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CULTURAL ASPECTS OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

I have called my lecture "Cultural Aspects of Bible Translation" in order to make it clear than I am not going to deal with the linguistic, exegetical, or theological sides of the Bible translator's activity. I would also like to state right at the outset that I am ignorant of the history and problems of the Armenian version of the Bible, and thus cannot know at any point whether what I say is relevant to these matters. What I want to do is to bring out those aspects of Bible translation which make it part of the cultural history of mankind, and to show how these aspects have affected Bible translation in ancient and modern times.

Translation has two sides, closely connected with each other. One is language, the other is cultural background. Language means that translation is a matter of transferring content from one language to another, and not just content, but also shades of meaning, attitudes, emotions, and the like. It is a well-known fact that languages are completely different from each other. They do not just differ by having different grammatical forms or different words for the same things and ideas. It was indeed believed formerly that all languages mirror reality, and since reality is one and the same, that all languages basically express the same things. The scientific work done on language in the last 150 years has increasingly shown that languages do not mirror reality, but digest reality, reshape reality in their own image, and that we see reality (whatever that term may imply) through a kind of prism or grid provided by our own language.

Thus the grammar of different languages gives us a rather different view of the world. Here we get right into the problems of Bible translation. The modern European languages have a verbal system centred around the idea of relative time: everything is either past, present or future in relation to the moment of speaking or writing, or in relation to some point of time fixed in the statement. Biblical Hebrew, as we have known for about 100 years, has no tenses in that sense. It has no form always expressing the past, no form that always expresses the future, and it has no way of indicating the present time in an unambiguous way. It possesses two so-called tenses, but these are really aspects. The difference between them resembles that between Armenian *lkʿanem* and *lkʿi*, except that in Armenian each of

these has several tenses, while in Hebrew only the tow basic forms exist, and have to express everything. One of them describes a happening as being completed, as being there, while the other describes it as going on, as being so far incomplete. True, the first one largely describes past events, the second largely present and future events, but for a variety of reasons each can also describe events in the other time range. To translate statements and stories from such a relatively timeless style into a language where everything has to be placed in time, is of course quite a problem. Very often the translator has to decide on logical grounds to which time to relate a statement.

There are many languages in the world which have no grammatical expression for the plural of nouns. Biblical Hebrew does indeed have a plural form, but its use is more or less optional. The singular forms “man”, “tree”, “animal” etc. may also stand for “men”, “trees”, “animals”, and we do not really know why the Biblical writers sometimes chose to indicate the plural and at others blithely ignored it[1]. Quite often the exegete and the translator are hard put to decide which is meant. These are just two examples to show how grammar differences can affect the translator.

Differences are even greater in vocabulary. No two languages have vocabularies in which all words will cover each other, so that every time a word of the one language appears in a text, it can be rendered by one and the same word in the other. Every language has a number of words which just do not exist in certain other languages. Of course, since there are 4,000 languages in the world, we cannot say that a given concept is not expressed by a separate word in any other language; what matters to us is that is not so represented in the language into which we have to translate. But even if we have in both languages words expressing the same concept, we can never be sure that they will do for rendering each other in every case. Most words of the common–as distinct from scientific–vocabulary have not one well-defined meaning, but a range of related, but at times quite dissimilar, meanings. This phenomenon, called polysemy, is not to be confused with homonymy, the accidental identity of two words of different origin. While the latter are of course in most cases

[1] It seems that Classical Armenian was similarly inconsistent in using plural ending.

recognized by the speaker of the language as different words, the various meanings in polysemy are apparently not consciously felt by the unsophisticated speaker, especially as they are normally found in different contexts. These ranges of meaning differ widely in different languages, so much so, that probably the most important piece of advice to the translator is: never assume without checking that a word which rendered a certain word of the source a few lines ago will render the same source word correctly at its next occurrence. Unfortunately, translators are apt to forget this advice, especially if one translates a sacred book, where the very words have an aura of holiness and immutability. To overcome the range-of-meaning difficulty, the translator has in fact to re-think the statements he translates, but since these statements are clothed in words, and these words, as we have said, filter and re-shape reality, getting back to the underlying reality is not a simple task, and too much re-thinking may well result in having the translator's thoughts taking the place of the author's thoughts.

