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Scripture

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THE NEW ENGLISH VERSION OF THE NEW TESTAMENT¹

'A massive confidence trick, though without criminal intention' is what the *Sunday Express* called this new translation; 'it is as if a trade union leader had collaborated with Miss Enid Blyton.' Well of course the biblical translator is fair game. It is right that he should be. The public are warmly invited to criticise when a version is made expressly in their interest and advertised with a barrage of propaganda. Nevertheless, the 'I am no expert, but . . .' is never an impressive opening, and what follows it will often be found to be a matter of taste, personal taste; in this instance literary taste. One does not despair of quasi-absolute standards in the judgment of literary excellence, but it is at least disconcerting for the layman when one respected man of letters can write that the Gospel translations are 'admirable . . . what slept has been awakened' (John Masefield in *The Times*), and another can speak of a 'defect of tone throughout,' 'a language of administrators, even dropping to that of politicians' (V. S. Pritchett in the *New Statesman*). It is beyond our competence, and therefore fortunate that it is outside our scope, to weigh literary merits. But there is a question one would like to ask and which every translator must ask himself: Is the translation to be better than the original or as bad? It is a commonplace, for example, that Luke loves to plane

¹ *The New English Bible. New Testament.* Library edition, pp. xiii + 447. 21s. Popular edition, pp. xi + 432, 8s 6d (Oxford and Cambridge Presses, 1961). The way in which this new translation came to birth is now sufficiently well known, and will not be discussed here; it is explained in the Introduction, and Mgr Barton's article may be consulted in *The Clergy Review*, April 1961, pp. 217-23. There is an essay forthcoming from Fr Bligh, S.J., in the *Heythrop Journal*. We shall refer to the new translation as NEB, with RSV for the closely literal American version (New Testament 1946, Old Testament 1952), and JB for the Jerusalem Bible. It is necessary to say a word about this third. *La Sainte Bible traduite en français sous la direction de l'École Biblique de Jérusalem* (Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris 1955), commonly known in France as the *Bible de Jérusalem*, is at present being translated into English. The publishers, Darton, Longman & Todd, hope to have it out in 1962. Its battery of cross-reference, introductions, exegetical and textual notes, headings, make this edition the most useful I know. For the translation of the biblical text itself, the text established by the French scholars is being accepted, together with their interpretation, but the wording of the translation is governed throughout by continual reference to the original languages.

down the roughnesses of Mark's style. Is the translator to do Luke's work or leave Mark alone? And if Mark is left alone, of whom is the critic complaining? Of the translator, or of Mark? This is no attempt to evade capture by diving down some esoteric burrow, nor is it a scarecrow to frighten off popular criticism, but it is a plea for sympathy and caution. At least the critic who is Scriptureally amateur might draw back from calling Professor Dodd 'the foreman of the demolition job,' though he may have some excuse for denouncing 'acadamese' and 'candy floss English' (D. Macdonald in *The Observer*). It is easy indeed, and amusing, to tilt at what is, wrongly, supposed to be a drawing-room refinement (though NEB is much less frightened of 'belly' than RSV is, and uses 'stomach' only where stomach is meant). It is evidently less easy to construct, unless we are to take the suggestion of Mr Robert Graves for a joke: 'vitiliginous' for 'leprous.' When all this is said, it still remains that there is criticism of this kind that has some justice in it. It may be true that *Revelations* is 'small beer, and sadly flat' (*Punch*), and that certain phrases 'stick out like black coat and pin-stripe trousers in an Oriental bazaar' (V. S. Pritchett). Of this the public and time will ultimately judge; they will judge well if information and sound taste go hand in hand.

