

TRANSLATION AND THE KING JAMES VERSION

Nicholas King

IT IS A PLEASURE TO BE WELCOMING in these pages the quatercentenary of that great monument and guiding light of the English language, the King James Version. It is necessary, of course, to make certain clarifications when we speak of this massive translation. It was not, as is sometimes oddly supposed, the work of James VI of Scotland and I of England himself, for all that he was an alert and interested theologian, with a greater share of biblical scholarship than many monarchs have had. Nor is it accurate to entitle it ‘the St James Version’, as though it might have been written by the ‘brother of the Lord’. Nor was it, as is sometimes supposed, an entirely new version,¹ for it made good use of the admirable version of Tyndale, of the ‘Bishops’ Bible’ and of the ‘Geneva Bible’, about whose marginal notes King James had the gravest misgivings; it even made some use (the extent is debated today) of the Catholic Douay-Rheims Version.² It is also slightly misleading to call it the ‘Authorised Version’, which it was not apparently entitled until 1824.³ Nor, finally, was it universally accepted and loved as soon as it appeared. The barrage of criticism it received in its first century and a half is evidence of that.⁴

The fact is that anyone who is unwise enough to attempt a translation of the Bible makes a rod for her or his back. All translations

¹ See Bruce M. Metzger, *The Bible in Translation: Ancient and English Versions* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2001), 76.

² Strictly speaking, this should properly be known as Rheims-Douay; the New Testament appeared first, in 1582, when the English College was at Rheims. The money ran out, and the Old Testament only followed in 1609–1610, when the College was once more in Douai.

³ The evidence for this, and for the other claims in this paragraph, are to be found, entertainingly presented, in David Daniell, *The Bible in English* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 428–429. For some more modern beliefs of an extreme sort, such as that King James Version is ‘the inspired and inerrant Word of God in every letter and syllable’, see 765–768.

⁴ Edward Harwood, *A Liberal Translation of the New Testament* (various publishers, 1768), calls it ‘bald and barbarous’ (vi).

are difficult, and all translators have a sense of uneasily walking a tightrope, as the translators of the King James Version indicate in their somewhat fulsome address to the monarch who had brought them together, when they ask for his Majesty's support,

... so that if, on the one side, we shall be traduced by Popish persons at home or abroad, who ... desire still to keep [the people] in ignorance and darkness; or if, on the other side, we be maligned by self-conceited brethren, ... we may rest secure.⁵

It is also the case, as Eugene Albert Nida and Charles R. Taber argue, that Bible translation is in some ways the most profitable field for reflecting on what we are doing when we translate. They make several important points:

... Bible translating has a longer tradition (it began in the 3rd century BC), involves far more languages ... is concerned with a greater variety of cultures (Bible translators have worked in all areas of the world), and includes a wider range of literary types (from lyric poetry to theological discourse) than any comparable kind of translating.⁶

I should like to argue here that 1) all translation is a political act, that is to say, it involves the exercise of various kinds of power; 2) that all translation, especially biblical translation, fails; 3) that all translation is done into and out of a particular context; and 4) that the question of what you are doing when you translate runs close to the heart of the human quest for meaning.

All Translation is a Political Act

This first point is obvious enough. Lynne Long, in her important work on translation theory, says (of Wyclif, but it will do as a stark reminder for the whole field): 'Wyclif's aim in translating was to make a political statement about authority, to challenge those who stood for that authority'.⁷ She also makes a similar statement in her concluding

⁵ Cited in Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 73.

⁶ Eugene Albert Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), vii.

⁷ Lynne Long, *Translating the Bible from the 7th to the 17th Century* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004), 53.

reflection on the history of English Bible translation in the sixteenth century, especially in the light of Henry VIII's need to have Rome provide him with an annulment of his marriage to Catherine of Aragon:

This period of English history highlights just how politically sensitive the act of translating could be and underlines the idea that any translation is at the least a rewriting of the source material and can amount to a complete reorganisation of it.⁸

Or look at the circumstances in which the King James Version came to be, originating in a conference called at Hampton Court by James I in January 1604, which was not about translating the Bible at all, but about religious toleration. At the end of the conference, almost as an afterthought, the King was persuaded that a translation without the tendentious marginal notes of the Geneva Bible was required if he was to achieve his political ends.⁹ This political context is expressed in the address of the translators, when it was finally published just seven years later. If we are to appreciate what these eminent scholars were about in producing this version, we must take seriously their misgivings in those difficult years.