This difficulty has so much impressed a number of linguists, philosophers and literary thinkers that they have declared translation to be an impossible undertaking. They say that a translator is someone who cheats you by telling you that he says in your own language what is written in another language, when in fact he doesn't. However, we all know by experience that translation is possible. In this very room you have a notice which says exactly the same in Arabic, Armenian, English and Hebrew. The test that it says the same is of course that people who act according to what this notice says do the same thing is whichever language they have read it. This notice is, therefore, a successful translation from an operative point of view. The belief that translation is impossible is based on the idea that source and translation must always have the same inner meaning, evoke the same associations in the mind of the reader; but since these associations are based upon the world-view and the complicated play of ranges of meaning peculiar to each languages, we may admit that perfect translation is impossible, except in science and in certain other circumstances which we shall discuss later.

There is no doubt, however, that translation is possible–even if it may not always be easy–from the operative point of view. We may define a good translation as one that

achieves the same purpose as does the original text. If you translate the instructions for using a certain machine, then the translation is good if the engineer who reads the translation works the machine correctly; if he can't find out from the translation how to do it, or gets misled, then the translation is bad, or perhaps we should rather say inefficient. But the same is true for a religious text. In translation, the text must have the same religious effect as the original has upon those who use it. It must affect your morals, your beliefs, your moods in the same way; if it has a different effect, the translation is ineffective. Therefore the test of such a translation is not linguistic. An effective translation may possibly not be perfect from a linguistic point of view (if that is at all possible), and it may well be that a linguistically near-perfect translation will fail to strike the chord in your heart which the original set out to do. The test of a successful translation is therefore social, psychological, or cultural. Translation is indeed a curious activity: it uses language in a way which–so it can be argued–is illegitimate from a purely linguistic point of view, but in spite of this achieves cultural purposes. The history of literature and ideas proves beyond doubt that these cultural purposes are achievable, for they have been frequently achieved throughout the centuries. Hence the main aspect of translation is, for those who use translations, not the linguistic one, but the cultural one.

Yet the cultural aspect of translation has rarely been studied. Instead, a related aspect has been extensively discussed: the artistic one. There exist so-called theories of translation, which accompany certain cultures throughout their history, and are indeed an important part of the history of those cultures and of their literatures. For instance, in Europe there has been carried on for some centuries a discussion as to whether a literary work should read in translation as if it had originally been written in the language into which it was translated (so that only the title page shows it is a translated work at all) or whether it is the duty of the translator to preserve, while using idiomatic language, the character and style of the original language, so that the work can immediately be recognized as translated. Goethe was an ardent advocate of translations from Greek and Latin that would read like Greek or Latin, not like ordinary German, because he believed in the educational value of the classical languages as languages, and thought that this quality would be destroyed by making the translations

read like German. Another controversy of great importance for European culture is whether translations should be literal or should concentrate on the general meaning. St. Jerome stated in the fourth century that the translated "non verbum e verbo, sed sensum exprimere de sensu", but he immediately qualifies this by saying that this does not fully apply to Holy Scripture, "where even the order of words is a mystery"[2]. A literary translation is in a way a linguistic translation, since it tries above all to render the language of the original, while the "sense translation" allows itself a great deal of freedom in order to accommodate itself to the ways of thought to which the reader is accustomed.

These controversies, and many others I cannot mention here, prove that the translator has to make decisions before he even translates the first word. These decisions are not conditioned by the relation of the two languages with which he works, but by his cultural background. Translation is essentially a cultural artefact. It is an expression of the state of culture in which the translator works, and its ways change when cultural attitudes change. Of course we must not overlook that language itself is a cultural artefact. Not only is its structure and vocabulary an important cultural fact, which helps to mould the culture of its users and is in turn moulded by it, but the way a language is handled by its speakers and writers expresses their culture-bound attitudes, values, and ways of thinking. This is what is probably meant by the well-known saying that one who learns a new language acquires a new soul. Indeed, the same language can be handled by different societies in such different ways that it makes the impression of being two languages. The grammar of British and American English is so similar that the same grammar books will do for both. The vocabulary of written British and American is largely identical. Yet how different are the American and British ways of handling that language! The Britisher, for instance, uses a relatively small vocabulary and makes it do a lot of work, while the American uses a much larger vocabulary. Yiddish, the language spoken by the Jews in Eastern Europe, is closely related to German, though its grammar and vocabulary differ more from standard German than American does from British English. One could hardly think of two languages more

[2] In the beginning of his letter to Pammachius, Epistula LVII.

different in the way they are handled.