Now what of the Greek text behind the translation? The edition (1516) of Erasmus whom, it will be remembered, St John Fisher made professor of Greek in Cambridge, was the raw material for the King James Version. Erasmus was at the mercy of eleventh-century minuscule manuscripts as his earliest source, but his edition, substantially, remained the 'Received Text' until the last century. There have been two notable changes in the art of textual criticism since then, as notable as the progress from steam to oil and from oil to atom. The first stage was one of discovery, edition, rumination: fourth-century codices and even second-century versions came to light, and many others; the scholars fell upon these, scrutinised them, sorted them into 'families,' became decided in their preference (in a somewhat wholesale manner and rather hastily, as it would now appear), and from this gestation was born in England the sound but unpopular Revised Version of 1881. The second stage began with disillusion: the 'families' were not behaving themselves, that is to say they were not as clearly and as uniformly grouped as they had appeared; the great fourth-century codices themselves, Westcott and Hort's great 'Neutral Text' which had dominated the Revised Version, were found to be not spring water but piped editions and not disinterested witnesses.¹ Moreover, the importance of the earliest translations began

¹ Of course, what is a molehill for the public is a mountain to the textual critic. Nevertheless, reviewers should respect a science that is akin to microphysics.

to force itself upon the critics' notice, and the quotations in the earliest ecclesiastical writers ; there were papyri, too, of great antiquity. The neat old card-index system had tumbled over the floor, reshuffled itself, and been smothered under a mass of new facts. All the work was to do again. It is still to be done. But now (for we are still in this second stage) a method is forcing itself to the front which always played at least some humble part in textual criticism, the method that weighs not the manuscript authorities but the intrinsic likelihood of a given reading. It is no longer accepted that a respectable 'family' can do no wrong, there is no general absolution, every word is guilty until it is proved innocent. This is all to the good, but with a principle in play that is partly subjective we must expect variety, apparent inconsistency, something which in the 'first stage' we have described would have been called—and oddly still is—'eclecticism.' The question we have asked at the beginning of this paragraph ('What of the Greek text behind the translation?') is something of an anachronism therefore. The text is selected as the translator proceeds—not, of course, scorning the external authorities but using the principle we have described with more freedom than his fathers would have done. One may disagree with the choice, but it is important to know what motives there are behind it. We may remark here, in passing, that complaints about certain preferences for the 'Western Text' (as it is misleadingly called) are perhaps unjust if we remember, first, the criterion of internal criticism and, second, the gaining favour of a hitherto despised text. This is not to say that one always agrees. It is a surprise to read, for example, that our Lord is 'warmly indignant' when he stretches out his hand to heal the leper (Mk. 1:41), and not 'moved with pity'; one can only suppose that the Western reading has been preferred (since there is no question of harmonisation here; the other gospels omit) precisely because it is the more 'difficult' reading. Even then, it seems misleading to refer, in the footnote, to the mass of counter-evidence as 'some witnesses.'

The footnotes, all textual and none exegetical, are perhaps not as full or as many as might have been expected. The impression is left that this, coupled with the complete absence of cross-reference even for quotations from the Old Testament or for gospel parallels, has been done to leave an undeniably beautiful page unsullied. A pity, some may think. And since the textual footnotes are so sparse, the citation of the Sinaitic Syriac, apropos Mt. 1:16 (Joseph, to whom Mary, a virgin, was betrothed, was the father of . . .), which is critically speaking negligible, appears all the more scrupulous; perhaps due to the pressure of members of the committee. The common reader might also be misled by the footnote to Lk. 1:46 ('And Mary said'—

the Magnificat follows) : ' So the majority of ancient witnesses ; some read Elizabeth ; the original may have had no name.' If the original had no name, the Magnificat is Elizabeth's (' and she said ' would refer to Elizabeth the last speaker). But surely the textual footnote in JB is more just : ' Not " Elizabeth," a variant reading without serious support.'

