaced the AV in public worship or private devotion.

/8 Among recent translations that have aroused special interest, especially in conservative circles, is the New International Version. /9 Here again the translators aimed at and achieved a reliable translation. It was, however, on the score of readability that it fell down. They aimed at a new translation but they also "sought to preserve some measure of continuity with the long tradition of translating the Scriptures into English." It becomes evident that the effort to maintain continuity with the past has greatly reduced the effectiveness of this version in a modern setting.

We may put it simply - the AV was altogether too dominant, at least this is the accusation levelled against TIV. "On virtually every page the dependence of the NIV translators upon the KJV tradition is obvious in the choice of vocabulary, time-honoured clichés, syntactic structures which parallel the Hebrew and the Greek, and stylistic features." /10 Among the examples that are chosen from Matthew, we propose to look at a few so-called "in-group" jargon for Christians on Sunday morning". /11

In Matthew 1.18 and 1.23 the NIV has "be with child", and this follows the AV rendering in both places. Yet not all modern translations feel they can abandon this familiar and sensitive and - dare we say it? - dignified phrase. In 1.18 the variation in translation is perhaps predictable, "with child" (RSV, NEB and JB); "be pregnant" (Mf, Phillips(P)); "expecting a child" /12, "Going to have a baby(child)" (TEV, WB). In 1.23, we have "be with child" (P), "conceive" (Mf, RSV, NEB, JB, WB), "will become a mother" (Mercier), "become pregnant" (TEV). It is perhaps unwise, as Dr Barry Newman does, to dismiss the phrase "be with child" as mere "translationese". It is by no means a simple choice between "be with child" and "be pregnant".

Another illustration of the "in-group jargon" is the address of John the Baptist to the Pharisees and Sadducees, "Brood of Vipers". Here again we wonder if this is not too hasty a judgment and whether the complexity of the issue has been examined sufficiently by Dr Newman. The phrase "Brood of vipers" of Matthew 3 and v7 is retained by six modern translations, MF, RSV, NEB, JB, WB, Mercier. It is not, in our judgment, improved by "serpent's brood" (even Phillips cannot avoid "brood") or "You snakes" (TEV). NIV did not follow the term "generation" (AV) any more than the other modern translations and it is just as readable as they.

We may take one more example of this so-called "translationese", the extraordinarily difficult "poor in spirit". This difficulty is reflected in the translations where two modern translations cannot escape the phrase "poor in spirit" (RSV, JB). Phillips ends up rather feebly with "humble-minded" while others expand with a word which stresses the fact of their awareness, viz, the elaborate "who realize the destitution of their own lives" (WB), "...feel poor in spirit" (MF) , "know they are spiritually poor" (TEV), "know they are needy" (Mercier), "know that they are poor" (NEB). It is not to be wondered at if, with such an elusive phrase, the NIV kept to "poor in spirit". Again it may be wondered if sufficient caution was exercised in this indictment of Dr Newman.

Other criticisms of the NIV are, however, not so easy to refute, e.g. an uneasy blend of the old and the new: there is little excuse for holding on to ancient ways of reckoning the hours of the day in the Gospels, e.g. 'third hour', 'ninth hour', 'sixth hour' and yet use a modern method in Acts, "three in the afternoon" (3.1; 10.3,30), "about noon" (10.9), and "at nine tonight" (23.23); alongside quite stilted and formal expressions we find phrases that are rightly charged with verging on slang, e.g., "had your fill" (John 6.26) or the incredible "have a bite" (John 6.7); and what of the crude "take me for a fool" (2 Cor 11.16) or "cover-up" (1 Peter 2.16). /13. The translators claim that they have tried to reflect the differing styles of the biblical writers, but this hardly justifies some of the expressions used. In any case how far can a translator avoid his own idiosyncrasies of style? The use of lengthy sentences is hardly suited to

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a translation which aims at being readable. Some of the most glaring examples are in Romans 1.1-4 and 2 Peter 2. 4-9. The former has 72 words and is couched in such a way as to make it most difficult for the ordinary reader. The latter has a word count of 151, occupying 21 lines of the NIV text, with 5 conditional clauses, two "but" clauses and two temporal. It is evident that on the score of readability, the NIV is often sadly amiss.