This matter of handling a language–largely unexplored scientifically–is of great importance to the translator. Take the Greek translation of the Bible. Its grammar is standard Greek grammar of its period, and its vocabulary for the most part standard Greek, and for the rest based on Greek roots. Yet anyone who is accustomed to Classical Greek and then turns to the Septuagint feels that it is not Greek at all, because this type of Greek is handled in the way Hebrew is handled. These "Semitisms" of Biblical Greek have been investigated by numerous scholars, and we know pretty well what this different handling consists in. It has been shown that the difference is largely statistical: certain constructions which are very rare in standard Greek are frequent in Biblical Greek and vice versa, certain words are used in comparatively marginal meanings, and although the substance is the same, the impression the language makes it quite different.

To give you a contemporary example: in our days the Bible is being translated into numerous languages of the indigenous peoples of North and South America and of Africa. They are being carefully prepared with the help of native speakers of these languages, and yet missionaries are worried by the fact that the finished product does not look like anything said spontaneously by native speakers. Until not so long ago it was accepted as natural that a Bible translation would read different from an original text, and for some of the older members of those churches the unusual language is part of the sacred character of their Bible. But in recent years it has been held that the alienness of the language removes the Bible from relevance to the people, and that Bible translations ought to be like original writings in their own languages. Linguists began to make statistical inquiries, for instance, on average sentence length in the receptor languages and on the rhythm with which shorter and longer sentences alternate. It has been found that languages possess at times all the means for forming subordinate clauses, but hardly ever employ them, and when they do employ them, they have a definite stylistic value which a subordinate clause, say, in English, does not have. Hence they stand out in Bible translations, and if you translate all the involved periods of St. Paul's epistles as they stand, you get a text which suggests to the native reader something quite different than St. Paul intended. So we arrive at the curious situation that missionaries

now study the heathen myths of the peoples for whom they work, and attempt to follow in their Bible translations as closely as feasible the manner of presentation formerly used for pagan religion. It seems that this has been successful in bringing the Bible closer to the lives of the people.

There are not only different approaches to the problem of translation as a whole: there are as matter of necessity at one and the same time different approaches to the translation of different kinds of material. Obviously translating poetry is quite a different task than translating artistic prose; translating a business letter poses a different set of problems from that involved in translating a technical book, and both are quite different from the challenge of translating literature. Contrary to what we may think at first glance, these difference are not conditioned by the difference of the material. Different cultures, and the same cultures at different periods, have very different ideas as to what constitutes the right way of translating various kinds of material. In Israel at the present moment it is customary to translate scientific books into an elaborate and archaic style, which in an original Hebrew book would be connected with, say, a metaphysical essay. This attitude is rooted in the circumstances in which the Hebrew language was revived, but it is certainly odd compared with what you would find in England, where scientific books are translated into straightforward scientific English. Another example may be found in medieval Arabic. When Greek philosophy was translated into Arabic, this was done into a very simple, slightly colloquial style, quite unlike the rich Greek written by the philosophers. Again, there were historical reasons for this, connected with the linguistic situation in Arabic, not with the nature and needs of the matter to be translated. In brief, the type of language and the technique employed for translating a certain type of literature is mainly determined by cultural forces within the receptor language. This, of course, applies particularly to religious literature, since religion invariably already has its established forms of expression within the receptor language.