We may now turn to certain particularities of the new translation. It should be said at the outset that there can be no question of the scholarship and care that lies behind it ; the history of its making and the men who made it are guarantees of both. What has been done is the outcome of a thought-out policy and, as it seems to me, it is only that policy that can be usefully examined. Other questions like the acceptance of the shorter reading of Luke's Eucharistic text (Lk. 22: 19b-20 are, one thinks mistakenly, omitted), the use of ' girl ' for Mary (eliminating the Isaian echo), the committing of Jn. 8:1-11 to the end of the gospel (a reasonable procedure), the printing of both ' finals ' of Mark and a hundred similar questions might be raised, but these are not properly characteristics of NEB and do not contrast it with the other version which has swept the English-speaking world, the American Revised Standard Version. Where these two stand contrasted, and widely contrasted, is in their literary policy (though indeed, as we shall see, this may overflow into exegesis). ' The Revised Standard Version is not a new translation in the language of today. . . . It is a revision which seeks to preserve all that is best in the English Bible as it has been known and used through the years ' (Preface). Compare this from the Introduction to NEB : ' The Joint Committee which promoted and controlled the enterprise decided at the outset that what was now needed was not another revision of the Authorised Version but a genuinely new translation, in which an attempt should be made consistently to use the idiom of contemporary English to convey the meaning of the Greek.'

How do these two policies work out in practice? Here is a sentence taken at random from Galatians (5:6) as it is in the traditional and closely literal RSV, in the ' idiom of contemporary English ' represented by NEB, in the forthcoming English edition of the *Bible de Jérusalem* :

| RSV | NEB | JB |
|---|--|--|
| For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor uncircumcision is of any avail, but faith working through love. | If we are in union with Christ Jesus circumcision makes no difference at all, nor does the want of it ; the only thing that counts is faith active in love. | For in Christ Jesus neither circumcision nor the lack of it has any value, but only faith active in love. |

In the Greek this sentence has 15 words, RSV 17, NEB 30, JB 20. NEB and JB add something to their total by a common dislike for the word 'uncircumcision' (which, however, NEB uses only a few verses lower down, 6:15, and rather surprisingly in the almost exactly parallel sentence of 1 Cor. 7:19: 'Circumcision or uncircumcision is neither here nor there'). The NEB adds further to its score by filling out Paul's strongly adversative 'but' (*ἀλλά*) into a clause ('the only thing that counts'); the JB feels that 'but' is too weak for *ἀλλά*, though it refuses to go to the lengths of NEB. The reader must judge for himself whether NEB has made the incisive Paul too wordy. But perhaps the most significant difference here is NEB's refusal, which has few exceptions, to use Paul's recurrent phrase 'in Christ' ('in union with,' 'in fellowship with,' 'united with,' etc.). For here we are at the crossroads of translation, I mean of course biblical translation which has (as I think) its own peculiar claim to vocabular consistency, as also to what may be called 'neutrality' on the part of the translator—I mean a resistance to paraphrase. Of course, this resistance can never be absolute in a readable translation: it is a question of degree; but degree is important. In the example we are considering, students who have no Greek may feel themselves cheated when, for instance, 'those who have died in Christ' becomes 'those who have died within Christ's fellowship' (1 Cor. 15:18). He may feel that the theology is shallower than it should be. And yet in assessments of this kind, it is only fair to remember that a translation is made with a determined public in view. Now the NEB is not designed as a tool for biblical theology, and indeed it is reasonable to suppose that a theologian would know his Greek and need no NEB; it is a faithful, somewhat free, easy-to-read translation, addressed (as I have seen suggested) to unbelievers and even potential unbelievers, conciliatory—perhaps even condescending, as when 'Caesar' becomes 'Roman Emperor'—and supremely competent. In these circumstances it is understandable that 'If you wish to be perfect' is 'If you wish to go the whole way' (Mt. 19:21), and the children's 'angels' in Mt. 18:10 become 'guardian angels.'

And because this modern 'public' of ours is supposed (perhaps rather hastily) to have lost its taste for sonority and flowing rhythm, there is less fear of the staccato and less tolerance of the protracted sentence. Here there is almost certainly a gain in clarity, particularly in the Pauline epistles. But, as with every gain, there goes a loss—and here occasionally a loss without the gain. Thus at times the NEB is impatient of repetition (though in Mt. 16:18 it intrudes an interpretative repetition: 'You are Peter, *the Rock*, and on this rock . . .')—unfortunate that by a necessity of printing a distinction should appear

to be made). Now repetition need not be deplorable, it is a trick the human baby never entirely loses, and it is often effective, certainly revealing an author's temperament. The following example has already been singled out in the reviews, and one cannot help but join in their complaint. For I Cor. 13:11, the Rheims-Challoner reads :

When I was a child, I spoke as a child,
I understood as a child, I thought as a child.
But when I became a man,
I put away the things of a child.

