

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION IN THE WESTERN WORLD

The criterion of a translation is readability.² The highest praise often read in reviews is "This translation reads as if it were the original" or "One does not notice that this is a translation." In our time the translator must transform the language of the original into the receptor language in all its shades and diverse connotations. In a work of literature he has to render the form, the rhythm, the atmosphere, the temper, in short the literary value of the original, which sometimes makes a complete transformation of the original necessary.

The student of the history of biblical translation, especially of the period from the second century B. C. until the sixteenth century A.D., must inquire whether the theories of translation are identical with those of our time and whether the rendering of profane and sacred texts requires different methods.

Only two names are mentioned here to elucidate the theories in antiquity, CICERO in his *De optimo genere oratorum*, Chapter 14, pleads that the sense should be rendered rather than the words; HORACE in his *De arte poetica* 133-4 exhorts "you should be unlike a faithful translator-you should not render word for word." Obviously there were two trends of thought, the one advocating a word-for-word translation, that means a literal rendering in which every word should be reproduced in the receptor language, and the other recommending a free rendering in which the main emphasis would be laid on the clarification of the sense. These two views on translation have been discussed throughout the ages. Nowadays the literal translation, often called "crib," has lost its importance while in the Middle Ages it had, broadly speaking, gained universal recognition. If literal or word-for-word translation with its imitation of foreign phrases is valued as "faithful," readability and clarity of expression cannot have been the goal of the translator. To understand the task of medieval translation we must clearly discard our modern conceptions.

Limiting the field of observation to sacred texts only, I must first of all point out that all paraphrases and literary works dealing with biblical subjects in verse or prose are excluded from this investigation.

It would be possible to compare the old versions of the Bible with the original and in

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

this way inquire into the methods used. One could, however, also refer to the testimonies in which the views on biblical translation are freely expressed and which enable us to find the methods, principles and procedures required at different times. A short history of the main tendencies of biblical translation during the two thousand years of its existence will be given in these pages, with special emphasis on the earliest theories and translations, and the subsequent changes of principle and procedure. Purely religious questions not directly concerned with the subject matter will be omitted.

The Greek Septuagint

The earliest version of the Hebrew Old Testament into a Western language is the Septuagint which was made in Egypt probably in the third century B. C. The oldest report about its origin is found in the so-called Aristeas Letter written about 100 B. C. It contains many legendary traits which conceal rather than reveal the historical facts. But it is an important document, presenting the views of its author on the method and procedure of biblical translation. It was written, I would think, to explain to the Jews in Egypt the excellence and perfection of the Greek version. It may be that it was composed as a recommendation to those who were reluctant to forego the original Hebrew text. The Aristeas Letter probably embodies traditional thought about principles of translation. For us it is important as the earliest elucidation of the requirements necessary to create a new version of the Bible.

The Letter states that on the order of King PTOLEMY II PHILADELPHUS (285 - 246 B.C.) seventy-two Jews, elders, "men of noble life" who knew Hebrew and Greek, were sent by the High Priest in Jerusalem to Egypt, where acting as a committee they agreed on the wording of the Greek version.

For the first time in history a translation was made by a Committee, not by an individual translator. The work of a Committee guarantees accuracy, and to the author of the Aristeas Letter accuracy means that none but a Committee translation can be accurate. This is why it was stated at a meeting of the priests and the leaders of the Jewish community, "for-as-much as the translation has been well and piously executed and with perfect accuracy, it is right that it should remain in its present form and that no 'revision' should take place."³

These words reveal a theory of language foreign to our conceptions, namely, that lan-

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

guage does not change and as I may add with some diffidence, languages are fundamentally identical. Therefore "perfect accuracy" of a translation is possible; one can create a standard translation which is not only final but which can replace the original.

The question of the identity of the original and its translation is examined at some length by PHILO JUDAEUS. In his discussion of the origin of the Septuagint he lays the greatest emphasis on the sacredness of the Bible which has been revealed to man by God and which could therefore be rendered only by those who, while translating, lived a life of ritual purity far away from the impurity of the world. When they were bent on their task "they became," PHILO (*De Vita Mosis*, II, VII, 37-40) maintains, "as it were possessed, and under inspiration, wrote, not each several scribe something different, but the same word for word, as though dictated to each by an invisible prompter." The seventy-two translators, in PHILO'S view, worked separately and yet produced an identical text in spite of the fact that languages "abound in terms," and that the same thought can be put in many shapes. The translation of God's word could not be made by ordinary men who are only capable of transferring words or thoughts from one language into another. A new revelation is necessary, the translator's own activity is reduced to writing words "as though dictated to him by an invisible prompter." Thus there is complete identity of the original Hebrew text and the Greek translation.

PHILO'S theory played a significant part in the history of biblical translation, for it could lead to the conclusion that an inspired translation could provide the basis of new translations and that knowledge of languages alone is inadequate to this task. The translator must needs receive God's help and therefore only the theologian has the right to engage in this work. However, the difficulty inherent in this theory lies in the term "inspired translation." PHILO made the translators into mere instruments who wrote what was dictated to them. It might be said that however much the translator may be inspired in his understanding of God's word, it is he who has to select the words and may therefore pervert the truth. Even if the subjective interpretation of the text by the translator is successfully eliminated, it is re-introduced into his activity when he transmutes words, phrases, and sentences from one language into another. This subjectivity can be avoided if the rendering is literal in its

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

preservation of word order and phrasing. The translator's task in this case is to transfer the original word for word with scant regard to linguistic peculiarities of the receptor language. This theory is, I would suggest, based on the belief that all languages are fundamentally alike and that the sense can be conveyed when expressions of one language are literally preserved in the other. This literal method of translation is a guarantee of the creation of a faithful rendering whether or not the translator is divinely inspired.

This short survey shows that the early Christian translators inherited their theoretical views from the Jews. Indeed in the fifth century when these issues were again of greatest importance, the discussion always turned to the opinions relating to the origin of the Septuagint.

In spite of the theories that the text of the Septuagint was final, new translations were made which, together with the Hebrew text and the Septuagint, were in the third century collected and examined by Origen in his *Hexapia*. Origen also indicated the differences between the Hebrew original and the Septuagint.

The Views of St. Jerome

In the second century A. D. a Latin version, the so-called *Vetus Latina*, was made from the Greek Septuagint and not from the Hebrew original. In 382 ST. JEROME was requested to revise the *Vetus Latina* since the wording had in the course of time been corrupted. During this revision he seems to have slowly changed his mind. At the beginning he thought that the translators of the Septuagint were inspired, but he did not believe in verbal inspiration. They had to transmute the style of the original into the peculiarities of Greek diction. Later, it seems, he rejected the Septuagint as a basis of a new translation and still later he maintained in his *Praefatio in Job*, "One thing I know, I could translate only what I had understood before"-and again in the *Praefatio in Pentateuchum* ". . . sentences are understood and translated by erudition and command of language." With this philological method of translation he was in marked contrast to ST. AUGUSTINE, who upheld the view that translators of the Septuagint were inspired and that therefore the Septuagint should serve as the basis of ST. JEROME's new translation which is known as the Vulgate.

It seems obvious that ST. JEROME was aware of the fact that because languages

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

differ from each other in diction, idiomatic expressions, syntax, and the semantic contents, the translator could not render the Greek New Testament, not to mention the Hebrew Old Testament, word for word. In some of his prefaces he mentions that he renders partly sense for sense, partly word for word. But in a letter written at the end of 395 he explains that he himself has always rendered the sense "with the exception of Holy Scripture where even the order of words is a mystery." Whatever the reason for his statement may be, it opens the door to the most literal translation possible where even a change in the order of words is forbidden since every change may destroy the profundity of God's word. (*Ep.* 57,5; 53.8,6; *Comment in Abacuc* 2-3). This saying clearly emphasizes that any change whatsoever of the biblical text in favour of syntactical preferences diminishes the value of the translation. While rendering profane literature, the translator may and even should communicate the meaning of the original in a style easily understood, but when rendering Holy Scripture he must follow the original text in every detail without even attempting to adopt foreign phrases to the customary idioms of his own language.