Or, for a different, but still political, angle on translation, nearly two thousand years earlier, look at the Letter of Aristeas,¹⁰ which claims to give an account of the origins of the translation of the Septuagint. It places them in royal and high priestly circles,¹¹ involving the advice of the Pharaoh's librarian, Demetrius of Phaleron, and a sumptuous exchange of gifts. It is not important whether the letter accurately describes the origins of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible; what matters is that the author of the letter saw the need to give a lofty justification for a step as radical as turning the Hebrew scriptures into Greek, a language that resembled English today in that it was almost certainly the *lingua franca* of the greater number of Jews. Later on, of course, that would create a problem, since when Christianity appeared on the scene, very few of its adherents could manage

⁸ Long, *Translating the Bible*, 164

⁹ See the account offered in Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 431–436.

¹⁰ For an enormously useful treatment of the letter, see Jennifer M. Dines, *The Septuagint* (London and New York: T. and T. Clark, 2004), 28–33.

¹¹ Ptolemy Philadelphus and Eleazar.



TO THE MOST
HIGH AND MIGHTIE
PRINCE, JAMES BY THE GRACE
OF GOD KING OF GREAT BRITAIN,
France and Ireland, Defender of
the Faith, &c.

THE TRANSLATORS OF THE
BIBLE, with Grace, Mercie, and Peace, through
IESVS CHRIST OUR LORD.



GR *REAT* and manifold were the blessings (most dread So-
ueraigne) which Almighty GOD, the Father of all
Mercies, bestowed upon vs the people of ENGLAND,
when first he sent your Maiesties Royall person to rule and
raigne over vs. For where as it was the expectation of ma-
ny, who wished not well vnto our SION, that vpon the set-
ting of that bright Occidentall Starre Queene ELIZA-
BETH of most happie memorie, some thicke and palpable clouds of darknesse
would so haue overshadowed this Land, that men should haue bene in doubt
which way they were to walke, and that it should hardly be knowne, who was to
direll the vssetled State: the appearance of your MAIESTY, as of the Sunne in
his strength, instantly dispelleth those supposed and farnised mists, and gaue vnto
all that were well affected, exceeding cause of comfort, especially when we beheld
the gouernment established in your HIGHNESSE, and your hopefull Seed, by
an vndoubted Title, and this also accompanied with Peace and tranquillitie, at
home and abroad.

The translators' address to King James, from the 1612 edition
of the King James Bible

Hebrew, and the Septuagint became their Bible, along with the 27 documents that we now call the New Testament. In reaction, by the end of the first century AD Jews had ceased to use it, or had seen the need to revise it. Something of the impact of Bible translation is revealed in the self-contradictory, but clearly deeply felt, protestation of Rabbi Judah that ‘he who translates a biblical verse literally is a liar, but he who elaborates on it is a blasphemer’.¹² Rabbi Judah was talking of the *targumim*, the translations of the Hebrew Bible into Aramaic—some of them go in for very striking paraphrases, or insertions meant to explain to the reader how the text is to be understood. But his remarks convey the sense of a sacred text that is very difficult to read and to be treated with immense respect.

From quite a different angle this political point is made by Ronald Knox, writing on the problem of Bible translation, ‘under the eyes of a censor who has never reflected that the word *concordat* is derived from *cor*’.¹³ There is testimony here to the power of the biblical text, and to an implicit battle over who may exercise that power. Gregory Martin, in his preface to the Douay-Rheims Version, also bears witness to the power plays of the century in which he lived. He is reluctant to admit that, in principle, the Bible should be in the vernacular, and argues that it is ‘upon erroneous opinion of necessity, that the Holy Scriptures should always be in our mother tongue’. He does not, however, wish to deny that there is such a thing as a skilled reader, so that it is more ‘convenient ... to have them turned into the vulgar tongues than to be kept and studied only in Ecclesiastical learned languages’.

You can feel that Martin is walking a tightrope: the sole reason that he allows for even attempting the translation is ‘the special consideration of the present time, state and condition of our country’.¹⁴ Here we need, of course, to recall that it was not legally permissible for this former Oxford don to live in England because of his religious adherence and because he had been ordained a Catholic priest. That is the context in which we must read his undeniably polemical introduction and notes, and indeed, from the other side, the response of William Fulke, who called his work *A Defence of the Sincere and True Translation of the Holy Scriptures into the English Tongue against the Manifold Cavils, Frivolous Quarrels and Impudent Slaunders of Gregorie Martin*.

¹² T. Megillah 4.41.

¹³ Ronald Knox, *On Englishing the Bible* (London: Burns and Oates, 1949), 19.

¹⁴ This is conveniently put together at Long, *Translating the Bible*, 176.

