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The Bible: A Contemporary Translation

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Drawing the powers of the soul within
To concentrate all attention on One.

By alluding to such well-known terms as "the cloud of unknowing" and the "dark night of the soul", Milward attempts a theological synthesis:

Hidden from us in a cloud of unknowing
Hidden in a dark night of the soul
Hidden under a veil of mystery
He is the mystery of Divine Love.

What Milward's poem needs is an organic structure of metaphor that would have given his insights not only a theological but also a poetic (i.e. an imaginative) synthesis. Such a structure of metaphor is evident in the poetry of Hopkins, who sees in the flashing wings of a dragon-fly, and hears in the sound of a pebble hitting the sides of a deep well, an image of the Divine Life by which Christ lives "in ten thousand places".

MIGUEL A. BERNAD

THE BIBLE: A CONTEMPORARY TRANSLATION

THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE WITH THE APOCRYPHA. New York: Oxford University Press Cambridge University Press. xxi, 1166; vii, 275; ix, 336. \$9.95.

The New English Bible is the latest translation of the Scriptures by British scholars which has been planned and directed by representatives of eleven churches, councils and Bible Societies in Great Britain. The book jacket enhances its official status by terming it an "authoritative translation" but does this refer to the competence of the translators or its ecclesiastic patronage? It is not a revision of the prestigious King James version, like the British and American editions of 1885 and 1901 and the new universally popular Revised Standard Version (RSV) of 1952. Scholars have made a new translation from the original Hebrew and Greek texts, utilizing the latest findings in the textual, linguistic and historical fields. A panel of literary advisers helped the translators in literary and stylistic questions to insure a modern and literate English and not merely an accurate, scholarly rendering of the ancient texts. The presence of Roman Catholic observers at the final stage of the work is a sign of the times in ecumenical courtesy. The labors lasted for almost twenty-five years, with the

New Testament appearing in 1961 and in slightly revised form in 1970 along with the Old Testament. The Apocrypha, often called deuterocanonical by Catholics, are the Greek books of the Septuagint accepted by them as inspired but not by Protestants. Here they are set between the Old and the New Testament sections. A translation of the whole Greek book of Esther has been conveniently provided since the six additions from the Septuagint would have been unintelligible out of context.

It is no surprise that the NEB became a best-seller immediately in Britain and even the United States. The books do not sound like typical biblical translations. The language is vigorous and modern throughout, with its tone and style matching the different kinds of literature found in the Bible. Brief, repetitious Hebrew sentences have given way to flowing English periods. The results of even older scholarship have had a hand in transforming traditional and familiar passages. A comparison of the first verses of Genesis in the RSV and the NEB will present a striking contrast and introduction to the new translation.

RSV: In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.

The earth was without form and void, and darkness was upon the face of the deep; and the spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters.

NEB: In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters.

These lines not only parallel the introductions of ancient creation stories as in the Babylonian myths and Genesis 2, 4b-5 but sound like twentieth century English.

The heavy four-verse introductory sentence in Luke's gospel begins crisply: "The author to Theophilus," and flows smoothly into two sentences. The clarity and vigor of the Christological hymn in Philip-pians 2, 6-11 can hardly be faulted (except perhaps for its lack of verse form).

For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death—death on a cross. Therefore God raised him to the heights and bestowed on him the name above all names, that in the name of Jesus every knee should bow—in heaven, on earth, and in the depths—and every tongue confess, 'Jesus Christ is Lord,' to the glory of God the Father.

Examples can be drawn from every page to show the translators strove "to employ a contemporary idiom rather than reproduce the traditional 'biblical' English."

It is a delight to read a good book. The New English Bible is certainly that and as a fully modern work is a delight even to the eye. The text runs across the whole page instead of half way across in double columns—much as a telephone directory—as in older translations, the RSV, and even the New American Bible. Verse numbers no longer interrupt the sentences but are set in the outside margins. According to current biblical usage poetic passages and books (like Psalms and Job) are printed in poetic verse form. The NEB has departed from the traditional Protestant technique of heading each page with a different title indicating its content and thus not interrupting the text of the biblical books. By breaking up the pages of solid print with occasional sub-titles, the NEB has taken on a modern look.