But NEB has :

When I was a child, my speech,
my outlook, and my thoughts were all childish.
When I grew up,
I had finished with childish things.

Paul's hammered indictment of superficial *charismata* has been smoothed out into persuasive pedagogy. With greater reason the ten times repeated 'flesh' in Rom. 8:3-9 ('lower nature' four times in NEB) is varied, though even here there seems to be a loss of impact. It is the old question: how far may the biblical translator venture to improve upon his original? If he does truly improve, he will be sure of a round of applause, but is this—as the jargon goes—ethical?

Associated with this business of repetition is what we have gracelessly called 'vocabular consistency'; this self-denying ordinance the RSV has most gallantly assumed, and its great Concordance is a monument to a virtue that NEB lays no claim to, indeed explicitly repudiates. The virtue may be thought puritanical, as in some part it is, and even RSV cannot always practise it; nevertheless, in the biblical literary tradition where one writer not infrequently makes deliberate echo of some predecessor a measure of consistency is necessary, at least for the student. It is still to be seen what the NEB Old Testament (some years away) will do about this: how far, for example, the Deuteronomic style will be recognisable in sections of the historical books; how far, in short, the literary critic will be able to work from the English. In this field, it may be thought, respect for the original may have to defy popular approval. Let me take a sentence related to this: God gave Solomon 'a heart great as the sand on the seashore' (I Kg. 4:29; JB). Quite understandably Mgr Knox sees how wrenched the comparison is here and prefers 'a store of knowledge wide as the sand on the sea-shore,' which makes the comparison altogether natural and the translation readable. Yet

the very unnaturalness of the picture (elsewhere in the Bible it is used only to express things innumerable, and not size) makes many scholars conclude to the late date of this verse. One may be excused for preserving the artificiality therefore, though here again it may be that the translator must keep his intended public in mind.

Now in the New Testament, and particularly for the Gospels where the question of literary relationships is hotly debated, consistency—where it is reasonably possible—is still of importance. In an excellent review¹ the author even suggests that in NEB variety seems to have been made a virtue in itself. He instances the word *γραμματεὺς*, which occurs sixty-one times in the New Testament and is consistently translated 'scribes' in RSV. In the NEB he counts 'lawyers' (30 times), 'doctors of the law' (25), 'teachers' (4), 'teachers of the law' (2). He quite rightly adds that the occasional use of *νομικός* by Luke alone² is thus obscured, although many think that this has a bearing on the problem of Luke's sources. In this example, one feels, the question of the intended readers is not relevant. In this same review (if we may be forgiven for going back to a point we have already mentioned) freedom of a different kind is made the subject of warning, not however of rebuke. The passage quoted is from Rev. (Apoc.) 13:18 in RSV and NEB, to which one may be allowed to add the Jerusalem Bible version :

| RSV | NEB | JB |
|---|---|---|
| This calls for wisdom : let him who has under- standing reckon the number of the beast, for it is a human number, its number is six hundred and sixty-six. | Here is the key ; and anyone who has intelligence may work out the number of the beast, The number represents a man's name, and the numerical value of its letters is six hundred and sixty-six. | This calls for quick wit : let one who is shrewd reckon out the number of the Beast, which is the number of a man : his number is six hundred and sixty-six. |

One rather sympathises with the NEB paraphrase here ; the temptation to do so, and what is almost the justification for doing so, is the complete absence of explanatory notes. It might be permitted to urge that the NEB translators or committee publish a commentary ; it is improbable that this will be done, but the present writer is convinced that no Bible should be published without adequate notes ; a book of such moment and of such difficulty demands them. The dangers of sectarianism are rapidly disappearing and the bad old times of

¹ *The Times Literary Supplement*, 24 March 1961

² Though perhaps here we should except the (doubtful) reading of Mt. 22:35

footnote polemic have surely gone. A translator sitting on a cushion of footnote will be more at his ease (though this, too, has its perils) and not lured to paraphrase.