Fulke printed the Rheims New Testament side by side with that of the ‘Bishops’ Bible’, aiming to demonstrate its inferiority; but he may by this means have given it a publicity that it would not otherwise have had. David Daniell, who on the whole disapproves of the Douay-Rheims, admits that it may indeed be the case that the Rheims New Testament gave the King James Version, at least for the synoptic Gospels and the epistles, ‘as many revised readings as any other single version’.¹⁵ Modern works on translation theory express this point, about translation as a political act, with lapidary confidence: ‘Translation has to do with authority and legitimacy and ultimately with power’, for example, is the verdict of André Lefevere.¹⁶ We may shift restively at so comprehensive a claim, but we ignore it at our peril.

All Translation Fails, Especially Biblical Translation

One of the slightly alarming phenomena around biblical translation is the ease with which sneers and jeers are delivered at renderings that the writer or speaker dislikes, and the unhesitating certainty that a particular version is ‘wrong’. As one who has attempted a certain amount of Bible translation, and who has in the past been known to be critical of certain versions, the present author is endeavouring in these days to be more constructive in his comments on the work of his co-labourers in the field. For the Bible is so precious to so many readers and hearers that a version that is different from what is known and loved will seem like a betrayal.¹⁷ An important new book by Gerard J. Hughes makes the salient point that,

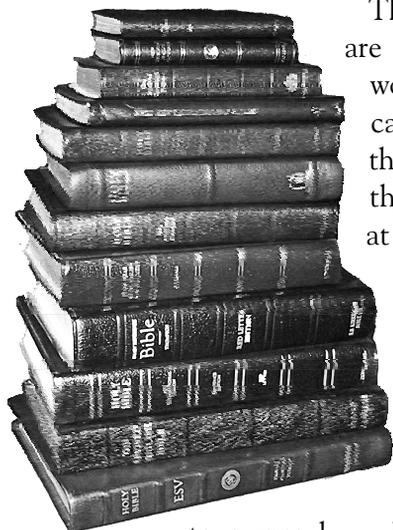
... translation *always* involves some intercultural negotiation Sometimes the negotiation will be comparatively quick and easily concluded What is important is to realise that invoking notions such as ‘faithfulness to the original’ does nothing to solve whatever problems there may be.¹⁸

¹⁵ Daniell, *The Bible in English*, 440, citing Ward Allen, *Translating the New Testament Epistles 1604–1611* (Nashville: Vanderbilt UP, 1977), xxv.

¹⁶ *Translation, History, Culture*, edited by André Lefevere (London: Routledge, 1992), 2, cited in Long, *Translating the Bible*, 204.

¹⁷ Knox, *On Englishing the Bible*, 66, reports the disconcerting experience of being forever asked, ‘Why did you alter such and such a passage?’, when that is precisely not what a translator is aiming to do.

¹⁸ Gerard J. Hughes, *Fidelity without Fundamentalism: A Dialogue with Tradition* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2010), 19.



There are many reasons, of course, why translators are said to ‘fail’. In the first place they might be working from deficient manuscripts (as was the case with the Greek text of the New Testament that the King James Version scholars had before them).¹⁹ Or, secondly, they might not be very good at understanding the source language—or the ‘target’ or ‘receptor’ language. Thirdly, they might be not sufficiently alive to a particular ideological agenda, such as the need to ‘get the theology right’. Now each of these could work in a different direction; and each might well be grounds for dismissing a particular translation.

The translator, however, might be in a position to respond, as Ronald Knox frequently does in his book on translation, ‘Yes—but that was not what I was trying to do’; and that riposte might be sufficient to counter any objections. What I am coming close (dangerously close, you may mutter) to saying here is that our decisions on the quality of a particular translation are very subjective. If you object to the Douay-Rheims Version that it is too woodenly imitative of the Latin, Gregory Martin will return that his aim was precisely to catch the sound of the Latin. If your difficulty with the King James Version is that it uses several different English words to translate one word in Greek²⁰ or Hebrew, the translators will respond that this was their policy, partly because no one English word will capture all the possible resonances of a term in the source language, and partly (and, you may yet feel, rather oddly) because they had decided to share the glory among several English terms.

One of the difficulties is that there is more than one view of what a translator is or ought to be about. Compare the following two criticisms of translations. The first is Henry Gifford on the *New English Bible* in 1961:

The translators, turning to ‘the current speech of our own time’—more stagnant than current—have shut themselves in a one-

¹⁹ See Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 77–78.