This precept of ST. JEROME was followed by those who wrote the medieval versions of the Bible in the European languages.

Translations Into Germanic Languages

It is not easy to understand the difficulties facing the translator who wished to render the Greek or Latin Bible into a Germanic language. However arduous the approximation of Greek and Latin terminology to biblical thought, the linguistic and semantic differences between biblical and Germanic languages were probably even more marked. Little is known of the style of the Germanic languages in the pre-Christian era. It is, for example, doubtful to what extent subordinate clauses were of syntactical significance. Moral attitudes as expressed in Germanic songs had to be revalued and transformed by Christian conceptions. Semantic connotations were uprooted and assimilated to an entirely new environment. This assimilation must of necessity have changed traditional Germanic conceptions as well as idiomatic expressions and syntactic structures. The language of the biblical translations in its turn influenced the literary and spoken native languages and might well be the reason for the close syntactic similarity of the structures of the West European languages. These few

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

words may suffice to draw attention to the linguistic aspects of biblical translations.⁴

ULFILA, the bishop of the Goths in the second half of the fourth century, had first to invent an alphabet before setting out to translate the Bible into Gothic. He used a Greek text which he rendered word for word imitating the Greek order of words, syntax and idiom. In the process he often had to create new compound words in Gothic in which each part of the Greek compound was individually translated.

The Goths sent missionaries to Bavaria and, it can be assumed, circulated some of the Gothic Christian terminology. To give one example, ULFILA used the Germanic word *fastan* which meant 'to hold fast' in the religious connotation 'to fast' and it is this religious term which spread to all the Germanic vernaculars.

All the other translations into the Germanic languages were made from the Vulgate which was accepted by the Church and used for Church services and which formed the foundation of biblical exegesis. As Hebrew and Greek were then unknown in the Western world, the authority of the Vulgate remained unquestioned.

The oldest English versions we know of have either been entirely lost or have been handed down to us in manuscripts which we cannot accept as reliable witnesses of the original works. The Anglo-Saxon version of Psalms 1-50 by ALDHELM who died in 709 has perhaps been preserved in a Paris manuscript of the eleventh century. BEDE'S translation of the Gospel of St. John finished on the Eve of Ascension day 735 is lost. King ALFRED'S (871-99) Psalter does not appear to have survived although an eleventh-century manuscript in the British Museum is known as King ALFRED'S Psalter. In this manuscript the Old-English translation is written between the lines of the Latin text, and is therefore called an interlinear version. Some manuscripts containing interlinear translations from the ninth century onward have come down to us, such as the glosses of the Lindisfarne Gospels, in which the Latin text was written in about 700 and the Old-Saxon gloss by ALDRED the priest in about 950, and the Rushworth manuscript, somewhat later than the Lindisfarne Gospels.

The existence of interlinear glosses raises the question if medieval biblical translation did not originate with the activity of these glossators. Later the gloss could have been copied

without the Latin text. Thus the word-for-word versions would result from the gloss and not necessarily from ST. JEROME'S precepts or a tradition dependent on them. These two possibilities need not exclude each other. However, the link with ST. JEROME seems to be implied in King ALFRED'S *Pastoralis*, "I began . . . to translate into English the book *Pastoralis* . . . sometimes word for word, and sometimes according to sense, as I had learned it from Plegmund, my archbishop, and Asser, my bishop, and Grimbold, my mass-priest, and John, my mass-priest."⁵

The earliest English version written without the Latin text originated in the south-west of England at about 950 A. D. Of this seven copies are extant, the earliest written by AELFRIC in the monastery of Bath about fifty years later. Another AELFRIC, abbot of Eynsham, translated a great part of the Old Testament. He is of some importance for his interest in grammar and for his endeavour to formulate clear and concise sentences. Yet it is doubtful if his version could be called a translation in the strict meaning of the word since he sometimes omitted sentences and paraphrased freely.

In the eighth century English missionaries, most of all WILLIBROD and WYNFRID (Boniface) went to Germany⁶ and used an AngloSaxon religious vocabulary which was to some extent accepted in the northern part of Germany, while the southern part was influenced by the Gothic missionaries, as has been pointed out above.

In Germany too, glosses precede the translations. We possess German glosses from the middle of the eighth century onward; the first translation (we do not know of any interlinear translations) must be dated back to shortly before 800 A.D. Fragments of a German Gospel of St. Matthew, the *Monsee Fragments*, are relatively freely rendered (ca. 780-820), while the translation of TATIAN, *Diatesseron (unum ex quattor evangeliorum)* of ca. 830 follows the Latin text literally in its imitation of syntax and word order. There is no testimony explaining the method used.

[Ecclesiastical Opposition to Vernacular Translations](#)

The translations made in these early times were intended to instruct clergy as to how to explain Christianity to the common people. There was no opposition to vernacular versions, which were made by clerics or, in the case of King ALFRED, influenced by them.

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

However, when in the twelfth century the laity began to read the Bible and to interpret its meaning according to their own personal understanding, the attitude of the Church changed. It must be remembered that since the time of the Fathers of the Church the method of exegesis had become more rigid and the religious doctrine evolved from biblical interpretation had hardened. A layman ignorant of this tradition could easily pervert the views reached after centuries of long and learned discussion. It clearly follows that only those who were fully steeped in the study of traditional exegesis were entitled to interpret the sacred text. The ignorant laymen applying their own personal reasoning to biblical exegesis were bound to reach conclusions different in effect from the orthodox view. Often unlettered, they argued from the text of Holy Scripture only, which they had read in the vernacular since they knew no Latin. It is understandable that the Church regarded them as heretics, condemned the translations and prohibited the reading of the vernacular Bible. According to an inquisitor of the thirteenth century, DAVID of Augsburg, the early Waldensians believed "that the gospel ought to be obeyed according to the letter . . . This [he goes on] was their first heresy, contempt of the power of the Church . . ." In 1369 the emperor CHARLES IV issued an edict ordering the German versions of all books with religious contents to be confiscated because "lay people who read them do not understand them in a safe and good sense ... which books might give occasion to certain seducers of souls to preach and teach errors."⁷

The reasons against the vernacular versions were of two kinds: (1) nobody can translate without perverting the meaning of the sacred text since even ST. JEROME inspired though he was, admitted that he had erred in his work; and (2) the poverty of the vernacular languages makes it almost impossible to render "the mysteries of the Christian religion."⁸

Because of the interconnexion of text and exegesis it was dangerous for the layman to read the Bible without falling into heresy. The vernacular languages were too primitive an instrument to express religious thought. These views meant the condemnation of biblical translation even though, in the fifteenth century, Sir Thomas MORE, for example, was not opposed to vernacular versions provided they were approved by the bishop. He himself had seen praiseworthy old Bibles. But a WYCLIFFE or a TYNDALE followed their own individual ideas, setting aside the teaching of the "holy doctors." "In which translation he

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

[WYCLIFFE] purposely corrupted the holy text, maliciously planting therein such words as might in the readers' ears serve to the proof of such heresies as he went about to sow.⁹

And yet sometimes the reading of sacred books in the vernacular was recommended. In 1398 the Brethren of the Common Life, a religious community, not under religious vows, founded in Holland in the fourteenth century, asked lawyers of the law school at Cologne for a legal pronouncement on various matters such as should lay people lawfully "read or possess sacred books written in the vulgar tongue, or translated out of Latin into the vulgar tongue." "To which it briefly answered: that to read such books is lawful and meritorious, provided they do not contain heresies or errors, and especially if they treat clearly of plain subjects, and do not disagree with the books of the saints, either in the style of the writer, or in likeness of reasoning . . ." ¹⁰

This pronouncement refers not only to Holy Scripture but also to devotional books in general. But the conditions attached to the recommendation are of a very far-reaching nature and show the interconnexion between the traditional exegesis and the texts of sacred books.