The NT writings are documents of faith, written by people of faith, and intended to win people for the faith or to build up people in the faith. If then we find those who claim that mere expertise in language does not by itself qualify a person to translate the NT but that he must share the faith of the writers, there are few church members who would differ from that point of view. They could well make the words of the Living Bible their own, "The man who isnt a Christian can't understand and can't accept these thoughts from God. They sound foolish to him because only those who have the Holy Spirit within them can understand what the Holy Spirit means. Others just can't take it in." (1 Corinthians 2.14)

If it is probably true that only those within the context of faith are equipped to translate the NT and discern the subtle nuances of the theological terms, yet such translators may and do bring their own presuppositions with them and dogmatic reasons can not only affect the text but also the very terms in which the translation is couched. Those within the Reformed tradition, for example, would find it impossible probably to discard all the presuppositions with which they might approach the text. The expression of such a faith may be "frozen", so to speak, in a confession and such confession(s) can become the norm and directive by which the translation of Scripture is assessed and expressed. The tendency can be to absolutize often the terms of such confession - in addition to the words of Scripture -with the consequent denial that there is anything situational in such a confession or even in Scripture. Thus the suggestion that such theology was evolving and, to some extent, determined by a historical situation would be flatly denied.

We may take one or two striking examples of such "wishful thinking", from "The Living Bible" described as "paraphrased". The addition of "paraphrased" implies a sensitivity to possible criticisms of its expansive style. But there is

nothing wrong with paraphrase. "The idea that faithfulness can best be preserved by a word-for-word translation is fallacious." /14 The tendency for devout people - and it can readily be understood-is to shrink from anything but the most literalist or sound translation and to assume that paraphrase is a betrayal of the original, which to them may merely be represented by the AV. "The word 'paraphrase' is the bogey of the half-educated....It is paraphrase when you translate 'Comment vous portez-vous', by 'How are you?'" /15. But granting that paraphrase and translation are very closely related, we can seldom have a more definite declaration of bias than that we find in the preface to "The Living Bible". There we read that "The theological lodestar in this book has been a rigid evangelical position". /16 Such a translation starts off with the conviction that, before it looks at the text at all, it comes with the right kind of attitude for interpreting the text. Such an attitude purports to come from the text so that the translated text can presumably tell them nothing more than they already know. If the text had something other than a basis for a rigid evangelical position, would it be fairly and faithfully translated? It is presumably an attempt to reassure the faithful that there will be no attempt to tamper with a text from which has been derived their faith. It is evident that the danger of such presuppositions is that they cannot translate faithfully. They will, just like some theologians of the past, find what they want to find. Is this not a travesty of what translation is about?

We may take two passages to illustrate the approach of "The Living Bible".

(1) John 1.17

The literal rendering of this text as given by the Revised Version is: "For the law was given by Moses; grace and truth came by Jesus Christ". The LB renders, "For Moses gave us only the Law with its rigid demands and merciless justice, while Jesus Christ brought us loving forgiveness as well." What the original gives us is, "the law was given by Moses". The LB adds what is not in the Greek text, "with its rigid demands and merciless justice". Does the evangelist really entertain such a view of the Mosaic law? When we examine the fourteen occurrences of the Greek word for "law" (nomos), we find that the law is something which Jesus respects (7.23). Response to this law would mean response to Jesus (5.46;7.19). Such a law is fulfilled in Jesus (1.45-5.46;12.34-15.25), and

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is fair (7.49). Where are its "rigid demands" and its "merciless justice". Is this a transfer from the view of Paul to the writer of the Fourth Gospel? But Paul attacks "works of the law" i.e., a legalistic scheme of salvation and he not only declares that the law is holy and just and good (Romans 7.12) but appears to have been a practising Jew. Is there then such a contrast as the LB translation would suggest in John 1.17? It would appear that, in accordance with the evidence of the use of nomos in the Gospel, "the theory that v17 contrasts the absence of enduring love in the Law with the presence of enduring love in Jesus Christ does not seem to do justice to John's honorific reference to Moses. Rather v17 contrasts the enduring love shown in the law with the supreme example of enduring love shown in Jesus." /17 It would appear that this view is more in accord with the evidence given us in the Fourth Gospel.