I think by now it is quite clear that translation is far from being a simple process of putting words from one language into words of another language. It imports into the process elements from the culture connected with the receptor language, and thus changes the

character of the material. This can be very nicely illustrated from the history of the translation of Homer into English. The first translation, in the 16th century, was by Chapman, and this book exercised for a long time a profound influence upon English education. In the 18th century Homer was again translated by Pope, and there are several modern translations. Chapman turns Homer's heroes into Elizabethan Englishmen. Pope, on the other hand, makes them into 18th-century courtiers, and introduces into the text all kinds of concepts and institutions to give them the proper dignity. Perhaps the most outstanding modern translation is one in prose by Lawrence of Arabia (Aircraftman Shaw), in a perfectly modern idiom, where we feel an atmosphere of twentieth-century England. The result is amazingly beautiful, and I, for one, felt on reading it that I had understood Homer. In most languages literary works are normally translated into a contemporary literary idiom. For this reason it is also necessary for great works of literature to be translated anew after some generations have passed. But not all literary works are felt to be suitable for contemporary language. Rabelais is at present read in England mostly in an Elizabethan translation, not in the available modern one, no doubt because it is felt that the spirit of the book fits the language of the Elizabethan age, as the modern Englishman imagines it to have been like. In present-day Africa there is a large literature in English. In West Africa novels, situations often arise where the African townsman, speaking the local language but westernized in this culture, meets the peasant of his own tribe who is culturally unassimilated and speaks a more idiomatic and regional form of the same language. In the novel, both speak English, but while the townsman speaks normal standard English, the peasant is represented as speaking Biblical English. Thus the translator often uses varieties of his own language in order to symbolize other languages–but of course he does so because to him there is some cultural similarity between the language which he translates and that variety of his own language. This similarity is not based on any objective historical facts, but upon the attitude he and his culture have to the foreign language on the one hand and to that variety of their own language on the other. You can see that this is likely to affect Bible translation in particular, because the civilization of the Bible is strange to modern man, and yet something familiar to him through the Bible and thus claiming a place within his own scale of means of

linguistic expression.

But Bible translation is not ordinary translation. It is the translation of a central religious text. We ought therefore to start with the basic question: should sacred scripture be translated? Cultures have very divergent answers to this question. The Moslems have never really come to terms with translation. Only quite recently did some European converts or marginal sects produce proper translations into western languages–until then translations had been made by non-Muslim scholars for non-Muslims. In traditional Islam, there were at most interlineary glosses. In some Islamic countries the Qur'an is still taught without translating it into the language of the pupils. Medieval Judaism put up with translation by permitting word-for-word translation in teaching children, and by having translations put opposite the Hebrew text. They never achieved an existence of their own, except as helps for understanding the original text, the only one that may used in religious ceremonies.

Christianity, on the other hand, has been from the first a translating religion. It has always attempted to have the sacred text put into a language understood by the people, and these translations became independent, taking the place of the original in the life of the community. It may appear that this does not apply to the European Middle Ages, when the Catholic Church used the Bible in Latin, and not in the popular languages. It must not be forgotten, however, that during that period practically all literary, scientific, and administrative activities were carried on in Latin, which thus was understood by all those who could read and write. The Bible was transmitted to the people orally in the vernacular languages, and we have indeed some popular works on Biblical material, and even parts of the Bible itself, in those languages. It was only later, when the Church frowned on Bible-reading by the laity that translations were discouraged, though not stopped altogether; and as you know, the Catholic Church has now completely changed its attitude about the use of vernaculars in worship. We may thus not be far out when we say that Bible translation is a typical Christian activity. It was started, however, by Jews, and not only did the Christian world take over for its own use two Jewish Bible versions, the Septuagint and the Peshitta, but indeed it seems that the very idea of having Scripture translated was taken over from Judaism. The Jewish attitude to Bible translation which we described before was not always

held, at least not by all Jews. We are not sure under what circumstances the Septuagint was translated. The "Letter of Aristeas" tells us that it was done at the command of the Helenistic king of Egypt, but the purpose of this legend may have been to shift the responsibility for an act that was disapproved of by some religious authorities. That it was disapproved, we learn from a saying in the Talmud, "when the Pentateuch was translated into Greek, that day was as fateful to Israel as the day on which the Golden Calf was made"[3]. Yet everything points to that translation having been made for use by Jews. It was certainly used quite independently of the Hebrew text. Even a learned man like Philo of Alexandria in the 2nd century A. D. based his theological discussions on the Greek Bible without apparently even being aware that it was not identical in many places with the sense of the Hebrew original.

