

about the state of our civilization and about what is to be done. *Not* in order for us to opt out into a new otherworldliness, but simply to liberate us from the spell of our own absolutes, to deliver us from our own idols. 'We know of too many revolutions', writes Herbert Marcuse, 'through which the continuum of repression has been sustained, revolutions which have replaced one system of domination by another.' The story of Jesus has to be told so that it may be heard as deliverance from every absolutization of penultimate concerns. The *shalom* which God's sovereignty brings, makes our conservative myths of law and order and our revolutionary mystiques of solidarity look *salutarily* (but not totally!) ridiculous. The demonstration Jesus organized was a send up of political utopianism, but it remains for us a sacrament of freedom. Laughter is liberating: the effect of Jesus is deliverance from idolization; but how it happens, like making a good joke, is unpreparable, unpremeditated, literally *ex-temporaneous*. And finally—it is important too if the homily can release the congregation from the grip of that undue solemnity which so often inhibits us in church. Liturgy can be *celebrated* only if it too is felt to be less than ultimate; deliverance from absolutization of the ecclesiastical is another effect of the Gospel.

The New English Bible by Aelred Baker, O.S.B.

If anyone thinks there have been quite enough translations of the Bible already, he will have to think again, and make room on his bookshelf; for the New English Bible (NEB) has arrived. It was heralded in *The Times* on 25th February with a fanfare, unusually shrill and orchestrated. And well it might be, for this is news indeed. It completes a project begun in 1946 and undertaken by representatives of all the major Christian bodies in Great Britain and Ireland, except the Roman Catholics. Why not they? A recent national newspaper colour supplement answers that it is because Roman Catholic scholars were engaged on the Jerusalem Bible (JB). What, all of them and all the time? Well, perhaps it is an exaggeration, but there is prudence in the telling. For seeing the august body that sat in judgment on one another's work in committee stage, Roman Catholics could be nothing but admiring and grateful observers; which in fact, latterly, some of them officially were.

Review is necessary now only of the Old Testament as the New was published separately in 1961, to explode some of the critical booby traps. The Massoretic Hebrew text has been made the basis of the translation and the finest English scholars of a generation are

the instrument. The result begins boldly; for the very first words summon up the apparatus of Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica* and a host of modern scholars to support the reading: 'In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth. . . .' And in the next verse, where JB had the first of its more notable misprints, there is 'a mighty wind' sweeping over the surface of the waters, instead of 'the spirit of God hovering'. Thereafter a great deal more of Hebrew scholarship, especially by English scholars, is writ forever in the text.

And yet apparently this is not sales talk. The hurrah among the trumpets is not for erudition but intelligibility. The NEB claims to make sense. This of course chimes in with the modern chorus. All recent translations have tried to make the Bible intelligible, even at the expense of the old resonances and new accuracy. JB in 1966 brought this trend to a fine art. For the translators included several eminent names in English letters, while it was not clear who among the rest knew Hebrew really well. Perhaps it did not matter. For, whatever the foreword says to the contrary, it is manifest that as often as not when the Hebrew gets really difficult JB simply and literally translates the modern French of *La Bible de Jérusalem* (BJ).

The NEB could never stoop to that, of course, But it is easy to forget what a heavy strain intelligibility imposes on a translator who really knows Hebrew. Unlike his confrères with the New Testament, he does not have to pick from many nuances, or a fistful of variants; he simply has to try to make the one available text make any sense at all. Numerous verses are so mangled that the translator has got to say something. NEB is not an annotated Bible, and as the translator is only allowed room to keep saying *prob. rdg.* (probable reading) for all and every kind of ingenuity, he has got to make maximum sense in the text. Maybe it helps not to be all that aware of what is Hebraically possible.