Are we then to see behind this presentation the emergence of "the rigid evangelical position"? It is a common tendency in writings about Christianity especially of a generation or two ago to play down Judaism in order to bring out the superiority of Christianity. The result could all too often be a distortion of a proper perspective on the Jewish law. Does the Psalmist think of "rigid laws" and "merciless justice" when he writes, "Blessed Lord, teach me your rules. I have recited your laws, and rejoiced in them more than in riches. I will meditate in them.... I will delight in them and not forget them." (Psalm 119.12-16) And what consciousness of "merciless justice" do we get when we read, "He is merciful and tender toward those who don't deserve it; he is slow to get angry and full of kindness and love. He never bears a grudge, nor remains angry forever. He has not punished us as we deserve for all our sins, for his mercy toward those who fear and honour him is as great as the height of the heavens above the earth." (Psalm 103.8-11) - both of these richly phrased quotations are from the Living Bible!

But these Psalms are not isolated examples. The devout Jew had an exultant and overflowing joy in keeping the law, Indeed "this 'joy of the Law' is so essential an element of the understanding of the law, that it 'forms that originality of sentiment more or less delicate' which can never be

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conceived by those who have experienced it neither from life nor from literature." /18 It would appear that the general rule for the Jew was, "Tremble with joy when thou art about to fulfil the commandment". /19 Rabbis indeed taught that the joy in carrying out the law was more acceptable than the commandment itself. /20

(2) John 13. 23-26

We set the passage from the LB alongside one from the RSV:

	<u>RSV</u>	<u>LB</u>
23	One of the disciples whom Jesus loved, was lying close to the breast of Jesus;	Since I was sitting next to Jesus at the table, being his closest friend
24	So Simon Peter beckoned to him and said, "Tell us who it is of whom he speaks."	Simon Peter motioned to me to ask him who it was would do this terrible deed.
25	So lying thus, close to the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?"	So I turned and asked him, "Lord, who is it?"

This bold translation of the LB is quite unique in modern translations. It does two things (1) it identifies the author with the beloved disciple (2) and apparently with John, the apostle, son of Zebedee. This is confirmed by an incorrect footnote to the effect that "all commentators believe him to be John, the writer of this book." /21 Dr Robert G. Bratcher, in his review of the Living Bible, concludes that "in many places it is so dominated by fixed theological presuppositions that it should not serve as a model for translators." /22 It should, however, be remembered that the paraphrases of the LB can at times be of remarkable quality and it is questionable if there are many better devotional renderings of the Psalms.

We turn now, finally, to look at the translation of the Four Gospels by Mr Norman Marrow. Mr Marrow is a member of the Society of Friends, a former Open Scholar of Christ's College, Cambridge. After graduating with honours in Classics he taught Latin, Greek and Scripture at Watford

Grammar School where he was Senior Classical Master for thirty years. He tries to "spell out what the Greek was really saying in ordinary (but not...banal) everyday language ..... (and) conceivably make these books available almost for the first time to people who think of themselves as agnostics, humanists, even atheists." /23 In the forefront of his mind has been "the problem of achieving true eloquence in a contemporary idiom, of rising to the needs of elevated discourse without artificiality, of being on occasion poetic". /24 Further, he aims at ways of avoiding "male chauvinist" assumptions and of mitigating passages which foster anti-semitism. /25

These are admirable aims and, in our view, Mr Marrow has been remarkably successful in his attempt. Take the difficult word for translators, "Behold" (idou), occurring in the four Gospels no less than 130 times out of the 200 NT occurrences (Matt 62 and Luke 57; Mark 7 and John 4). Some translators do not attempt to translate it at all, believing it to be impossible in modern idiom. Here are a few illustrations of the way in which Mr Marrow deals with it from the Nativity stories: "Behold, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream" (RSV) "Who should appear to him in a dream but a messenger of the Lord" (M) (Matt 1.20); "Behold, a virgin shall conceive .." (RSV), "Be assured that a maiden shall conceive" (M) (Matt 1.23); "Behold, wise men from the East" (RSV), "Who should arrive in Jerusalem from somewhere to the east but a number of learned seekers after wisdom" (M). Who can doubt that this is "elevated discourse" expressed in modern idiom and so appropriate to the nativity account?