²⁰ καταργέω, for example, which is used 27 times in the New Testament, is translated in 18 different ways in King James Version.

generation culture The translators have never challenged their reader, never risked an unfamiliar concept or a remarkable word They have made things yet more difficult for the poet, by their tacit assumption that the marvellous can no longer find words of equivalent beauty to express it.²¹

The second is more recent, and refers to a proposed new English translation of the Roman Catholic mass that has been causing some indignation. The verdict of one experienced in liturgical translation is very damning:

We have been presented with a drastically botched job, botched basically because the Romans, people of goodwill whose language is not English, insistent on literal cognates of the Latin forms, have imposed an ill-chosen criterion. I wish this could be said more politely. I don't feel, as one who seriously thought through these matters of liturgical language in crafting, all those years ago, the versions that we have been using, that I can responsibly let that pass unchallenged.²²

We should notice the irritation that seethes below the surface of these two comments; when you venture upon new versions of religious texts, you cut very near to the bone. In that sense we should always call to mind the saying that is, of set purpose, often repeated in Gerard Hughes' book, that 'Translation is an art'.²³ That implies, among other things, that you cannot translate texts according to a pre-existing set of rules; that in turn means, of course, that any translation will inevitably be found wanting on some grounds or another.

Does the King James Version fail? One hesitates to say so; but here is one example, from Mark 1:2, where the translation reads, 'As it is written in the prophets, Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee'. 'In the prophets' was in the manuscripts on which the Textus Receptus was based, but it is an inferior reading, introduced in later manuscripts to cover the fact that Mark originally assigned this line to Isaiah, which is accurate for verse 3, while verse 2 is from either Malachi or Exodus.

²¹ Cited in A. C. Partridge, *English Biblical Translation* (London: André Deutsch, 1973), 225.

²² Raymond G. Helmick, 'Opaque and Clumsy', *The Tablet* (6 November 2010), 11.

²³ Hughes, *Fidelity without Fundamentalism*, 19, 23, etc.

All Translations Are Done out of and into a Particular Cultural Context

One way in which translations can fail is by not paying sufficient attention to the source language (and culture). Hughes makes this point well:

Quite generally, good and accurate translation requires a great willingness to learn facts about other cultures, and to develop a genuine feel for patterns of life and expression which may turn out to be very different from our own. That complex learning process is a prerequisite for accurate translation, but it is definitely not a licence to make it up as one goes along.²⁴

Another way of failing is by not paying sufficient attention to the target language (and culture). In the case of translations of the Bible, there is a further effect to remember, that having the Bible in a language actually does something to that language. As Lynne Long points out, in her demonstration of how Old English came to be a vehicle appropriate to receive the Bible,

The Scriptures arrived [in English] with, and maintained, a centrality unrivalled by any other text. Their status and the status of the language which conveyed their message was at first unmatched by the vernacular but gradually Anglo-Saxon prose grew in stature through writers like Alfred and Aelfric until it became a competent vehicle for philosophy and theology. From the introduction of the text into England there was vernacular activity surrounding the teaching and preaching of its content.²⁵

The point hardly needs demonstrating for the King James Version, which has become such a classic of the English language and has left so many traces in the shape of phrases (such as ‘my brother’s keeper’) that are widely assumed to be proverbial. Partridge expresses this well:

Reverence for the King James Bible is not entirely a sentiment or prejudice. The Englishman’s Bible, however infrequently he opens it, is as essential a part of the national culture as the works of Chaucer and Shakespeare. An honoured language and rhythm have enabled the Bible’s spiritual truths to endure repeated assaults

²⁴ Hughes, *Fidelity without Fundamentalism*, 73.

²⁵ Long, *Translating the Bible*, 49.

from agnostics; there is a firm conviction that changing the words would undermine the faith.²⁶

An example of translation in a rather different context is cited by Hughes,²⁷ as an instance precisely of a failure of sensitivity to the effect of translation on culture:

Efforts by Jesuit missionaries and Chinese scholars to negotiate and adjust possible translations, sympathetically regarded at first, were in the end simply dismissed or ignored. It was as though only word-for-word transliteration and the mimicry of the rites of a Western version of the Church could satisfy the Western authorities. Differences such as those between the preaching and language of Jesus and that of Paul, or that of Paul and that of the Fourth Gospel, differences which the early churches were clear-sighted enough to welcome, were ruled out as clearly unacceptable when it came to the task of translating Christianity into language and customs intelligible to seventeenth- and eighteenth-century China.²⁸

And translations can have their effect on the target-language. Gregory Martin is often chided for his Latinate neologisms, which arise from his determination to follow the Latin Vulgate as closely as possible. Without that determination, words such as ‘holocaust’, ‘tunic’ and ‘rational’, not to mention ‘Paraclete’, would not have become familiar in English. Indeed, if you take the process further back, to Jerome himself, we find either neologisms or fresh meanings in the following words: salvation, regeneration, justification, sanctification, propitiation, reconciliation, inspiration, scripture and sacrament.²⁹ The King James Version has brought many once rare words into general use, of which perhaps the happiest is the word ‘amazement’³⁰ in 1 Peter 3:6.