However, NEB manages to get some of the resonant opacity of the Revised Version (RV) across to the mid-twentieth-century reader. The oft-repeated 'gird up your loins' becomes 'hitch up your cloak'; and that curious phrase in RV that sounds like a cavalry instructor grilling his recruits: 'Thou art near in their mouth and far from their reins' (Jer. 12, 2) becomes more reasonably: 'Thou art ever on their lips, yet far from their hearts'. The interminable Hebrew 'and' is well manipulated so as to avoid repetition or chopping up the sentences in staccato fashion. This works very well with narrative passages, which justify NEB's claim to be making sense 'in current speech'. An example will show. Here is 2 Kings 9, 11-12 in RV: 'Wherefore came this mad fellow to thee? And he said unto them: Ye know the man and what his talk was. And they said, it is false: tell us now. And he said, thus and thus spake he to me.' I do not believe this was ever current speech anywhere, neither in 1881 nor 1611; it is that separate thing called 'Biblical English'.

NEB has substantially the same translation but in normal English: "What did this crazy fellow want with you?" "You know him and the way his thoughts run", he said. "Nonsense", they replied; "tell us what happened." "I will tell you exactly what he said".

The translators occasionally let themselves go: 'If you are sitting at table do not lick your lips and exclaim "What a spread"' (Eccles. 31, 12). This is worldly wisdom with an accent. But it is not always so easy, especially when we come to poetry. The many-splendoured thing in the Song of Songs is intelligible enough to everybody. And the description of the heroine is the kind of Scripture that is apt to make the heart of Western man burn within him. But what are we to make of the description of her neck as like a fortress (4, 4)? The NEB follows a learned suggestion of Professor Honeyman from the styles of oriental architecture, and now finds the gentle maiden's neck to be 'built with winding courses'. What sort of sense does this make?

On the other hand, good sense and eyesight can bolster erudition in other places. In Job 40, 15, for instance, the translator is faced with the Hebrew *behemoth*. What is this? JB leaves it as it is, but tells us in the note that it means a hippopotamus. This is fished out of BJ, and the translator sees no anomaly in going on to describe this 'hippopotamus' with 'power in his stomach muscles' and a 'tail stiff as a cedar'. To which the modern reader can only reply that either poetical licence is being carried to its illogical conclusion or that evolution here has had a gallop. NEB resorts to a suggestion by G. Driver that the animal is really a crocodile. This at least makes 'the strength in his loins' and his tail 'rigid as a cedar' a little more credible.

There are numerous special cases where either the existing Hebrew is impossible or where an obscure word occurs for the first and only time. The work of many scholars on these problems is pressed into service. For instance, the famous suggestion of D. Winton Thomas at Isaiah 53, 3, 'humbled by suffering', is accepted. Another of his suggestions for a second meaning to a Hebrew word in particular contexts (*J.T.S.* xvi, 1965, p. 444) is accepted for 'captivity' instead of 'affliction' to make better sense at Job 36, 8; Psalms 105, 18 and 107, 10. G. Driver, as joint director of the working committee, not unnaturally, is specially favoured at certain points. One interesting one is a chivalrous intercession on behalf of the author of Ecclesiastes. This man has a bad enough reputation already as a woman-hater. But there are limits. He is nearly always accredited with saying (7, 26) that 'the wiles of a woman are more bitter than death'. But *mar* here might be better translated as 'mightier' than as 'more bitter', and so the NEB has it. A woman might feel positively flattered.

A special example where erudite sweat has quite lyrical consequences can be seen in the Song of Songs. The translation is set out in long flowing lines. They are not without their awkwardness

and absurdities. Where even faithless translators have failed at times, what can a just man do? But there is a truly Keatsian touch at 2, 17. JB here rounds off a poem with the incredibly prosaic line 'on the mountains of the covenant'. This lover is beginning to talk theology. Doubtless it is the fault of a difficult Hebrew word and BJ combined. But NEB develops a suggestion from the margin of RV to produce the successful line: 'on the hills where cinnamon grows'.

