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The Changing of the Host:
Translation and Linguistic History

For Europe the Bible has always been a translated book. More than that: it is a book whose translated status has always been a conspicuous part of its social, literary, and even religious identity. Almost every line of the text reminds us that it is about the people of another time and place who belonged to other kinds of societies from our own and who spoke different languages from ourselves. We have grown so accustomed to this curious fact that it is worth pausing for a moment to call attention to the obvious. If we compare the Bible with, say, the Koran as Holy Books, we find at once that there is one very striking difference. Whatever its degree of borrowing from the Bible and other earlier writings, the Koran is mediated to the Islamic world in the same Arabic in which it was written by the prophet Mohammed. A Mohammedan, whether in Glasgow, Ankara, Khartoum, or Jakarta, is obliged to pray in the original and therefore sacred language dictated to the founder of his faith, it is said, by the Archangel Gabriel for that purpose – and for that reason there must be no tampering with the word of God. Three quarters of the Christian Bible, by contrast, is acknowledged even by its most fundamentalist adherents to be originally the scriptures of another religion. Moreover, it was never a linguistically homogenous whole.

Though what we now call the Old Testament was mostly written in Hebrew, substantial parts of it are translations or paraphrases from yet other earlier holy books – Cananite, Mesopotamian or Egyptian, for instance. Indeed, since it seems to have originated as a critical and often hostile commentary on those earlier religious writings, there is a very real sense in which the Bible can be said to owe its very origins to intertextuality. By the time the New Testament came to be written, however, the vernacular language of the Jews was Aramaic, so that even in the Synagogues the Hebrew scriptures had to be read either by means of paraphrases into that language, called *Targums,* or, in Greek-speaking areas, by the Greek translation called the *Septuagint.* If we assume that Jesus and his immediate circle were themselves Aramaic-speakers, we have to note also the astonishing fact that the written accounts of his life and sayings are themselves, even in their earliest known forms, translations – since the remaining section of our Bible was written in a different language altogether, *koiné* Greek, a non-literary low-status form of the language spoken mostly by traders and non-Greeks throughout Asia Minor in the early years of the Christian era. This was a sign of the times, for within only a generation or so the early Christians had lost almost all contact with both Hebrew and Aramaic and were using either the *Septuagint* or the Old Latin and then the *Vulgate* versions. Thus what was in effect the first truly unified monoglot version of the Bible, was already itself not merely a translation, but a translation of a translation. Nor was this the end of the long proces

of textual accommodation. The English King James Authorized Version was, in turn, a political as well as a religious undertaking in which the Protestant appropriation and alteration of the Catholic *Vulgate* paralleled the earlier Christian appropiation and alteration of the Jewish scriptures.