Translation Is Part of Humanity’s Unending Quest for Meaning

One element that has frequently recurred in the course of this essay is the sense that translators, and especially Bible translators, are treading on egg-shells, or touching on neuralgic points. It is possible that this is

²⁶ Partridge, *English Biblical Translation*, 231.

²⁷ Hughes, *Fidelity without Fundamentalism*, 126–127.

²⁸ Hughes, *Fidelity without Fundamentalism*, 126–127.

²⁹ This list is borrowed from Metzger, *The Bible in Translation*, 30.

³⁰ For πτόησις.

because of a sense that the words, not least those of the King James Version, enshrine undying values; but, of course, it is for precisely that reason that in the centuries after 1611 there was an unending tendency to correct previous editions. This was partly because the language had developed, and partly because of new insights in biblical studies and textual criticism. Paradoxically, however, every attempt at revising the King James Version has resulted in cries of anguish; and that is as it should be. Because we human beings are always seeking for meaning, and because versions of the Bible especially seem to offer ways of finding meaning, there is every incentive to change familiar texts, and every incentive to demand that they stay the same.

Thus the Jewish people wrote their scriptures in the Hebrew language that came most naturally to them, with a little bit in the Aramaic that was the *lingua franca* of the 'fertile crescent'; but there came a time when more Jews spoke Greek than understood Hebrew, and so the Septuagint was produced, clearly to meet the liturgical and educational needs of the lively Jewish community in Alexandria. However it is significant that even so austere an intellectual as Philo felt the need to provide the Septuagint with a founding myth that suggested 'miraculous inspiration'.³¹ So the original Hebrew was turned into Greek; and the Greek (not the Hebrew) was translated into Latin, once Greek was no longer the majority language of the Christian communion. The Latin came in a variety of different versions, lumped together under the umbrella of 'Vetus Latina'. It was to cope with the uncertainties that these different translations engendered that Jerome was commissioned to produce the Vulgate; and the Vulgate ruled the field for many centuries, probably to a point where it was unreflectively taken to be the 'original version'.³²

In Britain the Latin transformed slowly into the Old English (what we used to call Anglo-Saxon), initially by way of glosses attached to Latin manuscripts, and then, as Old English gained in confidence and status, as translation; then it came into Middle English, through the Wycliffite translators, which in turn gave rise to the Tyndale version, and hence both to the Douay and the King James Version and its

³¹ Philo, *De Vita Moysis*, 2:37; and see the excellent discussion in Dines, *The Septuagint*, 67.

³² I can remember as a child learning Latin, and, on coming to read the texts of the Gospels in that language, thinking, with some satisfaction, that this was what Jesus had actually said.



successors. In all this we see an unending process that moved seamlessly ahead (and has not ceased to move); the King James Version was given a certain privileged position because it was the version exclusively used in (Anglican) church services, and it became for most English ears the most familiar version. Until at least the nineteenth century virtually all translations into English were refinements of the King James Version.

We should, moreover, recognise that there is ‘something special’ about the Bible: probably more than any other text it has the gift of both remaining the same and restlessly changing, for it is the text in or under which the Word of God has made its home. The fact is that all translation, including that of Wyclif or of the expert scholars who gathered to answer the call of King James, is a ‘work in progress’. For there is no end to human questioning; there never comes a moment when the human intellect can say ‘I have found the answer to all my questions’ or ‘I have ceased from my search for meaning’.

We may aptly conclude here with more remarks from the original translators, expressing the importance of at least making the attempt at Bible translation, for it touches (whatever the opponents of religion may say) something that is very close to the human quest for meaning:

But among all our joys, there was no one that more filled our hearts, than the blessed continuance of the preaching of God’s sacred Word among us; which is that inestimable treasure, which excellet

all the riches of the earth; because the fruit thereof extendeth itself, not only to the time spent in this transitory world, but directeth and disposeth men unto that eternal happiness which is above in Heaven.

Four centuries after this great Bible version was published, and even if some of it is now incomprehensible, it still performs the function, and largely achieves the purpose, for which it was put together. We should celebrate this anniversary with enthusiasm.

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