In the late Middle Ages the possessor of vernacular Bibles was suspected of heresy. Yet parts of the Bible and devotional writings were, it seems, widely spread. The two most important new translations were the Wycliffite Bible, completed in 1384, probably not translated by WYCLIFFE although he was the instigator and driving spirit of the project, and the Czech version by John Huss who was burned in 1415.

A Change in Basic Concepts Affecting Translation

Biblical translation is intimately connected with the religious trends and tenets of the community. Thus a change in the method of translation must be preceded by a new attitude within the community. As long as the views of the "holy doctors" were all powerful, the Church could brand the expositor or translator as a heretic and prohibit any version because it deviated from its doctrine. It follows that a new age of biblical translation began after the authority of at least part of the tradition was undermined.

However, this weakening could take place only on two conditions. The representatives

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

of authoritative thought were unwilling or unable to develop their own theories any further and to clarify them according to the requirements of the new tendencies. Secondly, as long as those who favoured a new style of living were unable to transform their own individual views into a new style of thinking which could satisfactorily replace the old tradition, their striving was in vain. The newcomers had to find a new method which could take the place of the old and could offer solutions unobtainable in the traditional way. It is therefore not amazing to discover that new, vigorous translations start with the age of humanism and reformation at the beginning of the sixteenth century.

A few words must therefore be said here about the intellectual atmosphere at the turn of the sixteenth century. Scholasticism, although still producing bulky volumes, was declining. One of the Schoolmen, "Paulus Scriptor," admitted that one should read the works of the Fathers of the Church rather than those of the Schoolmen. Another, Wessel GANSFORT, maintained that "Theologians must have recourse to 'logic'," while in a letter to a nun he writes: "Long before you could learn logic, you will have prevailed through the prayer of faith with the Teacher of truth to grant you all needful truth." The study of structures of logic as erected by the Schoolmen, was, according to this view, not the only way to find truth. The layman could have asked, why study scholasticism and theology if God grants the divine truth to the unlettered.

Yet the real opposition to traditional thought came from humanism. The humanists at first had nothing to do with religion or scholasticism. They believed that a civilised language was the foundation of every civilisation. The corruption of classical Latin brought the barbarism of the Middle Ages in its trail. A return to the purity of classical Latin must needs produce a golden age of civilisation.¹¹ Thus the humanists' first endeavour was to learn the grammar and style of the great Roman writers and to read their works. Soon they asserted that books that did not fulfill the stylistic requirements of humanism should not be read, a demand which amounted to the elimination of all the books written in the Middle Ages. Interested in the writings of the ancients as they were, they made Greek texts accessible in printed editions and Latin translations. It was a decisive step when they compared the text of the Latin Vulgate with that of the Greek Bible. From the point of view of grammar and style they

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

found the text of the Vulgate wanting and in need of revision.

The first to collate the texts of the Greek and Latin Bibles was Laurentius VALLA whose *in Latinam Novi Testamenti Interpretationem ex Collatione Graecorum Exemplarium Adnotationes*, finished in 1449, was published by Erasmus in 1505. As a humanist he emphasizes that even in theology the property of every language must be observed since corrupt language cannot be understood, and as a philologist he emphasizes that in principle the original Greek text of the New Testament should be preferred to a translation. When the Greek and Latin texts differ, it is in general the Greek text that is more reliable. This was a revolutionary thought which was to be debated in the sixteenth century when it was asserted that the schismatic Greeks had purposely changed the Greek wording of the New Testament in order to prove their own religious tenets. The same argument could be applied against those who were in favour of the Hebrew Bible; for, it was argued, the Jews had falsified the text wherever it referred to Christ. ERASMUS in the prefaces to his translations of the New Testament of 1516 and 1519 drew attention to the agreement of the biblical quotations of the Fathers of the Church with the Greek version, thus proving the accuracy of the Greek text. REUCHLIN conclusively argued that for philological reasons the Hebrew text was more authoritative than the Septuagint or the Vulgate. It is therefore obvious that the humanists drew the conclusion that one had to go back to the original Hebrew and Greek for the interpretation of the Bible and that all the medieval expositors who had relied only on the Latin text could not be depended upon. As the Latin text of the Vulgate had been corrupted by copyists, a reconstitution of the text could only be made from the originals. It follows that it is the task of the grammarian who knows Hebrew and Greek to translate Holy Scripture. With the help of the profane literature of antiquity he will be able to understand the words of the Bible better than the theologian who is ignorant of such languages. REUCHLIN, for example, remarks in a letter of October 10, 1508, "I would have you know that nobody of the Latin people has been able to give an exact explanation of the Old Testament without having first had knowledge of the language in which it was written." And ERASMUS writes in the Preface to VALLA's *Annotations* of 1505, "When LYRA [Nicolaus of LYRA (ca. 1270-1349) who compared the Hebrew text with the Vulgate and criticized the Latin

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

translation of the Vulgate] discusses a form of expression, is he acting as a theologian or is he not rather acting as a grammarian? Indeed all this translating of Scripture belongs to the grammarian's part." ERASMUS agrees that theology is "the Queen of all Sciences," while grammar, although only a "handmaid," is the indispensable foundation for the theologian. After the humanists had proved the pre-eminence of the original text, they could draw attention to mistakes in the translation, mistakes which were basic to scholastic reasoning. This undermined the claim that medieval exegesis was authoritative. They were able to do this because they had found a new method which promised a new understanding of Holy Scripture. They did not attack the traditional view with subjective reasoning which would prove nothing but offered a method which in its objectivity could gain confidence. Moreover, the same method could be used for the interpretation of profane literature and the exegesis of the Bible. It was REUCHLIN and most of all ERASMUS of Rotterdam who were the initiators of this philological method.

[Johannes Reuchlin](#)

Johannes REUCHLIN has only one translation to his credit, *In Septem Psalmos Poenitentiales* of 1512, a word-for-word rendering of the Penitential Psalms into Latin. His method is in contradiction to his own statement that a literal translation from Hebrew into Latin cannot be made. Yet this contradiction is the clue to his thought as a humanist. In his view the aim of the translation is to lead the student to the original text, for its full meaning cannot be expressed in any translation. "The mediator between God and man was, as we read in the Pentateuch, language, yet not any language but only Hebrew; God wished his secrets to be known to mortal men through Hebrew." Therefore everybody who wishes to explain God's word has first to learn the grammar of Hebrew, in order to understand the real significance of every word of the Bible. The "spiritual understanding" contained in the Hebrew writings is necessarily lost in translation. REUCHLIN does not rely on translations, "Therefore I read the New Testament in Greek, the Old Testament in Hebrew, in the exposition of which I trust myself rather than anybody else." Many mystical features of his work are closely interwoven with the philological knowledge of Hebrew, which gives him the assurance that his own judgement is more correct than that of the traditional view. Indeed

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

in his Hebrew grammar and dictionary *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* of 1506 there is scarcely a page without a criticism of the Vulgate or of some exposition of the Old Testament by the Fathers of the Church. Every authority is subjected to his censure. "Though I revere ST. JEROME as an angel and though I honour LYRA as a teacher, yet I worship truth as God," he writes in the preface of his dictionary. This is the spirit of a man who demands freedom of thought and who believes that the philological method which he handles with consummate skill can lead to an understanding of God's word. It goes without saying that he was strongly attacked by those whose name is still know as "obscurants." Like ERASMUS he was aware that he was a grammarian, not a theologian, and as a grammarian he thought it his task to find the truth in the "language in which God and the angels have told their merits to men from on high."

Desiderius Erasmus

ERASMUS of Rotterdam writes in one of the prefaces to his edition and translation of the Greek New Testament "in this work truth is to be respected more than authority." The similarity with REUCHLIN'S statement, cited just above, is striking. But what is the meaning of ERASMUS' words?