The typical Jewish Bible translation, however, and the one that gained permanent authority in the whole Jewish world, was the Aramaic *Targum*. This was indeed a translation of a peculiar kind. At first it was not written down, but the translator (or should we call him the dragoman) stood next to the person who read out the Pentateuch or the Prophetic lessons in the synagogue, and orally rendered each verse into Aramaic after it had been read aloud in Hebrew (or groups of these verses in the Prophets). The *Targum* to the Prophets, as we have it, is not a translation in our sense at all, but an Aramaic interpretation, weaving around the words of the text morals and legends. There are two similar *Targums* to the Pentateuch, and it is widely held by scholars that they are older than the relatively faithful *Targum Ongelos* which Jews now consider authoritative. Indeed the Hebrew verb *targem*[4] does not only mean "to translate". It refers, for instance, to the activity of the man who stood next to a lecturer and repeated his words aloud so that a large audience could hear them. Arabic

[3] This is only reported in the 6th century *Masekhet Soferim* chapter I, but makes the impression of being copied from a much earlier source. The addition, "because the Pentateuch could not be translated as it should be", is interesting, but in my opinion much later than the statement to which it is attached.

[4] The word was borrowed into the Semitic languages from Hittite, which may have borrowed it from one of the languages with which it was in contact. Cf. the present wirter's summary of the question in "Hittite Words in Hebrew", *Orientalia* N. S. XXXII (1963), pp. 134-135.

tarjama means, besides translating, also commenting, making a heading for a paragraph, and writing a biography. Also the Romans, though they had verbs meaning only "to translate", often used for this activity *interpretari*, which also means "to explain". The two activities were thus not properly distinguished. The Jewish *Targums* certainly were interpretations in the spoken language rather than translations: they gave the official view of what the sacred text meant, but were intended to be used together with it, as a commentary is intended to be used together with the text. This attitude remained alive in Judaism: in the 10th century, Rabbi Saadia Gaon produced a translation of the Pentateuch and a few other Biblical books into Arabic, deviating rather less from the original Hebrew text than the *Targum*. His translation is called *tafsir* "explanation", and originally formed part of a commentary explaining the Hebrew text. Some scholars, such as the late P. Kahle, think that also the Septuagint was at first an oral translation accompanying the public recitation of the Hebrew text in the synagogues.

When the Christian communities adopted Jewish Bible translations for their own use, and made further translations of their own, they meant them from the outset to be read not in conjunction with the Hebrew original, but rather to replace it for reading, for worship, and for teaching. The Christian community had no attachment to the Hebrew text as such, but only to its contents. Nor was it more closely attached to the Greek text, for it did not hesitate to make from it Coptic, Latin, Armenian and other translations, which each were used in their respective churches instead of the Greek text, not in conjunction with it. This fact of course gave the Christian Bible version an entirely different standing from that of a Jewish translation. It was not an aid for understanding, but an authoritative replacement. As such it had to be theologically equivalent to the original (or the intermediate version) which it replaced. This theological responsibility produced also a new attitude to the act of translation. The early Christian Bible translation were very literal. They were not so because the translators knew no better. At that time the Romans had already evolved an artistic technique of translating from the Greek, but the achievements of the heathen translators were ignored by the men who made the Old Latin Version of the Bible from the Greek. They rendered everything as literally as they could, to the detriment of Latin style. St. Augustin,

who was well educated, spoke in defence of this method, because in his opinion it was proper for the sacred text[5]. Jerome, indeed, followed a more liberal method, especially in the Pentateuch and the historical books of the Old Testament, where he often sums up the meaning of verses rather than translating, but he found no followers. Those who translated from the Vulgate into the European vernaculars did so in a way which was a denial of the principles of translation which at the same time were commonly applied to secular texts. Not only were they literal with only the minimum concessions to grammaticalitiy and idiomacy in the receptor language, but their language itself was consciously archaic and remote from the contemporary idiom of the translator's own period.

