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Translators - Their Methods and their Problems   /1

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When I was a boy, the Authorized Version of 1611, the King James Version, reigned supreme. It was read at public worship, it was used in private devotions, we learnt long passages from it in the Public Elementary School. Occasionally James Moffatt /2 knocked at the church door. On rare occasions he made his way into the pulpit and many used his translation for private reading. But Moffatt never really dislodged the AV.

Today things are different. In the church where I worship the AV is used in the pulpit and in the pew. But a quick trip around the five churches in the immediate vicinity of this College reveals that there are FOUR versions in regular use. Two churches use Good News Bible, one the Revised Standard version, one the New International Bible and one the New English Bible - a pattern which, I'm sure, is not untypical throughout the wider church. Today, in fact, we have so many different versions of the Bible available to us that we can well understand Jerome's exasperation, when invited by Pope Damasus I in 382 to try to sort out the chaotic situation brought about by a surfeit of Latin translations on the market, he remarked: "Tot enim sunt exemplaria paene quot codices", /3 which could be roughly translated as: "There are just about as many different types of text as there are manuscripts." A few years ago there was published a little book with the intriguing title: Bible Translations - and how to choose between them. /4   I wonder if this is to be the fore-runner of a new quarterly magazine of the Consumers' Association, with a title like "BIBLE WHICH?" to set alongside "CAR WHICH?"!

I should like today then to say something about TRANSLATION, thinking in particular of some of the problems involved and at some of the methods translators employ. Of course when we talk about Bible Translations we usually think of modern versions, but let's remember that Bible Translations did not begin in our day - they have been going for a very long time. They have their origin in a situation where devout people want to be able to read or to listen to their sacred books in their own

tongue. This means that even before Christ came the OT had already been translated into Aramaic, Greek and perhaps Syriac. That process continued after the coming of our Lord, with the whole bible being translated into Syriac, Latin, Armenian, Georgian, and, as the Faith spread throughout the world, that translation process kept in step, though somewhat erratically, until today the scriptures, or parts of them, have been translated into many of the main languages and dialects of the world - 1849 to be precise, though that does leave quite a shortfall when we remember that there are approximately 5000 known languages in the world. In some ways, at least, the wish of the great Dutch scholar, Erasmus of Rotterdam, has been granted. In 1516 he said:

> "Christ desires his mysteries to be published abroad as widely as possible. I could wish that even all women should read the Gospel and St. Paul's epistles, and I would that they were translated into all the languages of all Christian people, that they might be read and known not merely by the Scots and Irish but even by the Turks and the Saracens. I wish that the farm worker might sing parts of them at the plough, that the weaver might hum them at the shuttle, and that the traveller might beguile the weariness of the day by reciting them." /5

Granted,then, that today we have the bible translated into many tongues, let us pause for a moment to consider these words "translate" and "translation", which so far we have been using so freely. When I translate something from one language to another, what am I actually trying to do? If I start from the word translate, trans is the Latin for "across", as in "Trans-World Airways," "across the world;" Latum comes from the Latin verb to carry.i.e. "to carry something across," "to carry something across from one language to another." In bible translation, then, the translator is taking something written in Hebrew or in Aramaic or in Greek, and carrying it across in the language of George or Pierre or Gina or Chong or Patricia or Rudolph or Vittoria....carrying it across in such a way that George or Pierre or Gina or Chong or Patricia or Rudolph or Vittoria hears it in his or her own tongue.

If that can be accepted as a working definition of "translation", our next question must be: <u>how</u> can this be achieved? There are basically two approaches to translation:

1. A literal, word-for-word translation, following rigidly the sentence structure and the word order of the language I am translating from, an approach which many of us may recall from our clandestine use of Kelly's <u>Keys to the Classics</u>, which provided us with a wooden, literal, word-for-word translation, as we attempted to accompany Caesar in his <u>Gallic Wars</u> - not unlike Inter-linear Versions of the Old or New Testament used by some students today.

2. Take a phrase or a sentence, and irrespective of the word order in the original sentence, pass on the <u>meaning</u> in the structure of the new language in such a way that the new hearer will not even be aware that he is listening to a translation.