From his early years ERASMUS believes that a new age starts with the humanism Of VALLA and PHILELPHUS, which has superseded the barbarism of the Middle Ages. He believes that the early Fathers of the Church had explained "the brightness of eternal truth" in their theological works. Yet in the Middle Ages the expositors of Holy Writ were ignorant of Hebrew and Greek and could not comprehend the original meaning of "divine wisdom." Therefore the teaching of these interpreters must be censured and their mistakes shown up. However, even "the Fathers of the Church were human beings, they were in ignorance of some things, they were dreaming and prating idly in others, and sometimes they were asleep." All this can be proven by studying Holy Scripture in the original languages. The truth of God's Word, he thinks, has been concealed or even perverted by the exegesis of the barbarians who added new burdens and even dogmata to the tenets of primitive Christianity. The truth contained in Holy Scriptures was hidden by human ideas which hardened into doctrines. To recover this truth one has to go back to the sources, for "... truth is to be

respected more than authority."

Yet ERASMUS never claims to be a theologian and he intends to explain the philological connotation of words and nothing else. However, the interconnexion of words and meaning makes it imperative to interpret the meaning of the sentences. "Those who narrate the sense," he says in the Preface to his *Annotationes* of the New Testament, "are often forced to unfold the meaning of the words; in the same way we are sometimes forced to lay open the full contents of the sentences, while we busy ourselves with the unfolding of the meaning of the words." For the interpretation of the New Testament, ERASMUS believes, it is necessary to learn classical Greek, for classical Greek is not only older than biblical Greek but also identical. He who wishes to become a theologian, must first of all read the literature of antiquity and in this way learn the grammar, the meaning of words and the rhetorical significance of Greek. He must apply this knowledge to the interpretation of Holy Writ, which means that ERASMUS, the humanist, whose "natural inclination rapt me away as if inspired to the temple of the Muses," attempts to find a synthesis of sacred and profane literature, of theology and humanism. He wishes to avoid a division of civilisation where religion and literature signify two entirely different activities of the mind. It is this resolve of ERASMUS which in 1519 is praised by one of his friends, Thomas MORE: "I admit that I love ERASMUS ardently for almost no other reason than that for which the whole Christian world likes him; for as a result of the indefatigable labours of him alone, more than through the erudition of almost anybody else in the last centuries, have students of *bonae literae* everywhere promoted profane as well as sacred studies."

It is necessary to understand clearly what this programme of ERASMUS implies for the course of studies in theology. Instead of learning Petrus LOMBARDUS' *Sententiae* and the systems of scholastic philosophy, students should learn Greek and Latin and read the works of pagan literature. ERASMUS while studying in Paris, the centre of scholasticism, was always opposed to the teaching of the Schoolmen. "The student should not learn logic from the most loquacious kind of sophists, he should not sit at their feet for long and should not get old there, at the rock of the Sirens as it were," he remarks in his *Ratio studii* of 1511.

Compared to REUCHLIN, ERASMUS' work is of far greater scope although their

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

aims and tendencies are very similar. While REUCHLIN does not mention the tradition of the miraculous origin of the Septuagint, ERASMUS, quoting ST. JEROME as his authority, rejects the possibility of an inspired translation. "Shall we ascribe to the Holy Spirit the errors which we ourselves make?" Even if the earliest versions were without mistakes, the copyists of the manuscripts often made mistakes and thus the sacred text had become corrupt. Therefore ST. JEROME had to revise the older Latin versions. The same process had taken place again; the text of the Vulgate was in need of reconstitution or revision.

The philological principle used for his edition and translation must be briefly explained here. He compares all the Greek manuscripts available to him and the readings of old Latin manuscripts. Besides he examines the biblical quotations of the Fathers of the Church and takes them into consideration as independent testimonies of the text. So he can assert, "We change in the language of the apostles not even a syllable, indeed we reconstitute their language corrupted through the fault of copyists or otherwise. Nobody should cry, 'Such a man corrects the Gospel, such a man amends the Lord's Prayer', but he should say, 'He purges the manuscript of the Gospel from mistakes'."

Erasmus' Translations

ERASMUS made his first translation of the New Testament in England in 1501. In it he freely deviates from the Latin of the Vulgate. But in his rendering printed in 1516, he preserves the wording of the Vulgate "with some superstitious fear." However, in the second edition of 1519 and in the subsequent editions of 1522, 1527, 1535 and 1539 he falls back to his rendering of 1505. The Greek and Latin texts (his own translation) are printed side by side, dedicatory letters and treatises explaining the principles of his methods and attacking his adversaries, are added. The text is followed by *Annotiones* which give his reasons for rejecting the wording of the Vulgate. The reader of the Bible is offered ERASMUS' own version, he can find the text of the Vulgate in the notes only, where the traditional reading is refuted. Whenever possible he adduces authorities for serious changes. For example, in his translation of the Greek word *logos* with *sermo* instead of *verbum*, he quotes early Fathers of the Church, and even medieval theologians and the gloss to justify his rendering. In his explanations he stresses the differences between individual languages and emphasizes

that only the knowledge of philological details, such as idiomatic and figurative expressions, can lead to an understanding of Holy Writ. Thus he can reasonably say, "We restore the old and exclude novelty." And even if he attacks the sayings of weighty authorities he still claims, "First of all we testify (and we wish to testify it everywhere) that we do not intend to depart a finger's breadth from the judgement of the Church."

It goes without saying that in his translations he avoids all ungrammatical expressions and constructions. Against those who maintain that "... God is not offended by solecisms," he lashes out, "Yet God hates the haughty solecists who attack those who speak correctly and who themselves do not wish to learn a more correct diction and like a dog in the manger do not let the others do so who do."

Yet if necessary ERASMUS renders word for word. But he avoids ambiguities which may lead to misunderstanding. Since in his translation he can render one meaning only, he explains the other possible meanings in his notes leaving the final decision to the reader, who himself should be able to judge on the meaning of the text. "This is not written for the crowds," he says, "but for the erudite, and especially for the candidates of theology." His work therefore is not intended to be used by the common man. The text of the Vulgate should "be read in schools, sung in Churches, quoted in meetings." But when studying his translation, the meaning of the Vulgate will be clearer. His labour should contribute to the understanding of Holy Writ, which can be reached by everybody according to his ability. It is for this reason that he is in favour of translations of the Bible into vernacular languages. His words, famous though they are, may be quoted once again (translation by William Roy, an amanuensis of TYNDALE), "I wold desire that all women shuld reade the gospell and Paules epistles and I wold to god they were translated in to the tonges of all men So that they might not only be read and knowne of the scotes and yrishmen But also of the Turkes and sarracenes ... I wold to god the plowman wold singe a texte of the scripture at his plow-beme. And that the wever at his lowme with this wold drive away the tediousnes of tyme. I wold the wayfaringe man with this pastymc wold expelle the weriness of his iorney. And to be shorte I wold that all the communication of the christen shuld be of the scripture for in a manner soch are we oure selves as our daylye tales are."

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

The status of the Vulgate was fundamentally undermined although it should, according to ERASMUS, still be used in Church. Like REUCHLIN, ERASMUS fights for the freedom of the humanists to translate Holy Scripture and to interpret the meaning of the words even if he leaves the theological exegesis to the theologians. Yet without the help of the philologists the theologian is unable to do his work. It is ERASMUS the philologist who boasts, "We have laid open more than six hundred passages, which up to this time have not been understood even by great theologians. This they admit themselves, as indeed they cannot deny it." It is the search for the understanding of Holy Writ which makes ERASMUS say, "In this work truth is to be respected more than authority."

The question must be raised if and how the humanists influenced the trends of biblical translation in the centuries to come. They could not date manuscripts nor could they discover the relative value of a manuscript for the reconstitution of the text. ERASMUS had understood that biblical quotations found in the works of the Fathers of the Church were within a manuscript tradition different from that of the Bible itself. These quotations should therefore be used as testimonies to the history of the text.

No translation can fully render God's word. This fundamental conception of humanism leads to results of utmost importance for the history of biblical translation. Exegesis and translation must go back to the original text. The theologian and the interpreter must know the languages although they should take into consideration versions and commentaries in other languages. It is the task of the philologist to teach the theologian the linguistic peculiarities which are necessary to understand God's word. To fulfill this task the philologist must have complete freedom of research and thought.