The flavour of the new version can best be communicated here by a few samples. 'Behold' has gone; 'in the bosom of the Father' has become 'nearest the Father's heart' (inadequately?); 'physician' in Mt. 9:12 (though not in Lk. 4:23) is 'doctor'; 'moat and beam' are now 'speck and plank'; 'soft garments' reads 'silks and satins'; 'man born of woman' is (jauntily?) 'a mother's son'; 'publicans' are 'tax-gatherers' (why not 'tax-collectors'?); 'swine' are 'pigs,' and 'sinners' 'bad characters'; 'let us draw lots for it' is 'let us toss for it'; the sponge is stretched out to the Crucified not on 'hyssop' (Jn.) but on 'a javelin' (a reading most attractive but almost unsupported in the manuscripts); 'gates of hell prevail' is 'forces of death overpower'; 'great was its fall' (Mt. 7:27; JB) reads, with more gusto than sombreness, 'down it fell with a great crash'; 'gnashing of teeth' is, more accurately, 'grinding of teeth'; that ancient fight about nothing, the 'woman, a sister' of I Cor. 9:5 (Rheims) is still stubbornly, and questionably, 'a Christian wife'; the 'sting in the flesh' is 'a sharp pain in my body,' perhaps too specifically; the technical 'sign' in St John is happily preserved, as it was not in the Knox version (though why not 'sign' also in Rev. 12:1 where 'portent' is read?); 'Barabbas' is 'Jesus Bar-Abbas,' which makes good contrast with 'Jesus who is called the Christ' ('Jesus called Messiah' in this version) but which, according to JB footnote, seems to have an apocryphal tradition for its source; the 'beginning of sorrows' ('of the birth-pangs' in JB) is 'the birth-pangs of the new age'; there are ten 'girls' who are wise and foolish, but 'the girl's name was Mary' will grate on a Catholic ear ('virgin's,' RSV); 'except it be for fornication' is 'for any cause other than unchastity' in both Mt. 5:32 and 19:9, though the Greek is notably different; 'Whosoever the body shall be, there shall the eagles also be gathered together' (Mt. 24:28; Rheims) is most happily 'Wherever the corpse is, there the vultures will gather'; 'Woman, what is it to me and to thee?' is translated 'Your concern, mother, is not mine.'

But of all the changes, the disappearance of 'thou' with its troublesome verb-forms is, naturally, the most pervasive. The Old Testament will benefit much more by it. One says 'benefit,' though here there is a loss too; our language has lost and we have to surrender to the new standard of literary living. There are certain archaisms that demand retention. When Achab defies Ben-Hadad with the proverb, 'Who dons his armour may not so boast as he that doffs it'

(1 Kg. 20:11 ; JB), we would be rash indeed to translate, 'Don't count your chickens before they're hatched.' And indeed the whole great framework of Christianity may be called 'archaic'; the New Testament itself spoke in terms of the Old. But there are purely literary archaisms within a given language that may induce a dream-state or, worse, an affectation. In all but a few parts of our country 'thou' is unreal. It is no surprise that NEB agrees with RSV in letting it go. And yet, again with RSV, it remains when God is addressed. There is liturgical preoccupation here, no doubt. Where there is intention (though fulfilment is doubtless some distance away) of using a translation uniformly in public worship, the version will perforce retain something of the hieratic. With other translations which make no claim to influence, much less plead for, liturgical usage, the case is different. The time will come, and now is for some, when the common man will prefer to address God, with equal reverence and perhaps with more naturalness, as 'you.' With this in mind one may compare NEB with JB in the rendering of the 'Our Father':

NEB

Our Father in heaven,
Thy name be hallowed ;
Thy kingdom come,
Thy will be done,
On earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread.
Forgive us the wrong we have done,
As we have forgiven those who have wronged us,
And do not bring us to the test,
But save us from the evil one.