In the first, you hold on to the mould of the old language; in the second, you break the mould of the old language and pour its contents into the mould of the <u>new</u> language.

These are the two extremes in translation, and it would be fair to say that all bible translations fall somewhere between these two poles. To illustrate, let me take an example of each of these two extremes, using the well-known passage in Hebrews 1.1-3 as our basic text.

1. <u>The Concordant Literal Version</u>, by A.E. Knoch, 1966
By many portions and many modes, of old, God, speaking to the fathers in the prophets, in the last of these days speaks to us in a Son, Whom He appoints enjoyer of the allotment of all, through whom he also makes the eons; Who, being the Effulgence of His glory and Emblem of His assumption, besides carrying on all by His powerful declaration, making a cleansing of sins, is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in the heights
/6

2. <u>Good News Bible</u>, 1976
In the past, God spoke to our ancestors many times and in many ways through the prophets, but in these last days he has spoken to us throughhis Son. He is the one through whom God created the universe, the one whom God

has chosen to possess all things at the end. He reflects
the brightness of God's glory and is the exact likeness of
God's own being, sustaining the universe by his powerful
word. After achieving forgiveness for the sins of
mankind, he is seated at the right hand of the Majesty
in the heights. /6

Both of these are translations. We could say, indeed,
that they are both correct, faithful, accurate translat-
ions. Yet merely to listen to them does reveal a massive
difference both in approach and end-product.
The first is a literal translation, following the
original doggedly, word for word, working on the basis of
"formal equivalence." The second translation would say
that its aim is to express the meaning "in a manner and
form easily understood by the readers," on the basis of
"dynamic equivalence." And, as I have suggested, all
bible translations will fall somewhere between those two!
With this in mind, then, let us look a little more
closely at the translator and say some things about him.

1.   He must know both languages intimately. Augustine,
in the fifth century, made a scathing comment in this
connection. Talking about the early Latin translations
from the Greek, he complained: "no sooner did anyone
gain possession of a Greek manuscript, and imagine himself
to have any facility in both languages (however slight that
might be) than he made bold to translate it." /7
Like the translator Augustine had in mind, many of us
may feel thoroughly incompetent in two languages as we
struggle with Hebrew and Greek and we wonder if it is
possible to be competent in any other language than our
own! Can anyone ever learn another man's language
thoroughly? Indeed, is there such a thing as true biling-
ualism? Two things make it very difficult for anyone
to attain absolute competence in another language as well
as his own:
(a) There is the idiom factor or the cultural
factor. Language is related in some way to the culture
from which it springs. Can we therefore know thoroughly
the language of a people whose culture we only know at
second-hand? It is when we look at the peculiar idioms
of a language that we begin to see some of the
difficulties, for different groups of people from

different cultural backgrounds have different ways of
saying things. Let me take one simple example: I may say
to my German friend, "I'll meet you at the front gate at
half three." I arrive at the front gate at half three to
find a rather irate Hans demanding, "What kept you? You're
an hour late." I suddenly remember that when I say half
three, I mean half past three, but when a German says half
three he means half before three, what we would call half
two!   Having calmed him down, I invite him to my room for
a cup of coffee. As we chat, I tell him of a rather
stupid thing I've done, adding: "I'm in the soup now,
alright!" He looks at me perplexed, and says: "But I
thought we were having coffee, not soup! The conversation
goes on and Hans tells me of a silly mistake he has just
made, and remarks: "Ah, now, I am sitting in the ink."
It's my turn to look puzzled! Then we both burst out
laughing as we realize that we are each expressing our
plight by using two entirely different idioms. "I'm in
the soup" (English) = "I'm sitting in the ink" (German).
Can you ever adequately translate idioms into another
language? Think of some of our own rich local idioms?
How would you ever translate these adequately into e.g.
Hungarian? We have: "The crack at John's wake was grand.
Sure he had a heart of corn." "He didnt come within a
bagle's gowl of it;" "I'm not at myself today;" "He's
gone bananas."