As the translation cannot replace the original, every translation loses its value because it cannot serve as the basis of theological discussion or of a new translation. A translation, for example, can be used for the Church services, as ERASMUS believes. The Church can authorize a version, and indeed the Latin Vulgate was declared authentic at the Council of Trent. The decree of April 8, 1546, states that "the Vulgate approved through long usages during so many centuries be held authentic in public lectures, disputations, preaching and exposition, and that nobody dare or presume to reject it under any pretext."

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

It was recognized that the original was of importance for the exegesis and that the translation was of no value to the solution of theological questions. Hence ERASMUS advocated translations into the vernacular languages. These versions should be read with "a pious and open mind and particularly with a simple and pure faith" and understood by everybody according to his ability. Although accessible to all, the Gospel should be explained by the erudite only.

How different is this view from the one contained in the *Aristeas Letter* which stated that the translation and the original could be identical. Although ERASMUS does not expressly say so, it follows that every advance in learning would lead to a deeper understanding and therefore to a new translation.

Luther

On March 5, 1522, LUTHER wrote to Kurfürst FRIEDRICH, "Your Excellency knows, or if not may be informed herewith that I have received the Gospels not from man but solely from heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ (Gal. 1.10 ff.) and that I could have prided myself in words written and spoken on being a servant of God and his Evangelist, and this I will do henceforth."

"I have received the Gospels not from man but solely from heaven through our Lord Jesus Christ." Does this mean the rejection of all theological exegesis because, as LUTHER had said in 1521, "I have not dared nor am I able to boast of anything but of the word of truth which the Lord has given me." Does LUTHER refer to an inspiration enabling him to achieve a new understanding of Holy Scripture? If so, would it affect his attitude towards all traditional thought, humanism and biblical translation? A quotation from his *Table Talks*, dated March 25 and 27, 1532, says, "Grammar is necessary for declension, conjugation and construction of sentences, but in speech the meaning and subject matter must be considered, not the grammar, for the grammar shall not rule over the meaning." This clearly means that the grammatical explanation even if correct from the point of view of grammar is subordinate to the meaning of the sentence. He is reported to have said in his *Table Talks* of September 2 to 17, 1540, "God be thanked, when I understood the subject matter and knew that 'God's righteousness' meant 'righteousness through which He justifies us through righteousness

freely given in Jesus Christ,' then I understood the grammar. Only then did I find the Psalter to my taste."

How is it possible to understand the meaning without a knowledge of grammar? Or in other words, what is the interconnexion between grammar, the meaning of the words, and the comprehension of the subject matter? In his *Table Talks* of May 21 to June 11, 1540, he grades their mutual relationship, "It is not enough to know grammar but one must pay attention to the sense; for the knowledge of the subject matter brings out the meaning of the words."

It is obvious that for LUTHER the overriding principle of understanding a text consists in the knowledge of the subject matter. This can be learned from one's teachers who can explain the religious tenet, the age-long tradition of exegesis, and the authority of the Church which determines the interpretation. Indeed in his *Lecture on the Psalms* of 1511/3 to 1515 he fully accepts the doctrine of the Church and assails those who refuse "to listen to the books of the Apostles and the elders of the Church" and who "seek to gain another truth which in their judgement is better and saner, and they seek to gain it in such a way as to wish scornfully that the truth which is in the Church, neither exists nor appears to exist." At this time in LUTHER'S life the method of interpretation is in no doubt. The subject matter is known and the grammar and the meaning of the words have to concur to prove the doctrine. Individual reasoning is condemned;" . . . he who dares to erect another doctrine and another wisdom . . . and he who puffed up by his carnal understanding: this man rebels against God with horrible temerity," he writes in the same Lecture. He does not believe that he understands every word of the Bible. On the contrary, he openly admits that he has not yet understood "a very great number of Psalms: ... and I will be unable to interpret them unless the Lord illuminate me . . ." Understanding, he argues, is the result of illumination, and we may add, not the result of knowing grammar. Subjectivity of thought is rejected. God in His grace can grant understanding which LUTHER thinks, at this period of his life, must needs be identical with the doctrine of the Church.

Comparing LUTHER'S words with those of the Schoolmen and the humanists we can discover a fundamental difference in the attitude towards human reasoning. With LUTHER

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

it is God's grace not human reasoning that guides man to understand Holy Scripture. This does not mean that man has to wait passively for God's help but that he must endeavour to perceive truth. Only then will God come to his help. In other words, from the very first LUTHER'S attitude is that of the theologian and not the humanist.

The date of LUTHER's religious experience which influences all his thought and life is not known. His own remarks about it from 1518 and indeed throughout his life are in perfect harmony and give us an insight into his religious development.

In his autobiographical remarks of 1545 LUTHER writes that in his youth he believed the meaning of the word "righteousness" to be, "God is righteous and punishes the sinners and unrighteous." This philosophical explanation involved him in difficulties, for he could not understand the seemingly contrasting sentence in Romans 1.17, "For therein is the righteousness of God revealed from faith to faith: as it is written, The just shall live by faith" (A. V.). After pondering over this verse for days and nights, he understood that "righteousness" means that God in His mercy justifies man by faith. "At this point," LUTHER continues, "I felt completely reborn and as if I had entered paradise with its open gate. Forthwith the aspect of the whole of Scripture seems to have changed." In analogy with this perception he interpreted other words in Holy Scripture "such as the work of God, that means the work that God works in us, the virtue (*virtus*) of God, that means the virtue through which He makes us powerful, the wisdom of God, that means the wisdom through which He makes us wise, the courage of God, the salvation of God, the glory of God. My love for that sweetest word 'righteousness of God' was henceforth as great as my hatred for it had been hitherto. Thus this passage of Paul was truly the gate of Paradise."

This religious experience which he called later his *illuminatio* brought forth the doctrine of "justification by faith." Undoubtedly he believed that an inspiration led him to understand one single word of Holy Scripture. Because the Bible as God's revelation is a unity whose contents are in complete agreement, one can transfer the exposition of one word or one verse to the exegesis of the whole Bible. Therefore LUTHER believes that his interpretation of Romans 1.17 can elucidate the meaning of Holy Writ. It must be added that the second part of Romans 1.17 "The just shall live by faith" is St. Paul's interpretation of

Habakkuk's phrase (2-4). Therefore the Old and the New Testaments are bound together. For all these reasons LUTHER could justifiably expound the whole Bible in accordance with his illumination. This, however, does not signify that he understood every word of Holy Scripture. He never claimed it. He was aware of human limitation and believed that God alone could grant the full understanding of every single verse. Here are his words of 1521: "Nobody can understand God or God's word unless he receive it directly from the Holy Spirit."

Now it is possible to see how LUTHER understood the interconnexion between grammar, the meaning of words, and subject matter. He was certain that God had given him perception of His word. Therefore, he knew the subject matter which was of overriding importance for expounding the text. The meaning of the words is unfolded only to him who knows the contents.

Luther's View of Scholasticism and Humanism

Before it can be shown how LUTHER applied this religious conception, it is necessary to outline his attitude to traditional religious thought, Scholasticism, and Humanism.

LUTHER'S illumination gave him an insight which he could use as a standard to accept or refute religious thought irrespective of tradition or authority. In 1519 when speaking about Scholasticism he remarks: "I had lost Christ there, now I have found him in Paul." After the break with Rome he rejects the philosophy of the Schoolmen, since they expressed their own personal views instead of following St. Paul. This attack is pungent since it takes its armour from the traditional argument, namely, that all those who deviate from the tenets of the Church rely on their own individual reasoning. LUTHER turns this argument against the Schoolmen and even against the Fathers, the very authorities of the Church.

LUTHER had never trusted the doctrines of philosophers. His illumination taught him that the philosophical term "righteousness" was of a different connotation, when used as a religious concept. Philosophy therefore cannot be used for training the theologian. On the contrary philosophers, relying on human reason, necessarily pervert religious thought since "they cannot understand one single chapter of the Gospel or of the Bible." His rejection of

the "philosopher" Aristotle is in full agreement with his repudiation of the Schoolmen.