JB

Our Father in heaven,
may your Name be held holy,
your kingdom come,
your will be done,
on earth as in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our debts,
as we have forgiven our debtors.
And do not lead us into temptation,
but deliver us from the evil one.

The NEB has made a stir as (we hope not ominously) the Revised Version made a stir at the end of the last century and died at the hands of the people. If the Catholic wonders at the excitement, it is because he forgets that his own liturgical text has been Latin, and he has not felt the wind of change; because he forgets also that his own 1598 Rheims New Testament went through extensive revision in the eighteenth century (its 'Our Father which art' has given way to 'who art' many years now); moreover, he is almost impervious to shock: his sense of tradition is indeed strong, but it is of a living and lively tradition, and development of one sort and another he takes for granted. He might therefore underestimate the effect of this new translation on those English-speaking peoples over whose life and liturgy one revered version of God's word has ruled for three hundred and fifty years. The surgery is painful and severe; one can only hope that it will be successful. If it is not received into the churches of our age, we may at least pray that it will be welcomed in its streets.

And the presentation? Making the usual allowances for the mawkish religiousness of Dickens, we may quote with some sympathy his description of a nineteenth-century English Sunday. Arthur Clennam ruminates :

There was the interminable Sunday of his nonage ; when his mother, stern of face and unrelenting of heart, would sit all day behind a Bible—bound, like her own construction of it, in the hardest, barest, and straitest boards, with one dinted ornament on the cover like the drag of a chain, and a wrathful sprinkling of red upon the edges of the leaves—as if it, of all books ! were a fortification against sweetness of temper, natural affection, and gentle intercourse.

What a difference here !

ALEX. JONES

Upholland

RECENT DISCUSSION OF THE TITLE
'LAMB OF GOD'

In this paper I wish to present a synthesis of the latest discussion¹ concerning the origin and meaning of the expression *ho annos tou Theou* : the lamb of God, in the Fourth Gospel. This expression is found twice in St John, once in a simple form : 'Behold the lamb of God' (1:36), and once with the addition 'who takes away the sin of the world' (1:29).

With few exceptions the exegetes who have considered this question during the last few years (1950-60) distinguish two stages in the interpretation of this passage of the Gospel : they distinguish the time when the words 'Behold the lamb of God' were written, namely at the end of the first century A.D., from the time when these words were actually spoken, or were supposed to have been spoken by John the

¹ The most important contributions have been made by the following : C. D. Dodd, *The Interpretation of the Fourth Gospel*, Cambridge 1953, pp. 230-8 ; J. Jermias, *Theologisches Wörterbuch zum Neuen Testament* v (1954), p. 700 ; V. Taylor, *Jesus and his Sacrifice*, London 1955, pp. 224-5 ; C. K. Barrett, 'The Lamb of God' in *New Testament Studies* 1 (1955), pp. 210-18 ; O. Cullmann, *Les sacrements dans l'évangile johannique* Paris 1955, pp. 70-2 ; A. George, 'De l'agneau pascal à l'agneau de Dieu' in *Bible et Vie chrétienne* ix (1955), pp. 85-90 ; M.-E. Boismard, *Du baptême à Cana*, Paris 1956, pp. 42-3 ; id., 'Le Christ-Agneau-Rédempteur des hommes' in *Lumière et Vie* xxxvi (1958), pp. 97-104 ; B. Prete, 'Gesù Agnello di Dio, Valore ed origine dell' imagine' in *Sacra Dottrina* 1 (1956), pp. 13-31 ; I. de la Potterie, 'Ecco l'Agnello di Dio' in *Bibbia e Oriente* 1 (1959), pp. 161-9 ; R. E. Brown, 'Three Quotations from John the Baptist in the Gospel of John' in *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* xxii (1960), pp. 292-8.