On the whole the translators have tried to solve their problems manfully by sticking to the consonantal Hebrew text and the knowledge of the language. They have not listened very enthusiastically to the Ugaritic pipes ostentatiously played these days by Mitchell Dahood. The committee had its own Ugaritic experts. But one cannot imagine J. A. Emerton having quite the same gusto for digging up Ugaritic roots every time the Hebrew stem seems to wilt. Nevertheless, 'in stillness and staying quiet' (Is. 30, 15) looks very much like Dahood's suggestion in *CBQ* xx, 1958, p. 42, 'by sitting still and keeping quiet', based on Ugaritic. Moreover, *lamedh vocativum* (Dahood, Psalms I, p. 21) gets as far as the footnotes to Psalm 3, 8, and 'weapon of war' is clearly accepted in Hosea 1, 7 and 2, 18 (see Dahood, Psalms II, p. 218). Perhaps NEB might have turned to Dahood when stuck with *adam* at Proverbs 30, 14. It comes out eventually with: 'eat the wretched out of the country and the needy out of house and home'. The last five words seem to be suggested mainly by the jingle of a modern idiom.

In past ages wits used to name Bible translations by their curiosities or spectacular misprints. Several opportunities for JB are offered on this latter-ground. But there is nothing quite like the 'Breeches Bible'; JB and NEB both cautiously secure loincloths (Gen. 3, 7). But from the general style a confrère has suggested calling NEB the 'fireside' Bible, in recognition of its readability, even in an armchair. There are none of those stupendous authorized phrases by which God-fearing non-conformists demolished their enemies. They do not talk like that now, anyway. NEB is a concession to modern man who wants a book in the evening that he can read.

In experiments with members of the community we found that NEB does not come across quite so well when used as a lectionary. And time and again we had the impression that the translation was determined or inhibited by what is graven on the hearts of all pious readers since 1611. In this respect NEB is exceptional. Most other modern translations have been happy to try to gain their end all in one leap. They have no past and, in all probability, no future. JB, for instance, had nothing to lose in presenting English Catholics with a translation unlike anything they had seen before. Catholic liturgy was in Latin, the Latin Vulgate was considered secondary, Rheims-Douay was thought an embarrassment, Knox had never caught on, and anyway everyone says Roman Catholics never read the Bible. JB was therefore free to do what it liked. But the NEB is

walking in the footsteps of three and a half centuries of more or less revised Authorized version, where even angels must fear to tread. A tradition of this sort may be a very good thing, though it is not fashionable to say so, and NEB in fact does not say it. The accompanying booklet by G. Hunt, *About the New English Bible* (C.U.P. 1970) makes it plain that the joint committee were set on a new translation and not a revision (p. 21). But this is easier said than done. Anyone can put the two texts together and see that the psalms in particular have used RV at the very least as a bely. Moreover, the committee obviously favoured the use of 'you' instead of 'thou' throughout, as being more 'in line with contemporary usage and the general spirit of NEB' (Hunt, p. 51). But in the event they have had to conclude—wrongly, as some may think—that 'the public in general for whom NEB was intended were not considered ready for the general use of "you" in address to God' (Hunt, p. 52). And so in the very forms something unmistakably from a bygone age is retained. This was perhaps inevitable, and the weight of tradition does at least preserve NEB from being simply an up-to-the minute translation with all the latest gimmicks. But the memory of generations of pious readers breathing down his neck must have had an unnerving effect upon a translator every time he came on something familiar.

The translation offered by NEB is, therefore, uneven. Of course all translations of the Bible are uneven; there are so many different styles and genres, and each book in this instance was first translated by an individual. But there is this other factor. The translation in NEB is frequently determined by how well known, well used and well loved the particular verse was in the old translation. Here is a hoary problem, about which translators from Jerome on could complain most bitterly. Obviously opinions will differ as to how successfully the problem is solved in this instance. On this score NEB will probably generate the most emotion. But that is to take the attention off the greatest and most lasting quality of the work. There are no doubt other people who could write even better English, and persuade even more readers that they are bringing forth new things and old in correct proportion. But there can hardly be a better witness to the cautious and careful scholarship, sifted and refined in England over a quarter of a century. No person in search of the goods can possibly be diverted from admiration and gratitude for this handsome volume.

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