There are minor inconveniences, in this edition at least, for those interested in anything besides a straight reading of the text. The naturally flowing English which ignores the 16th century verse divisions provides sheer enjoyment, but finding a particular verse can at times be difficult, since the beginning of a verse that does not begin a sentence is not indicated in any way. (Cf. Isaiah 27,8-10 where a transposition complicates the puzzle.) The editors graciously acknowledge the problem! Unlike the RSV, the NEB has virtually no cross references to the OT and NT. The verse enumeration of the King James Version rather than of the Hebrew text followed by scholars and the New American Bible is used without any footnote to indicate the divergences (as in 1 Kings 4, 21; Hosea 2; Psalms, *passim*). An unavoidable consequence of a relatively free translation is the difficulty of careful discussion based on a more literal and accurate rendering of the text. Students of theology and the Bible, beware!

A practical question on the utility and popularity of the NEB in the Philippines might be answered in terms of Criticisms and archaisms. Reviewers from the US have noted the NEB's Criticisms—which would scarcely be unexpected from British scholars. In Matthew's early chapters: "He fell into a passion"; a lamp is not put "under the meal-tub"; "the crop is heavy"; "Are not sparrows two a penny?"; "they fell foul of him"; "their want of faith." In Mark: "a baptism in token of repentance"; "on thee my favour rests"; "make away with him"; "turn faint on the way"; and so on. How distracting or unintelligible some expressions might be would depend on the congregation's background. A well-educated group in the Philippines would have few problems in understanding; those less educated and familiar with a more pedestrian Americanized English might often be baffled. Less frequent but just as unpleasant for public reading are wordy, cumbersome sentences: "Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs

you"; "What was the spectacle that drew you to the wilderness?"; "Alas for the world that such causes or stumbling arise! Come they must, but woe betide the man through whom they come!"; "Thus by your own tradition handed down among you, you make God's word null and void."

The express purpose of the translators to put the Bible into "the language of the present day" has not always been achieved. I doubt if people in England today say "Hark" (Gen. 4, 10) or "Woe betide the man" (Matt. 18, 7) or thou, thy and thee. Custom and reverence for the divinity doubtless urged the retention of the archaic forms of the second person singular in addressing God in both OT and NT. But why does Adam say to God, "I heard the sound as you were walking in the garden," while Cain moans "Thou hast driven me today from the ground"? In the NT this usage might have been expected in addressing the risen Christ, but it seems limited to the Father's words to Jesus at his baptism, to Paul's remonstrance before the Lord (Acts 22, 19), and to the messianic fulfillment of Psalm 2 implied in Hebrew 1, 5.

In the name of scholarship the translators felt free to add sub-titles, even assign roles to bride, groom and companions in the Song of Songs, and to omit altogether the traditional Jewish titles and headings of the psalms that are "almost certainly not original." Still they felt constrained to retain the "incorrect but customary" medieval form of the divine name "Jehovah" in key theological passages (Exodus 3,15; 6,3). Modernity also bowed down to tradition in the use of other misspelled names. The list in 1 Chronicles 8,34 has long suggested the original forms of Mephibosheth and Ishbosheth (2 Samuel 4). "Nebuchadrezzar" hangs on in Jeremiah 52 along with the historical Nebuchadnezzar of Kings and Chronicles. The "woes" of Amos and Jesus have been watered down to the equally archaic "Alas," with "Shame" in Amos 6 and Isaiah 5. Either expletive would be apt for some of the translators' choices.

The task of translating a sacred family heirloom like the Bible is gargantuan and might appear thankless in the face of censorious comments. The examples cited above need not necessarily imply negative criticism. Rather they indicate the elegant and still somewhat archaic flavor of the NEB and the type of scholarly, literate English of Britain that the translators have enshrined in it. The present reviewer has thoroughly enjoyed reading from both Old and New Testament, but on occasion in public reading has felt the need for rephrasing and slipping in a synonym. One would hesitate, therefore, to predict its enthusiastic or even easy acceptance by Philippine congregations accustomed to the more prosaic and simplified American English of the widely used RSV, or the popular New Testament of Today's English Version, or the Confraternity Version (recently completed and re-christened the New American Bible). Even the Jerusalem Bible, the

work of British Catholics, which is closer to the language of the ordinary man in England, I would presume, than the NEB, has not been universally satisfactory in the liturgy. Successful public reading of the Scriptures demands instant intelligibility, and thus the NEB will probably be of limited usefulness in local churches.

The English-speaking world can consider itself blest with the variety of modern versions of the Bible that suit the needs of different groups. We can only be grateful to the scholars involved for their selfless task in producing the contemporary and literate NEB that will guarantee to many who are Christians and many who are not still easier access to the Word of God.

P. J. CALDERONE, S.J.