Already the English Authorized or King James's Version of 1611 was couched in a style based largely on the usage of earlier English Bible translations, the changes being mainly towards a more literal rendering and in order to agree with the Hebrew text rather than the Latin Vulgate text from which those older versions were translated. It is a testimony to the genius of the translators that nevertheless the style of the Authorized Version is so pleasing and harmonious. But it was not good English as would have been written at the time by an Englishman: it was good English for a translation, replete with imitations of Hebrew idioms and stylistic devices. towards the end of the 19th century, a Revised Version was prepared. There were two reasons for making this, quite considerable effort. One was that in the meantime philology had made large strides, and many, of the meanings given to Hebrew words by the 1611 version were now considered to be wrong. The second reason was that the archaic diction of the older version had become difficult to understand, or even misleading. The language of the Revised Version is of course not 19th-century literary English, but it is the 19th-century idea of Biblical English as opposed to the 16th-century image of what Biblical English should be like, and this also implied less subservience to Hebrew forms of speech. The Revised Version proved a failure. People were not willing to use it because for them the Bible was identified with the mysterious archaic phrases of the 1611 version. Besides, the rhythm was all wrong–and rhythm seems to play a part in the

[5] De Doctrina Christiana II, xiii, 19-20.

effect of a religious text. To what extend the Authorized Version is for the Englishman *the* Bible, can be judged from the fact that some English students of Hebrew told me that they were disappointed when they read the Hebrew original for the first time, as it lacked the beauty of the English Bible!

It is this tendency for the Christian Bible translations to become indepedent sources of religious authority and emotion which is, to my mind, their most typical trait, and does to the best of my knowledge not exist in other religions with regard to translations of their sacred books. This is also the reason why Bible translation in the Christian world has been so conservative in its methods. Yet, it has been moving, very slowly, and I shall attempt to show in which direction it is moving, to give a forecast as to what future, modern Bible translations may be like. We have to realize, first of all, that even the most modern translations still follow the ancient techniques in some essential features[6]. At present the most modern English version is the Revised Standard Version, an American translation made by a large committee of outstanding Bible scholars. The Old Testament was published in 1952. This version has definitely modernized the language. It has got rid of "thou" for "you" and removed many other grammatical and syntactical archaisms. In those respects it reads more like a modern book. Of course it has also applied the findings of modern philology in a large number of cases where the readings of the former versions have become untenable. It has also done away with some of the obvious Hebraisms of style. Amongst these perhaps the most notable is the omission of "and" to link sentences. But in many other ways the technique has not changed. The Revised Standard Version, as also the modern French, Spanish, German, etc., bible translations, are based on the principle of keeping as close as possible to the actual wording of the Hebrew sentence, except in cases were this would result in unreadable or unintelligible language. Where a contemporary word can be chosen to render the Hebrew word, it is preferred, of course, but the total effect, even at sentence level, is still that of an ancient oriental language. The various attempts made of publishing "The Bible as Literature" or similar titles are mainly different in topography. They print

[6] When this lecture was delivered, the *New English Bible*, Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, Cambridge, 1970, had not yet appeared.

paragraphs instead of verses, separate direct speech from the narrative, etc., but leave the text as it is.

Now what would a Bible look like that applied the techniques of modern literature? Take a simple example. When the Bible starts telling a story, it goes something like this: "There was a man in... whose name was... and he had two wives, and the name of the one was... and the name of the other was... and the man used to...". But a modern story would start something like: "X, who lived at N, had two wives, Y and Z." This says exactly what the Hebrew means, but without the stylistic peculiarities of the Hebrew. Or take the Hebrew habit of introducing any type of speech-act by the same verb, which we translate "he (she) said". The 1611 version still translates the additional element that Hebrew uses to show where the direct speech begins, as in "he spoke to him, saying: ...". Later Bible translations omit this, and later still, we find that instead of "The snake said to Eve... Eve said to the snake...", the English text has "The snake asked Eve... Eve replied to the snake...". But nobody has as yet gone so far as to omit altogether "The snake said to Eve" and instead to print the snake's words in a separate line, as is done in modern novels. We would of course do this if we translated a novel from an Eastern language, but somehow we feel that it cannot be done with the Bible. Finally, a much more extreme change: Biblical poetry is founded on the device of parallelism, i.e. the statement of each idea twice in different words[7]. since we are not used to this device, and inclined to expect from the two members of each parallelism additional information rather than aesthetic enjoyment, a case might be made out for eliminating parallelism and replacing it by modern free rhythm, though I can hardly imagine that in our time any Bible translator would agree to do so[8].

[7] There are different varietis: synonymous, where both half-lines say exactly the same in different words; complementary, where each half-ligne contains a word which does not occure in the other, and only both together give the whole message; and antithetic, where a positive statement is contrasted with a negative one to the same import.