LUTHER's attitude towards humanism is more ambiguous. In his *Lecture on the Psalms* of 1513-1515 he follows the traditional view, maintaining that the Psalms refer to Christ. This was also the opinion of Jacques Lefèvre's Quintuplex Psalterium, first published in 1509, a book used by Luther for the preparation of his *Lecture*. LUTHER'S copy of this book with his own notes has been preserved. Lefèvre rejects the idea that these hymns of David relate to historical events, namely, to his wars and to his persecution by Saul. Instead, he maintains, David was a prophet. The expositor must bring to light "the intention of the prophet (David) and of the Holy Spirit speaking in him." The literary sense exposing the historical events of David's life can therefore be neglected. Lefèvre quoting St. Paul, Romans 7.14: "we know that the law is spirituals"

asserts that the literal sense of the law is spiritual. Therefore the literal and spiritual senses are identical. This is an important innovation of exegesis. Lefèvre admits that only a prophet can interpret the prophetic sense in the Psalms. He himself is no prophet and therefore his interpretation contains many shortcomings. LUTHER, we remember, also believes that the Psalms refer to Christ and seeing his own inability to understand the prophetic sense without God's help he says "...I will be unable to understand them unless the Lord illuminate me." Lefèvre had drawn the conclusion that non-Christians could not comprehend the prophetic sense. LUTHER goes beyond this proposition and maintains that without a new revelation the expositor cannot do justice to the interpretation of the Psalms.

When working on his *Lecture on the Psalms* of 1513-1515 LUTHER did not yet recognize the importance of the original languages for Biblical exegesis. His knowledge of Hebrew and Greek was very limited indeed. He attacked Nicolaus of LYRA and Paul of BURGOS, for example, because they preferred the Hebrew text to that of the Vulgate. Yet he made use of REUCHLIN's *De Rudimentis Hebraicis* of 1506 and *In Septem Psalmos Poenitentiales* of 1512. He borrowed the grammatical explanations of the aspect of the Hebrew verbs which REUCHLIN had used to interpret Psalm 2.10 and transferred them to other verses without verifying the Hebrew text. This, of course, leads to mistakes, but it elucidates his method at this early stage when he made use of grammatical explanations to

prove the subject matter which he had known all along, ". . . for the grammar shall not rule over the meaning."¹²

In the year 1516 ERASMUS' edition of the New Testament was published and for the first time LUTHER could read the original Greek text together with the philological notes criticizing the Vulgate. Influenced by ERASMUS' linguistic method he began to pay attention to the Greek and the connotation of the single words in their context. Leaving aside questions of the fourfold sense of the text, he attempted to interpret the Greek text which he often preferred to that of the Vulgate. In philological details he followed ERASMUS' explanations which refer to all questions of grammar, style, literary usage, and rhetorical forms. In short LUTHER learned from ERASMUS that close attention to the original is a necessary preliminary to exegesis and he accepted this fundamental principle of humanism.

Yet he remained distrustful of human learning. His illumination had given him the understanding of Holy Scripture. ERASMUS forced him to recognize the value of grammatical studies. He now had to find a way to reconcile these two entirely different approaches to exegesis. Clearly, he recognized the supremacy of illumination which alone led to understanding and faith. In 1522, when criticizing ERASMUS' conception of predestination, he wrote, "Mightier is truth than eloquence, more important the spirit than genius, of greater weight faith than erudition." These words imply a contrast between faith and human erudition. In a letter of January 18, 1518, discussing the work of ST. JEROME and ST. AUGUSTINE, LUTHER pointed out the difference between the grammarian and the theologian. The first task of the theologian, he wrote, was to read the whole Bible and to learn the "simple story" with the help of JEROME'S commentaries. Then "for the knowledge of Christ and God's grace (that means for the more secret understanding of the spirit) the blessed AUGUSTINE and AMBROSE are more profitable." The student of theology must know the grammatical explanation of the text, but he cannot "penetrate into the meaning of the sacred books through study or mental ability."

However, LUTHER was convinced that there was a connexion between the wording of the Bible and the theological contents. In 1524 he wrote that the Gospel had been given

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

to man through the Holy Ghost only, but His message was transmitted by means of language. Therefore he fought against those who like Thomas MÜNTZER relied only on illumination. Without the thorough study of the text, without a meticulous examination of the words they cannot know if their illumination is the outcome of human fancy or of divine revelation. This demand is without doubt connected with LUTHER'S own experience, for he reinterpreted Holy Scripture anew in the light of his own illumination. However, those who rely on grammar only do not take into account that the biblical text is sacred and therefore beyond human understanding. Only God's grace can open the mind of man to the "knowledge of Christ." From this point of view LUTHER could appreciate ERASMUS' interpretation as being a necessary preliminary to the theologian but he could criticize it as failing to understand the spiritual meaning of the Bible. In a letter of March 1, 1517, LUTHER wrote, "The Lord will perhaps give ERASMUS understanding in his own time."

It should be remembered that JEROME and AUGUSTINE discussed the importance of philology and inspiration for translating the Bible. The controversy between ERASMUS and LUTHER is on similar lines and they are well aware that they deal with the same questions. One quotation of LUTHER who criticized JEROME and ERASMUS at the same time may be mentioned here. In a *Table Talk* of 1540 he is reported to have said, "JEROME is a prattler like ERASMUS; he wished to speak grandiloquently but he did not succeed. He promises something to the reader but he fulfils nothing. But I am amazed that at that time, scarcely three hundred years after Christ, so great a blindness was found in the Church together with so great a knowledge of languages."

Convinced as he was that he had received ("the knowledge of Christ and of God's grace," LUTHER was of the opinion that his own translation "is clearer and more accurate than the Vulgate at many places." He did not claim that his own translation was without mistakes, for no human being could achieve this. Therefore he did not assert that his German version could replace the original text or be used as the basis for exegetical purposes. He appreciated JEROME'S translation but was convinced that one person should not undertake this work single-handed. He refers to St. Matthew 18.20, "For where two or three are gathered together in my name, there am I in the midst of them." "ST. JEROME did as much

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

as one person can do. No single person could have done so much. If he had had one or two associates in his world, the Holy Spirit would have been with him, as is written: 'For where two or three are gathered together . . .' etc. A translator should not be alone, for the correct and appropriate words do not always occur to one individual person" (*Table Talk* between 1530 and 1535). It is well known that after he had translated the New Testament in the Wartburg LUTHER revised it with MELANCHTHON and that later special meetings with his friends were held for the translation or revision of his version.

His method of translation follows as it were ST. AUGUSTINE'S precept that the translator should not be in "servitude" to the words. "A real translation is the application of sayings in a foreign language to one's own language," he is reported to have said in 1532. He had learned from the humanists that languages possess their own peculiarities which cannot be rendered word for word. In order to reproduce the literary form and atmosphere of the original texts he transmuted the expressions of the original into idiomatic German sentences. Only in a free rendering could he, to some extent, recreate the "spirit" of Holy Writ. It goes without saying that he paid minute attention to the Hebrew and Greek texts. In a *Table Talk* of 1532 we find, "When translating I always follow the rule not to fight against grammar; he who has properly recognized this, knows how to render the letter, though not the spirit." His recognition of the value and the limitation of grammatical studies is clearly expressed in this statement. One who knows or believes he knows the subject matter will therefore not "fight against grammar" but "grammar shall not rule over the meaning."

REUCHLIN and ERASMUS had fought for the right of the humanist to make the Bible the subject of their studies. Both acted as philologists to elucidate the truth of God's word but refrained from discussing purely theological thought. LUTHER does not deny their right to do so but believes that the philological interpretation of ERASMUS contains "that literal, that means dead, understanding with which LYRA'S commentary and almost all the commentaries after AUGUSTINE are filled." These words can be of assistance to the theologian. But only the theologian and never the grammarian can receive "the knowledge of Christ and God's grace."