Every language has its own idioms, its own peculiar
ways of saying things - perhaps they start as slang, then
become colloquialisms, and finally become imbedded in the
mainstream of the language. Hebrew and Greek had their
idioms, their peculiar ways of saying things too! When we
meet such idioms in the bible, how should we deal with
them? Should we translate them literally, or should we
try to find the nearest corresponding expression in our
language and use it? For example, after his call to be a
prophet, God says to Jeremiah: "Gird up your loins,"
/8 a picture taken from Near Eastern forms of dress.
As one commentator puts it: "that is, that the loose
skirts of the flowing robe must be gathered into a belt
for hard work or vigorous activity." /9   Should we then
translate it literally, "Gird up your loins," and leave it
like that, hoping that our reader will know, or that some
one will explain to him, exactly what is meant? Or should

we use a corresponding expression in our own language
which expresses the thought involved but in a phrase that
we dont need to have explained to us, for example: "Roll
up your sleeves." The AV has: "Gird up thy loins." Like-
wise the RSV, except that "thy" becomes "your", as is the
case also with the JPS translation. But some of the other
recent translations move away from that picture:
NEB: "Brace yourself."
NIV: "Get yourself ready."
GNB: "Get ready."
NJB: "Prepare yourself for action."
   Or what about that strange expression in Ezek.8.17?
Ezekial castigates God's people for the way they have
behaved and ends his comments by adding, "AND LO! THEY
HAVE PUT THE BRANCH TO THEIR NOSE." Here clearly is a
Hebrew idiom. Most English versions leave it like this,
though one or two try to give a corresponding English
expression, e.g., NEB: "While they seek to appease me;"
or GNB: "Look how they insult me in the most offensive
way possible." The real problem here is that we are not
sure what the Hebrew idiom means! And the uncertainty of
the meaning of the original idiom is highlighted by the
fact that the two translations just quoted use two
entirely opposite expressions to translate it! Idioms
show clearly the problems involved in translating from one
language to another and sharpen the question if it is
really possible for anyone to know two languages
sufficiently thoroughly as to be able to translate
perfectly from one language to another.
   (b) Another thing which makes it difficult to know
another language intimately is the structural factor.
Every language has its own special structural features.
Hebrew is no exception. Let me mention five peculiarities
which Hebrew has:

(i) Hebrew usually puts the verb before the subject.
Thus, the phrase, "The man said to his wife," if spoken by
an Israelite in the OT would be: "said the man to his wife."
Take, for example, Gen.8.1-3. Translating it exactly in
the form in which it stands in Hebrew, we would have the
following: "And remembered God Noah and all the beasts
and all the cattle that were with him in the Ark. And made
blow God a wind over the earth and subsided the waters.

And were closed the fountains of the deep and the windows
of the heavens and was restrained the rain from the
heavens and receded the waters from the earth
continually." Verb before subject throughout. Even
though in certain circumstances the English language
follows this Verb-Subject order, fortunately most trans-
lators follow the more usual Subject-Verb pattern in
translating straightforward sentences like the above.

(b) The structure of a sentence in Hebrew is very
different from the sentence structure in English. At
school we were urged to follow the classical model - to
use subordinate clauses clustered round one main clause.
For example: "Although we brought the horse to the
water we were unable to make him drink because he had had
a drink already." If we dared use the word and in such a
sentence we were forcibly reminded that it was bad
English usage. Hebrew, by contrast, loves the word and
(Waw)! Hebrew is in its element when it takes a
handful of main clauses and strings them together with
a whole series of "ands", and, horror of horrors, it
often begins a sentence with "and"; indeed, on one or
two occasions it begins a book with this three letter
word. In Genesis 1, for example, there are thirty-one
verses: thirty of these begin with "and"; in the whole
of the chapter, the word "and" occurs one hundred and
one times. Though when you look more closely, you real-
-ize that while "and" is always a possible translation
for the Hebrew word "Waw", under certain conditions and
in certain contexts, it can mean "but", "if", "though",
etc. When you read 1 Samuel 1. 19-20, you see where
other words could be substituted for "and", enriching
the meaning of the sentence. "And they rose early in
the morning and they worshipped before the Lord and
they returned and they came to their home at Ramah and
Elkanah knew his wife Hannah and the Lord remembered her
and it came to pass at the appropriate time and Hannah
conceived and she bore a son and she called his name
Samuel..." If we were translating this sentence into
English, should we leave it as it stands in the Hebrew
order, with its ten main clauses and its ten ands, or
should we try to put it more into our own way of saying

it?