[8] The two more recent attempts at translating Psalms in modern times keep the parallelism intact: Huub Osterhuis et al., *fifty Psalms*, Burns and Oates, London, 1968; W. Kirkconnell and J. Belanger, "Translating the Psalter/Traduction du Psautier", *Meta* XV (1970), Montreal, pp. 10-25.

It does not seem that we are anywhere near getting Bible translations with such radical departures from traditional techniques. But something else and extremely significant is happening. People engaged in parochial work or "internal mission" in communities speaking major European languages have become aware that bringing the Bible to the masses is difficult, because not only in its traditional form, but also in modernized translations it is unintelligible to them. This is due not only to the changes that these languages have gone through, but also to the spread of literacy. Until the 19th century the masses of Europe were either illiterate or at best very slow and limited readers. During the 19th century practically everyone came to be able to read. Since up till then books had generally been written for educated people only, and were too difficult for the huge masses of new readers, a vast new low-grade literature was produced to answer their needs. The European vernacular Bibles belonged most definitely to the type of book for the educated reader. This had not mattered before, because the common man could not read anyway, and therefore the content of the Bible was transmitted to him orally, with the necessary interpretation. When the uneducated reader read the Bible, he was likely to put his own interpretation to it, and in fact the availability of Bibles to such readers without the literacy training necessary to understand the "rhetoric" must have been a factor in the formation of many of the more way-out sects in Anglo-Saxon countries.

It has therefore been realized for some time now that if you wish really to bring the Bible to all social classes, you must provide a Bible in simple language everyone can understand. This, I stress, is not literary translation. No one has suggested that the stories in these simple-language Bibles should be written in the way a popular story would be written to-day or that the Prophets should be made to speak in the style in which a good politician would explain his policy to a popular audience. They are sill literal translations, but literal translations using a simpler, more familiar vocabulary and a much simpler syntax. This is achieved by breaking up the sentences and by using, where needed, several words to give the sense of a difficult term. Such translations are being prepared in English, French, Dutch, and Spanish. The Spanish popular version is already being used also among speakers of Indian languages in Latin America. I have seen some samples of theses translations. They are done

with great ability and manage not only to render the sense completely, but also to be beautiful in their own way. The amazing thing is that they read more like the original Biblical Hebrew or Gospel Greek than the current translations, just because they lack the sophistication of the Latin tradition of European writing which lies behind the older versions. There is even a book discussing this type of translation and instructing how do to it[9]. So far the new approach has been mainly applied to the Gospels, where the matter is easier, because the original language of the Gospels is simple. It may run into greater difficulties when it comes to translating the complicated thought of St. Paul or the emotional and high-flown pronouncements of the Hebrew Prophets. However, the effort involved in expressing the same message by simpler means is in itself of tremendous value. To do it, we have to analyze the meaning of what we translate more closely than before. The translator cannot glide over a difficulty by using a word traditionally employed for rendering the Biblical one or by mechanically imitating a Biblical construction. The content of the Biblical message has to be restructured or rethought, and thus literalness is to some extent precluded.

Bible translators are slowly getting used to the idea that there ought to be not one but several Bible translations into one language at any one time. While the simple-language translation is necessary and beneficial, there is also need for a translation for educated people, so that the Bible can speak to them at the linguistic level they are accustomed to, and perhaps, we might add, also a separate translation for those with a philosophical and theological training, which would lay greater stress on a precise rendering of terms likely to affect our analysis of Biblical thought. Because such translations would be made from the outset with a definite public in mind, they would in turn free themselves from literalness. They would no doubt benefit from the experience gathered through the simple-language translations. The important thing is that the innovation of simple-language translations has broken the spell of the “authoritative” translation, by showing that more than one “correct” translation is possible at any one time and can be based on the same understanding of the original. By thus making the process of translation a separate activity, distinguishable from

[9] William W. Wonderly, *Bible Translations for Popular Use*, United Bible Societies, Ann Arbor, Michigan, U.S.A., 1968.

the process of understanding and interpretation, Bible translation has been brought much closer to modern translation in general, and will not fail to become part of it and share its advances.

Source : *Babel*, vol. XVIII, no 3, 1972, p. 11-20.