We have mentioned the difficulty of rendering "poor in spirit" and cited some examples above by which Mr Marrow's translation may be assessed. Here is his rendering: "happy are those who, spiritually, are as dependent as beggars." If we compare with those we have noted, is this rendering in any way inferior to them? We have seen, too, the number of translations which ended up by translating the Baptist's address to the Pharisees and Sadducees as "Brood of vipers". Here we have "You race of adders" (Matt 3.7) In Matthew 23.33 the same phrase is translated, "You descendants of adders". In all modern translations that have been quoted, the transliteration "prophet" has been retained. This translation prefers "spokesman for God" or

a variation of the phrase. It is difficult for those brought up in the biblical idiom to say whether this is better calculated to reach the unschooled or uninterested in religion. Perhaps it does. Yet again and again we are confronted with an originality of translation which does not seem out of place, e.g., "renegade excisemen" (Matt 5.46), "learned professors" (Matt 5.20) for "scribes", "whenever an official conscripts you as a bearer for a one mile stint" (Matt 5.41), "scrap-heap of Gehenna" (Matt 5.29), "putting on an act to impress their fellows" (Matt 6.2). It is not possible to do more than touch on some of the more striking examples. Occasionally the striving for a new idiom has strange-sounding results e.g, the opening phrase of the Great Commission in Matthew, "Absolute discretion has been granted me, both in heaven and here upon earth" (Matt 28.18) or "if the story leaks out at the Residency" (Matt 28.14) but that is perhaps our fault, due to our inability to readjust to fresh idiom. In John 1.10, the Greek word eksousia, translated as "absolute discretion" above, becomes "capacity" - he gave the capacity to become sons of God. In Mark 1.21, it becomes "he was teaching as of right".

The attempt to avoid "male chauvinism" is not perhaps very successful. "I will make you fishers of people" does not have the right sound, at least where the phrase "fishers of men" is all too familiar. How it would appeal to one who was outside the Christian faith would need to be tested. At times it is hard to resist the feeling that the attempt becomes downright clumsy e.g., we have no less than four occurrences of "fellow human-being" - all of them a translation of adelphos, 'brother' (p17). The final sentence of the account of the healing of the paralysed man reads, "They praised God for having granted that such things might be done by humankind (anthrōpōis = men). We may well ask how far such a modernisation can be called "fidelity" to the original. Can we really make an attempt to give women a position they did not occupy in Jesus' day and that they do not have in orthodox Judaism today where men can still pray, "Thank God I was not born a woman."? Other translators have attempted to do this. We may well ask whether the translation of hupotassomenai (be subject) of 1 Peter 3.1 is justified, "You married women should adapt yourselves to your husbands" (Phillips). In attempting

the same translation of the same word in a similar context (Ephesians 5.21f) where the verse runs: "Wives, be subject to your husbands as to the Lord" (RSV), Phillips translates, "You wives must learn to adapt yourselves to your husbands, as you submit yourselves to the Lord." There is only one verb involved (hupotassomai) but it has to be translated in two different ways. Is this faithful translation? Can the NT really be rid of "male chauvinism" without considerable awkwardness?

A problem of a different kind lies in the so-called "anti-semitism" of the Gospels, especially of Matthew and of John. Is it endemic to the gospel record or is it something that can be eliminated by the proper translation? According to Dr Gregory Baum who once held the view that anti-Jewish trends were peripheral to the NT, such tendencies are woven deeply into some of its major writings. /26 If this is the case, then a translation which eliminates such strands is misrepresenting what the NT says. An attempt was made in 1970 /27 to produce a NT without anti-semitism. What it did in effect was often to eliminate the very Jewishness of the NT context where "synagogues" become "congregations", "chief priests" become "ministers", and "Gentiles" "nations"; again "Pharisees" become "separates" and "Levites" "assistants". The alteration of the text of "His blood be on us, and on our children" to "His blood be upon him" (reference Lev.20.9ff) without any textual justification recognizes the appalling influence of this in Christian persecution of the Jews but is not in any way "translation" but "perversion".