Or take a more complex example.   II Chronicles 23 tells
the story of the downfall of the queen mother Athaliah.
She had earlier taken over the throne, killing rings round
her in the process.   After some years, however, there is a
conspiracy to oust her, led by Jehoiada, the priest. Ch.23
gives full details of the stratagems used to entrap her,
and in vs 15 we read: "And she went into the entrance of the
 horsegate   of the king's house. And they slew her there."
Jehoiada then takes certain precautionary measures to ensure
that there is no counter revolution and the new king is
enthroned.   The last verse of the chapter reads: "And all
the people of the land rejoiced and the city was quiet <u>and</u>
<u>Athaliah they killed with the sword</u>."   But Athaliah had
been killed six verses earlier!   This cant be just
repetition for effect, for the whole time sequence would
thereby be put out of joint.   So how do we translate it?
The answer to the problem seems to lie in the little word
<u>and</u>. When you look at the context, "the city being quiet"
and "Athaliah's death" are joined by the word <u>and</u>, and
would seem therefore to be somehow related.   Most
translations try to bring out this relationship by
substituting some other word for the word <u>and</u>.   Thus, AV:
"And the city was quiet after that they had slain
Athaliah with the sword."   Which seems to suggest that
there had been unrest in the city but now that the cause
of the unrest had been killed, all was quiet. A similar
approach is taken by RSV,NIV, NJB and GNB.   But J.M. Myers
brings in a slightly different emphasis: "And the city
was quiet although they had slain Athaliah with the sword",
which suggests that the expected backlash from Athaliah's
supporters had failed to materialize.   /10 And the NEB
takes an entirely different line.   It finishes the story
with a sentence: "The whole people rejoiced and the city
was tranquil." Full stop.   Then it adds the next sentence
as a summing up of the whole chapter, a kind of summary
statement: "That is how Athaliah was put to the sword."
All of this raises the question: Should the translators
have simply translated the Hebrew letter <u>Waw</u> as <u>and</u> and
left us to interpret it as we wanted.   Or were they right
to do the interpreting for us - and give us at least three
different interpretations? But we'll come back to this.

(iii) Hebrew poetry is different from our poetry. Now
this would deserve a lecture on its own and I shall touch
on it only briefly. Time was when rhyme was a device
liberally used in poetry, Take the first verse of the old
ballad "Johny Sands";

> "A man whose name was Johny Sands
> had married Betty Haig.
> Although she brought him gold and lands
> She proved a terrible plague."

Hebrew, on the other hand, was not terribly concerned with
rhyme! Instead, it took two parallel ideas and set them
alongside each other in two successive lines - if you
like, a rhyming of ideas rather than a rhyming of words.
Today, of course, hardly any of our English poetry rhymes
anyhow, so the rhyming hurdle is one that the translator
from Hebrew to English doesnt have to clear anymore.
Suffice to say that, in general, translating poetry from
one language to another presents more difficulties than
any other structural feature.

(iv) Several times in OT poetry we have examples of
acrostics. We are all familiar with a kind of acrostic
used in children's books: "A is for Apple, B is for Bear,
C is for.....(though we do have problems when we get to
Z once we have used up Zoo, Zebra, Zest), The Hebrew
Acrostic is a poem where each new line or section begins
with the next letter of the Hebrew alphabet. We find this
especially in the book of Lamentations and in some
Psalms, in particular Psalms 119, which is a most involved
acrostic poem. It has one hundred and seventy-six verses,
divided up into twenty-two sections, each section having
eight verses. In the first section, verses 1-8, each
of the eight verses begins with the first letter of
the Hebrew alphabet, Aleph. In the second section,
verses 9-16, each of these eight verses begins with the
second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, Beth... and so on
right through the twenty two sections, there being twenty
two letters in the Hebrew alphabet. Should the translator
try to follow some similar pattern in his translation?
Or should he simply disregard it but give a nod in the
direction of the alphabetic scheme by putting the
appropriate Hebrew letter at the head of the twenty two
sections, as most translations do?