[Luther's Translation](#)

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

It is impossible to enter into the details of LUTHER's German translation. It goes without saying that he took special care to bring out the religious meaning of the original words¹³ and that this tendency of his was open to attack by all those who did not share his theological beliefs. This introduced a new aspect into the field of biblical translation.

In the Middle Ages the Church was opposed to Bible reading by laymen whose ignorance of theology caused them to misinterpret the sacred text and develop heretical views. Fighting against heresy, the clergy endeavoured to prohibit translations and attacked any new Bible translations into the vernacular. But where translations were considered orthodox in meaning and contents, they were allowed if not actually encouraged. Indeed fourteen editions of the German Bible were printed from 1466 until LUTHER's Bible of 1522.

As stated above, LUTHER'S translation reflected his own religious experience. After the break with the papacy the Roman-Catholic party could easily condemn LUTHER'S version as being based on the misunderstanding of the biblical text. This is the line taken by Hieronymus EMSER in his criticism of LUTHER published in 1523, who adds the argument that LUTHER'S choice of German words is opposed to tradition and not suitable for Holy Writ. We remember that Thomas MORE levelled a similar attack against TYNDALE. In all countries in which the Reformation took root, new translations were made in support of their religious faith and every denomination asserted that only their own biblical version contained the right interpretation of God's word. To counteract the spread of these tenets, the Roman-Catholic Church published its own translations, with the result that in many countries two different Bibles in the same vernacular were being circulated.

In Germany, for example, LUTHER's New Testament was attacked because it did not always conform to traditional thought. Hieronymus EMSER, therefore, corrected these faults, added glosses and edited this "revised" version for the Roman-Catholic readers in 1527. EMSER's edition was again revised. Dependent on EMSER for the New Testament, on LUTHER for the Old Testament, and on the Swiss translator Leo JUDA for the Apocrypha, J. DIETENBERGER published the entire Bible in 1534. H. BRAUN'S version (1788-1805) was revised by Fr. ALLIOLI in 1830 and published again in 1949. There are some new German translations for the Roman-Catholic community, yet without doubt in

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

Germany the history of Roman-Catholic and Protestant translation (for LUTHER'S version also underwent numerous revisions) is a history of revisions.

Principal English Translations

In England the history of biblical translation has also been a history of revisions.

William TYNDALE (about 1490 to 1536), whose project to translate the New Testament from the original Greek into English was not encouraged, went to Germany in 1524 where he probably met LUTHER. After overcoming many difficulties his translation was first printed in 1525 and sent to England in 1526, against the will of the Church. It was likely that TYNDALE'S intention was to convert the English to Protestantism. The Church took countermeasures, and TYNDAL, the bishop of London, declared that he had found three thousand mistakes in TYNDALE'S translation. Sir Thomas MORE attacked it with great acrimony, and the clergy bought all the copies they could purchase to prevent the public from reading it, while Archbishop WARHAM demanded the destruction of these books. Although TYNDALE was eventually to pay for his boldness with his life (1536), he continued and published the Pentateuch in 1530, the book of Jonah in 1531, a thorough revision of the New Testament in 1534, which was with slight alterations reprinted in 1535 and 1536. For his translations he used all the commentaries and translations available to him but especially the Greek text and notes by ERASMUS.

TYNDALE'S Bible has remained the basis of all the subsequent versions of all the Protestant Churches in England. Indeed, they all are revisions of TYNDALE'S translation or revisions of revisions. But TYNDALE'S wording is still clearly recognizable in the Authorized Version.

[A list of these revisions include the following:](#)¹⁴

COVERDALE'S Bible, 1535, revision of TYNDALE'S New Testament and of the Swiss translation of the Old Testament by ZWINGLI and Leo JUDA of 1529.

Matthew's Bible, 1537, slight revision of TYNDALE'S New Testament of 1535, and of TYNDALE'S and COVERDALE'S Old Testament.

The Great Bible, 1539-1541, revision of Matthew's Bible in accordance with ERASMUS' Latin translation of the New Testament and MÜNSTER'S Latin translation of the Old

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

Testament. A copy of this Bible had to be placed in every Church.

TAVERNER's Bible, 1539, revision of Matthew's Bible; this version had no influence on later revisions.

The Geneva Bible, 1557-1560, revision of TYNDALE'S last edition of the New Testament and of The Great Bible for the Old Testament. Influenced by CALVIN and the biblical scholar Theodore BEZA.

The Bishops' Bible, 1568, revision of The Great Bible.

The Authorized Version, 1611.

Although the Bishops' Bible was read in churches, the Geneva Bible, which to some extent was partisan in the explanatory marginal glosses, was widely read. It was for this reason that JAMES I advocated a new translation acceptable to all the churches in England. His idea was that a new version without marginal glosses should be made by the universities and approved by the bishops, the Privy Council and JAMES himself. When it was published in 1611 the words "Appointed to be read in Churches" were printed on the title-page, although as far as is known neither the bishops nor the Privy Council nor the King had officially approved it. The Authorized Version was never authorized.

The scholar translators who undertook the work used earlier versions and stated in the "Preface to the Reader," "Truly (good Christian Reader) wee neuer thought from the beginning that we should neede to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, . . . but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principall good one, not iustly to be excepted against; that hath bene our indeauour that our marke." In "The Rules to be observed in the Translation of the Bible" it says, "The ordinary Bible read in the Church, commonly called the *Bishops'* Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the truth of the original will permit" (First "Rule").

What has become known as the Authorized Version was translated by a Committee of revisers who were the best scholars and theologians of their time. They worked for two years and nine months and used all the existing English Bibles for their revision. It goes without saying that they translated from the original Hebrew and Greek and that they incorporated the result of biblical scholarship into their work. But the magnificent prose of

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

the Authorized Version was not always the language of their epoch (1611). Those sentences which had been preserved from earlier renderings may have sounded archaic even then. There is some truth in the words of Monsignor R. KNOX, "The English have always been accustomed to having an archaic Bible."¹⁵)

It seems to be the fate of biblical versions which are read in churches that the community accepts them as final and rejects changes in the wording. ST. AUGUSTINE writes about disturbances in North Africa against the introduction of a new Latin Bible. The existence of the community seems to be guaranteed by the permanence of the sacred texts which are therefore considered to be final. Criticism may be levelled against the translation by the learned. REUCHLIN and ERASMUS drew attention to stylistic shortcomings and even mistakes in the Vulgate. Vernacular versions have been criticized for being written in an archaic language that can no longer be understood. Advance in scholarship makes many a sentence of a traditional version invalid. Yet this does not affect the feeling of reverence towards the translation. The congregation is familiar with the wording, its ring and rhythm, and will oppose any change, especially in prayers to which they have been used from earliest childhood, even if the language is archaic and hardly understandable. An early criticism (1768) of the Authorized Version may be quoted here. Edward HARWOOD writes in his *A Liberal Translation of the New Testament; being an Attempt to translate the Sacred Writings With the same Freedom, Spirit, and Elegance, With which Other English Translations from the Greek Classics have lately been executed*, "The author knew it to be an arduous and invidious attempt to make the phrase of these celebrated writers (HUME, ROBERTSON, etc.) the vehicle of inspired truths, and to diffuse over the sacred page the elegance of modern English, conscious that the bald and barbarous language of the old vulgar version hath acquired a venerable sacredness from length of time and custom, and that every innovation of this capital nature would be generally stigmatized as the last and most daring enormity." Two years later John WORSLEY stresses the same point in his translation of the New Testament: "The principal attempt therefore of this Translation is ... to make the form of expression more suitable to our *present* language ... though this be not allowed for *public* use, it is to be hoped some *private* persons may receive benefit by that which is now

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

offered."

ERASMUS did not intend his translation to replace the Vulgate but hoped that it would be useful for the learned. WORSLEY'S thought is on similar lines, for he too distinguishes between an official and a "private" translation. The "private" version, he thinks, should take into account the changes in the living languages. This tendency has led to numerous new versions in which not only changes in the receptor languages were considered but also the results of scholarship. Yet the official version remained unchanged. When the time was ripe for a new English Bible (The Revised Version, published in 1881), the Rules given to the Revisers were almost identical with those of the Authorized Version, "To introduce as few alterations as possible into the text of the Authorized Version, consistently with faithfulness."