We may note a few of the ways in which Mr Marrow seeks to eliminate potentially anti-Jewish elements. In Matthew the phrase "their synagogues", which sets the church over against Judaism, becomes "local synagogues", a not impossible translation perhaps, but in the context of the Matthaean situation, may be considered dubious. "You learned Professors and Pharisees, shame on you.." - Matt 23 - does serve to ease the starkness and force of "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees..". There is a certain esteem in "learned professor" unless it is considered to be ironic. "Shame on you and your play-acting" is certainly less denunciatory than "hypocrites". The reply of the mob is also much less emotive and sinister, "We'll take the blame for his death - we and our children". (Matthew 27.25)

But Mr Marrow, as his preface shows, is especially concerned about the misinterpretation of "The Jews" in the Fourth Gospel. /28 Most of the time - and there are 79 occurrences of Ioudaioi in the Fourth Gospel - they are consistently hostile to Jesus. It is part of the so-called dualism of the Fourth Gospel that we have light set over against darkness, life over against death, truth over against falsehood and the world over against God. The "Jews" as non-Christians, in keeping with the presentation of this dualism, are represented as part of the hostile world. /29 But even with this, it is possible to ease the severity of the presentation of Jews:- (1) by recognizing that by "The Jews" is meant the "authorities" at Jerusalem. Our translation has "for fear of the religious authorities" (20.19), "Jewish dignitaries" (19.7) and parallel phrases. (We would hardly expect "fellow-Jews", however, in 1.19; the reference is clearly to the Jewish authorities. Perhaps since the deputation was to the Baptist, it could not be viewed as "antisemitic".) (2) By making clear the identification of Jesus and his disciples as fellow-Jews with those who oppose him e.g. "fellow-Jews" (1.19;5.10; 5.18;6.41) (3) By using the adjective "Jewish" instead of the literal translation "of the Jews" (2.6;5.1;6.4)

We are grateful to Mr Marrow for a stimulating and refreshingly original translation which, if it tries to do too much, at least should occupy an honoured place among the numerous, often distinguished, translations of today.

### Notes

1. N. Marrow, The Four Gospels, Luton 1977
2. For the "semitisms" in the NT cf. C.F.D. Moule, An Idiom-Book of NT Greek, Cambridge 1953, Chapter XXV
3. Art. in Sunday Telegraph in The New English Bible, Ed. D.E.H. Nineham, London 1965, p97 - a needlessly harsh judgment.
4. J.B. Lightfoot, On a Fresh Revision of the NT, London 1871, p172, N.1
5. op.cit., p171
6. R.C. Trench, The Authorized Version of the NT, London 1859, p40
7. B. Newman, The Bible Translator, July 1980, pp 325-336.

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8. F.F. Bruce, The English Bible, London 1961, pp 142,152
9. New International Version, Michigan & London, 1978/9
10. B. Newman, op.cit., p326
11. B. Newman, op.cit., p329
12. K. Condon, The Mercier NT, Cork 1970, Part 1
13. B. Newman, op.cit.,p331
14. C.H. Dodd, Times Literary Supplement, March 20, 1959
15. Ronald Knox, TBT, July 1969 p37 as quoted by Dr R.G. Bratcher.
16. The Living Bible Paraphrased, October 1973 edition
17. R.E. Brown, The Gospel According to John, London 1971, ad loc.
18. S. Schechter, Some Aspects of Rabbinic Theology, London 1909, pp148f
19. op.cit., p151f
20. op.cit.
21. LB paraphrased (1973), p853, N.b
22. R.G. Bratcher, Review of The Living Bible, TBT, July 1969
23. The Four Gospels, p8
24. op.cit
25. op.cit
26. Rosemary Ruether, Faith and Fratricide, London 1975, Introduction by G. Baum, pp2ff
27. New Testament, Judaeen and Authorized Version, Review by H.K. Moulton in TBT, April 1971, pp92-3.
28. op.cit
29. Cf. the excellent article on 'The Jews' in the Gospel of John, by R.G. Bratcher, TBT, October 1975, pp401-409