(v) <u>Word Play</u>   Here, in a sense, form and content come
together, so we can't call it a pure structural feature.
But it does present a problem for the translator! The OT
does not use rhyme overmuch, but occasionally it does
indulge in Word Play. Let me take two examples.

At the end of the great Song of the vineyard in Isaiah
5, the prophet drives his message home in verse 7. "For
the vineyard of the Lord of Hosts is the house of Israel,
and the men of Judah are his pleasant planting: and he look-
ed for justice,   but behold bloodshed; for righteousness
but behold a cry." Very powerful stuff! but not half as
powerful as in the Hebrew; in Hebrew justice is "<u>mishpat</u>;"
bloodshed is "<u>mispach</u>;" righteousness is "<u>tsedaqah</u>"; and a
cry for help from oppression is "<u>tseaqah</u>." This, then, is
how the Israelite member of Isaiah's audience would have
heard the operative words. "For the vineyard of the Lord
of Hosts is the house of Israel, and the men of Judah are
his pleasant planting. And he looked for <u>mishpat</u>, but
behold, <u>mispach</u>, for <u>tsedaqah</u>, but behold,<u>tseaqah</u>." How
can a translator reproduce that in his own language? And
yet how much of its effectiveness is lost when he can't.

One further example from the same prophet: in chapter
7, in the famous interview between Isaiah and king Ahaz,
who has decided to put his faith in the armies of the
king of Assyria rather than in the armies of the living
God, Isaiah warns him of the consequences of such an
approach. In verse 9 we read: "If you will not believe,
surely you will not be established." True, no doubt, but
lame in English when compared with the Hebrew. In Hebrew
the word for "believe" is "<u>taaminu</u>", and the word for
"be established" is "<u>teamenu</u>". This, then, is what Ahaz
heard: <u>im lo TAAMINU, ki lo TEAMINU</u>. Should the trans-
lator try to reproduce that wonderful word play, or
should he just leave it? Some translators do make a real
attempt to carry over this word play into English: "No
confiding, no abiding." /12 J.E. McFadyen: "Your faith
must firmly hold, if ye yourselves be held;" /13 G.H.
Box: "No strong trust, no trusty stronghold;" /14 NIV:
"if you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not
stand at all;" or G.A. Smith: "If you will not have
faith, you cannot have staith," /15 which is all right for
the Scots who would understand the last word, but if you
have to insert a footnote giving the meaning of "staith",

the effect of this excellent word play . would be
correspondingly diminished!

My first rather elongated point, then, is that the
translator must know both languages intimately, but that
there are two factors which make this difficult for him -
the idiom factor, and the structural factor. Perhaps then,
we ought to settle for some such statement as this: while
it is wellnigh impossible to have absolute competence in
two languages because of idiomatic and structural differ-
ences, it is none the less necessary for the translator
to be as competent as possible in both languages, the
language he is translating from and the language he is
translating into.

2. Language is alive. It is generative. It is always
on the move....constantly changing, or taking an old word
and giving it new meaning, or inventing new words. If you
are part of the group using that language you adapt to
such changes automatically and unconsciously. But if you
are not part of that particular group, tread carefully.
Let me take the word "bastard" as an example, a word which
we find in the AV three times. The Concise Oxford
Dictionary which I bought as a student gives the meaning
as follows: "(Child) born out of wedlock or of adultery,
illegitimate." Today, however, the word has a much
broader meaning. This broader meaning is reflected in the
additional entry in the current edition of that same
dictionary, which says "a disliked or unfortunate person."
So, if we hear seomone say to another, "He's a proper
bastard," that does not mean that he is indeed
illegitimate, it means simply that he is a proper
so-and-so! Now, we know automatically that there has been
a shift of meaning. But Noel Barber, in his book on the
Malayan emergency, 1948-1960, The War of the Running Dogs,
/16   tells of someone who was not aware of this shift in
meaning. Sir Gerald Templer was High Commissioner, a
soldier's man, known for his blunt, straight from the
shoulder speaking and his no-nonsense approach. He was
speaking to a group of village Chinese home guards, who
had been intimidated, and who, as a result were now
failing to play their full part in the campaign. He tore
a strip off them in the course of which he called them a
"lot of bastards." His interpreter translated this with