However when in 1946 and 1947 all the churches in England decided upon a new translation, the translators "were subject to no such limitation." In the Introduction to the New English Bible published in 1961 they discuss the principle of their translation, "The present translators were enjoined to replace Greek constructions and idioms by those of contemporary English ... Fidelity in translation was not to mean keeping the general framework of the original intact while replacing Greek words by English words more or less equivalent . . . We have conceived our task to be that of understanding the original as precisely as we could (using all available aids), and then saying again in our own native idiom what we believed the author to be saying in his."

It is interesting to note that the principle of translation as expressed in these sentences is similar to the one found in Edward HARWOOD'S version of 1768 quoted above. It is, however, noteworthy that unlike WORSLEY'S "private" version, official versions are made by groups of translators working together closely, "for where two or three are gathered together in my name there am I in the midst of them." The method of translating an official version has become almost identical with that of rendering profane literature. This is possible because in Protestant communities only the Hebrew and Greek texts can serve as a basis of discussion of theological questions and therefore even the best versions cannot replace the original. The new versions are no longer word-for-word translations and they are not archaic

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

in their wording. They are clear and can be understood by the public. This goes for the Protestant as well as for the Roman-Catholic world.

English Roman-Catholic Translations

The Rheims and Douay Bible 1582-1596, based on the text of the Vulgate, is a word-for-word translation. In the Encyclical Letter *Providentissimus Deus* given by Pope LEO XIII on November 18, 1893, it is expressly stated, "For although the meaning of the Hebrew and the Greek is substantially rendered by the Vulgate, nevertheless whenever there may be ambiguity or want of clearness, the 'examination of older tongues' to quote ST. AUGUSTINE will be useful and advantageous." This letter and other Encyclical Letters have opened the door to new translations.

The title-page of Monsignor KNOX' *The Holy Bible* of 1955 reads, "A Translation from the Latin Vulgate in the Light of the Hebrew and Greek Originals. *Authorized* (the italics are mine) by the Hierarchy of England and Wales and the Hierarchy of Scotland." In the Preface by the Archbishop of Westminster the following words are found, ". . . our Catholic people have great need of a profound spirituality based upon knowledge and love of God ... We would see a Bible in every home, a Bible which is read regularly and which has a real bearing upon the life of those who use it." This version renders the sense rather than the word. Monsignor KNOX follows H. BELLOC'S precept given to the translator of secular literature, "What would an Englishman have said to express this?"

Other Important Early Bibles in Principal European Languages

Other important and early Bible translations or publications in some of the principal languages of Europe include the following, listed by countries:¹⁶

Switzerland

1524 LUTHER'S New Testament printed.

1529 The Zürich Bible, LUTHER'S version with Leo JUDA'S translation of the Prophets and Apocrypha. Last revision in 1931.

The Scandinavian Countries

Protestant versions:

Denmark: 1529, New Testament by PEDERSEN based on the Vulgate, ERASMUS and

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

LUTHER; 1550, by order of King CHRISTIAN III, based on LUTHER'S version; 1607, by Bishop Hans Poulon RESEN, made from Hebrew and Greek, often revised, last revision in 1872. An entirely new translation, 1931-1948.

Sweden: 1526-1541, following LUTHER'S version, revised in 1915.

Norway: 1891-1904.

Catholic versions:

Denmark: 1893 and 1931.

Norway: 1902 and 1938.

Sweden: 1885.

The Netherlands, medieval translations in the thirteen and fourteenth centuries; *The Delft Bible*, printed in 1477.

Protestant versions: 1535, a translation of LUTHER'S text; 1554, a translation of ERASMUS' text; 1637, *Statenbijbel*, accepted by all the Reformed communities; 1939-1951 a new translation.

Roman-Catholic versions: 1548; a new translation has just been published.

France, Albigensian translation in the twelfth century.

Catholic versions: 1523-1528 by Jacques LEFÈVRE D'ÉTAPLES, often revised until the seventeenth century; 1667-1696 version of Port Royal made by the LEMAISTRE brothers. The principal translator was Isaac Louis LEMAISTRE, better known under the assumed name of LEMAISTRE DE SACY. Based on the Vulgate, it was an excellent translation, and has often been revised. Three modern translations: La Bible de Jérusalem 1947 to 1956; another version edited at the abbey of Maredsous, 1950; a third version under the patronage of Cardinal LIÉNART.

Protestant versions: 1535 Pierre Robert OLIVÉTAN, based on the Hebrew text and for the New Testament on ERASMUS and LEFÈVRE, re-edited and revised by among others J. CALVIN, Th. BEZA, and most important of all Jean-Frédéric OSTERVOLD of Neuchâtel in 1744; further revisions well into the twentieth century. Another translation by L. SEGOND, 1874-1880, revised in 1962.

Italy, Translations of the fourteenth century, probably going back to Waldensian versions of

the thirteenth century.

Roman-Catholic versions: Printed in 1471 by Niccolo MALERMI, often reprinted until 1773; 1776, by the archbishop Florence A. MARTINI.

Protestant versions: The Italian Protestants used the versions by Antonia BRUCCIOLI (1532) and Santas PAGNINUS (1528) before Giovanni DIODATI'S translation, printed in 1607.

Spain:

1422-1430, a translation made by Rabbi Mose ARRAGEL; 1478, a Catalan translation by Bonifacio FERRER, destroyed by the Inquisition in 1498; 1569, Spanish translation by Cassiodoro de REYNA, revised by Cipriano de VALERA in 1602; 1944 and 1947, two New translations by NÁCAR-COLUNGA and Bover CANTERA.

Notes

1. Professor of old-Germanic philology, Gothic and the older German language and literature.
2. This paper is largely dependent on my book *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation*, Cambridge (1955).
3. For the interpretation of this passage see R. H. Charles, *The Apocrypha*, vol. II, P. 121, note to 310.
4. See C. Rabin, "The Linguistics of Translation" in *Studies of Translation*, London (1958), especially pp. 133 ff.
5. Quoted in R. H. Hodgkin, *A History of the Anglo-Saxons*, third edition, Oxford University Press (1952), p. 620.
6. Cf. W. Levison, *England and the Continent in the Eighth Century*, The Ford Lectures (1943), Oxford 1946), *passim*, especially pp. 132ff.
7. Quoted from M. Deanesley, *The Lollard Bible and Other Medieval Biblical Versions*, Cambridge (1920), pp. 63 and 84.
8. For a more detailed description see M. Deanesley, *op. cit.*, *passim*, especially pp. 124-5, 296.

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

9. M. Deanesley, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-17; W. Schwarz, *op. cit.*, pp. 14, 58-60.
10. The translation is borrowed from M. Deanesley, *op. cit.*, p 92. For the interpretation of this determination and of the preface added later see *ibid.*, pp. 92-97.
11. Denys Hay, *The Italian Renaissance*, Cambridge (1961), pp. 10 ff.
12. For details of this important point, see W. Schwarz "Studies in Luther's Attitude towards Humanism," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N. S., VI, (1955), pp. 66-72.
13. For details see W. Schwarz, "Examples of Luther's Biblical Translation," *The Journal of Theological Studies*, N. S. VI (1955), pp. 199-209.
14. For details see Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts*, revised by A. W. Adams, London (1958), pp. 284-319.
15. *On Englishing the Bible*, London (1949), p. 13.
16. More details will be found in the following encyclopedias, s v. "Bible, Translation of:" *Encyclopedia Britannica (last edition)*, *Die Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* third edition, (1957), *Enciclopedia Cattolica* (1949-1954), A. Hauck, *Realencyklopädie für protestantische Religion und Kirche* (1896-1909).

THE HISTORY OF PRINCIPLES OF BIBLE TRANSLATION

Source : *Babel*, vol. 9, n^{os} 1-2, 1963, p. 5-22.