the words: "His Excellency informs you that he knows none
of your mothers and fathers were married when you were
born." Not noticing the puzzled expression on their faces,
Sir Gerald continued with this dire warning: "You may be
bastards, but you'll find out that I can be a bigger one,"
which his interpreter duly relayed with the words: "His
Excellency does admit, however, that his father was also
not married to his mother." Yes, one does need to be
careful when words have a semantic transformation!

We are aware of these changes in meaning, too, when we
listen to the story of the Great Passover Feast, held after
Josiah's Reform in II Chronicles 35. We prick up our ears,
when we hear in verse 13 of the AV: "And they roasted the
passover with fire according to the ordinance: but the
other holy offerings sod they in pots, and in caldrons and
in pans." We use the word"sod" today, but not quite in this
sense! Sod is, of course, in older English, the past
participle of the verb "to seethe", or "to boil." Today we
might speak metaphorically of a seething caldron but we do
not talk about seething the kettle or about having a
"seethed egg" for breakfast. The verse is simply telling
us that the passover lamb was roasted but the other
offerings were boiled! Or when the Psalmist in Psalm 26.2
exclaims: "Examine me, O Lord, and prove me: try my reins
and my heart." we wonder if he had some horsey metaphor in
mind. No! "Reins" is an old English word, coming from the
Latin renes, meaning "kidneys," still surviving as an
adjective "renal." We talk about the renal unit in our
local hospital. So the Psalmist is asking God to try his
kidneys, and (to go back to our earlier point on cultural
changes) when we remember that the "kidneys" for the Hebrew
were sometimes thought as the seat of the emotions and
especially of the conscience, we begin to see what the
Psalmist was getting at.

Though, occasionally, an ancient expression may sudden
ly take on a fresh meaning in a new context. In 1 Tim.
3.13, according to the NIV, the deacon is assured that if
he does his work well, he will gain an excellent standing.
In the AV translation of that verse, we are told that if
the deacon does his work well, he will "purchase to himself
a good degree." Which might seem a very modern way of
putting it!

Thus language is alive - it's on the move, getting rid

of some old words, modifying the meaning of others and
creating new ones to keep pace with modern developments in
life and science, technology and thought. Yes! language
is on the move - but most of us are conservative at heart.
We resist change - we don't want to depart too far from
the old forms of expression which, of course, at one time
were quite new forms of expression! We want, naturally,
to hold on to words and expressions which, for us, have
been hallowed by usage and experience. Perhaps some of
us, particularly of my generation, brought up on the AV,
are afraid that, if we try to modify it or update it, we
have lost some of its mystery, some of its sacredness.
We want the holy things of our faith to be that little
bit remote, mysterious. We want to preserve, if we may
use Rudolph Otto's phrase, that mysterium tremendum et
fascinans and we believe we can best preserve it by using
slightly archaic and remote forms of expression. Eugene
Nida tells of a group of Christians in Guatamala, who
stopped a missionary in his tracks and asked him not to
attempt to explain to them "the truths of their faith"
on the ground that if such matters could be explained and
understood, they would then "cease to be religion." /17
We are sometimes like that when it comes to bible
language. We tolerate archaic language in the Bible
which we would never allow in everyday speech. As Ronald
Knox, writing after the Second World War remarked: "We
should have thought it odd if we had read in The Times,
'General Montgomery's right hand has smitten Rommel in
the hinder part;' but if we get that sort of thing in
the Bible we take it, like Rommel, sitting down." /18

3. Translators are not machines. They are people with
personalities, peculiarities and prejudices. No matter
how objective they try to be in their work, some of that
personality, peculiarity and prejudice rubs off on their
translation.   There is a subjective element in trans-
lation. Objective translation, like presuppositionless
exegesis, is an ideal much sought after but rarely
attained - which is perhaps a good thing, for if trans-
lation did not have this personal element built into it,
we would end up with a product which would be both flat
and insipid. But if we allow personality to enter, we

do run the risk that occasionally - perhaps unconsciously -
a translator may grind his own theological axe in his
translation. He may occasionally give a slant which is a
reflection of his own attitudes, or he may not just let the
text speak for itself. He may make it speak for himself!
For example, if I am translating Paul's letter to the
Philippians, and in the very first verse, when faced with
the word episkopos, will my views on the nature of the
church have any effect on my rendering of this word? Will
my translation give the word bishop or overseer? Was
Martin Luther right when, in translating Paul's letter to
the Romans at 3.28, he said that a man is justified
allein durch den Glauben, through faith allein, through
faith alone, where the Greek reads that a man is justified
pistei, by faith.   The logic of Luther's translation, in
adding the word alone, is no doubt on the right lines. But
is that letting the text speak for itself, or, bearing in
mind the context of Luther's controversies, is it a way of
underlining what he thinks is important in the text?

Or, again, irrespective of one's views on sacrifice in
Israel, is the NIV right in translating Jeremiah 7.22,
which in the Hebrew text seems to read as follows: "For I
did not speak with your fathers, and I did not command
them, on the day that I brought them out of Egypt,
concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices. But this
command I gave them, Obey my voice..." Is the NIV right to
insert the little word "just" - as follows: "For when I
brought your forefathers out of Egypt and spoke to them, I
did not just give them commands about burnt offerings and
sacrifices, but I gave them this command, Obey me..."

Or to take one final, and much better known verse,
Psalm 23.6, whose last sentence we all know as: "And I will
dwell in the house of the Lord for ever." So runs the AV,
and many other translations. Yet our English expression
"for ever" usually means "for now and for eternity." But
the Hebrew expression here means basically: "for a
length of days," "for a long time." The implication of that
may be "Yes! that state of affairs, where I am dwelling in
the house of the Lord, will indeed continue - in the
spiritual sense, and I shall remain in God's presence for a
long time, for the rest of my life - indeed, for ever and
ever!"

Perhaps Ronald Knox was right when he said: "You
cannot be a translator without being, to some extent, an
interpreter." /19 And this is especially true in those
places in the Bible where there is some ambiguity or
problem in the text before us. Sometimes our interpret-
ation may be well founded; at other times it may be, at
best, speculation. Let me take just one example:

As a schoolboy I went once with my friend, who was a
member of the Church of Ireland, to his church. As we
sang the Te Deum, somewhat haltingly, I confess, at one
point we sang: "Holy, holy, holy, Lord God of Sabaoth."
Cycling home together afterwards we wondered who or what
Sabaoth might be - neither of us had the slightest idea.
Many years later I discovered what this strange word
meant. "The Lord God of Sabaoth" - "Sabaoth" is simply
the transliteration of the Hebrew word צְבָאוֹת , a
plural "hosts." I suppose Lord God of hosts sounds more
majestic than Lord God of armies! But what does that
mean? The God of the armies of Israel? Or was it a hint
that he was the God also of the cosmic armies - the sun,
moon and stars? Or maybe it meant that he was the God
also of the heavenly armies, the angels. But how should
we translate this expression today? "Lord God of
Sabaoth" is meaningless unless you know some Hebrew. In
that the word "host" is no longer used in the sense
found here, should we say "Lord God of armies?" But
that might suggest that the church militant has also
become the church military. So if we can't translate it
satisfactorily in a literal way, should we use a word
which represents our interpretation of the phrase? Thus,
if he is the God of all the armies - human, cosmic,
angelic - then indeed he must be all-powerful, almighty.
The Lord God of armies becomes "Lord God Almighty."
That's not a translation - that's an interpretation.
Is that a legitimate way to handle this problem? Oddly
enough, by using the word "Almighty", that's how the
ancient Greek translation, the Septuagint, translated
it. And what of the moderns? A random sample reveals
that in Isaiah 6.3 where we meet the phrase, "Holy, holy,
holy, Lord God of Sabaoth," AV, ARSV, NEB, and JPS
retain the rendering "Lord of Hosts"; The NJB, oddly
enough, has the word which raised the question in my

mind first - Sabaoth, while the NIV and GNB have "Lord
Almighty!" So, "Lord of Armies" becomes "Lord Almighty."
"You cannot be a translator, without being, to some
extent, an interpreter!" It is not without significance
that, in non-biblical parlance, the word used today to
describe a translator is, in fact, Interpreter!

Translators are not machines. They are people and some-
times they want to spell out a little more clearly just
what they feel the text means...giving the text a helping
hand, as it were!

To sum up! I've tried to draw attention to some of the
things involved in translation, especially translation of
the Bible, with perhaps a little more emphasis on the OT.
I've looked at two different approaches to translation.
And I've suggested:

1. That the translator must know intimately the language
he is translating from and the language he is translating
into, if indeed this is possible, allowing for idiomatic
and structural factors;

2. That language is alive, generative, always on the
move, but we're sometimes rather reluctant to let our
Bible English move with the times;

3. That translators are people and, therefore, to some
extent, interpreters.

I have no theological axe to grind today, nor am I
acting as sales representative for any of the translations
I've referred to. Indeed I find often that, by looking
at how different translators translate the same verse, I
discover a new and richer meaning I had been unaware of.

But, bearing in mind the large number of different
translations in use today, that indeed, since the Second
World War, they have become fruitful and multiplied, is it
now time to sit back and take stock and ask:

1. Do we want to keep the AV as the AV?

2. Do we want to take one of these many modern versions
and make it our new AV?

3. Do we want to use one or other of these modern
versions as our judgment or the judgment of our minister
dictates?

4. Do we want on the basis of all these to bring out a

new AV?

Notes

AV:	Authorized Version 1611
RSV:	Revised Standard Version 1952
NEB:	New English Bible 1965
GNB:	Good News Bible 1976
NJB:	New Jerusalem Bible 1985
JPS:	Tanakh (Jewish Publication Society) 1985
NIV:	New International Version 1979

1. A slightly revised version of the Annual Public Opening Lecture delivered in Union Theological College, Belfast, in October 1987. On the whole the "Lecture style" has been retained.

2. A reference to the popular translation of James Moffatt, A New Translation of the Bible (1928)

3. Jerome, Preface to the Gospels, quoted in F.F. Bruce, The Books and the Parchments, Fourth Edition (Basingstoke 1984), 191

4. Alan S. Duthie, Bible Translations and how to choose between them. (Exeter, 1985).

5. From Erasmus's preface to his Greek New Testament of 1516, quoted in F.F. Bruce, The English Bible (New & Revised Edition) (London 1970), 29.

6. A.E. Knoch, Concordant Version of the Sacred Scriptures (1926,1944,1966). This excerpt is from the 1966 Edition. Quoted in Alan S. Duthie, op.cit.,107 In chapter 14, Duthie uses various translations of this passage to illustrate different approaches to translation.

7. Augustine, On Christian Doctrine, 2.16, quoted in F.F. Bruce, The Books and the Parchments, op.cit. 192

8. Jeremiah 1.17

9. G.J. Polkinghorne commenting on this idiom in 1 Peter 1.13 in G.C.D. Howley (ed), A Bible Commentary for Today (London 1979), 1633f

10. J.M. Myers, II Chronicles (AB) (New York 1965), 129

11.   Joe McPartland (ed), The Ulster Reciter (Belfast 1984), 64

12.   W.F. Bade, quoted in J.E. McFadyen; see next note 199

13.   J.E. McFadyen, Israel in Modern Speech (London 1918) 32.

14.   G.H. Box, The Book of Isaiah (London 1908) 47.

15.   G.A. Smith, The Book of Isaiah I (London 1927) 104

16.   Noel Barber, The War of the Running Dogs (London 1971) 182

17.   E.A. Nida, Toward a Science of Translating (London 1964), 46.

18.   R.A. Knox, On Englishing the Bible (London 1949), 7.

19.   R.A. Knox, op.cit. 21