This openly translated quality is more than just part of the 'givenness' of the Bible, it seems to flaunt itself as somehow central and intrinsic to our whole experience of it. As has already been suggested, it is possible that the origins of the Hebrew scriptures themselves lie not so much in a particular revelation as in a critical commentary on yet earlier texts or even unwritten traditions of neighbouring societies. A text that implies within itself the existence of other, prior, texts already also implicitly suggests multi-layered ways of reading. Moreover, it may also help to account for a curious contradiction in our attitude to the Bible that has had a profound effect on the development of many modern European languages – not least upon English. Though historically we may have had no difficulty in accepting the Bible's general relevance to our immediate situation – that it is, for example, about the Fall of Man or the Human Condition or the Forgiveness of Sins – we are also simultaneously aware that in some very profound sense it is *not about us*. It is an indication of the paradox we are engaged with that such a statement immediately sounds as if it is flying in the face of two millenia of often highly rhetorical and emotional polemic to the contrary. Nevertheless, in spite of jokes in the English-speaking world to the effect that God is clearly an Englishman, or that we prefer the *Saint* James' original version of the Bible to modern translations, we all of us know at the same time how essentially *alien* to us are the worlds of both the Old and New Testaments. The immense weight of traditional moralistic and devotional rhetoric urging us to see it as pointing to ourselves merely serves to illustrate the almost intractable scale of the original problem. To lose sight of this is to lose sight of what is happening in all those mediaeval stained-glass windows and illuminated manuscripts where the Patriarchs or Apostles are performing their typological roles in contemporary dress and setting; it is to lose sight of the corresponding deployment of biblical metaphor and typology not merely in religious and moral polemics but in the parallel contemporary discourses of politics, of trade, medicine, and everyday life. At Ranworth church, in north Norfolk, a fourteenth-century manuscript shows Jonah, dressed much as a local pason, being swallowed by a great fish from the nearby Broad. A panel of thirteenth-century stained glass in Canterbury Cathedral shows Jesus raising Jairus's daughter in a curiously perspectived mediaeval merchant's house. To James I of England, thundering against the filthy habit of smoking, it seemed entirely natural to compare the perverted lusts of smokers to the Children of Israel 'lusting in the wilderness after quails'. To Oliver Cromwell, fighting against Catholics in Ireland, it seemed no less appropriate to justify the brutal obliteration of Catholic society and, if necessary, the massacre of his opponents, by supporting the Protestant Plantation in Ulster with images of the Israelites occupying Canaan in the Book of Joshua.

Much critical ink has been split over the exact nature of mediaeval iconography, and only slightly less on the conventions of seventeenth-century political rhetoric, and it is not my purpose here to enter such specialist historical controversies. My point is rather to draw attention to the basic hermeneutical problem that underlies all such debates. Though the contemporary relevance of the Bible, its events, imagery and customs, was mediated as being self-evident and indeed as a quasi article of faith to our ancestors, influencing every level in their thinking from the broadest question of political policy and philosophical speculation, down to the minutest detail of their everyday lives, this sense of immediate relevance was achieved not in cooperation with the actual biblical texts with which they were confronted but rather *in the teeth* of their literal meaning, which, with stubborn consistency, proclaimed not merely their remoteness, but frequently as well their arcane and essentially unrepeatable nature. Indeed, the more we focus on this phenomenon, so familiar to any political, literary, or social historian that it normally passes witout a second glance, the odder we discover it to be.

Not the least odd is the fact that so many of the biblical translators themselves seem to be unaware of it. Take for instance this quotation from one of our leading experts on the subject, Eugene A. Nida.

> Translating consists in producing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first in meaning and secondly in style ...by 'natural' we mean that the equivalent forms should not be 'foreign' either in form... or meaning. That is to say, a good translation should not reveal its non-native source.[1]

Though I have used it before, the quotation is an important one in that it seems to encapsulate what might be described as a modern common-sense approach to biblical translation. Certainly it has been an influential one. Nida was a leading figure in the American Bible Society during the 1960s and 70s, and the person who, more than any other, was responsible for the theoretical underpinning of the Anglo-American *Good News Bible* – probably the most successful modern translation on the market.

Translation, for Nida, is basically a matter of 'finding the closest equivalence, in the host language for the message contained by the original source language. In developing this theme in a later book significantly entitled *Towards a Science of Translating,* he distinguishes between two basic kinds of equivalence, which he terms the 'formal' and the 'dynamic'. In his words, formal equivalence focuses attention on the message itself, in both form and content. In such translation one is concerned with such

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[1] Eugene A. Nida, 'Principles of Translation as Exemplified by Bible Translating', *On Translating* ed. Reuben A. Brower, Harvard Studies in Comparative Literature No.23, Cambridge, Mass. Harvard University Press, 1959, p. 19.

correspondences as poetry to poetry, sentence to sentence, and concept to concept.[2] The purpose of following such structural forms of the original is to reveal as much of the source language as possible. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, does not concern itself with forms, but aims to create in the host language an *equivalent effect* to that given in the source language. A classic example in biblical translation is that of the parable of the publican and the Pharisee in Luke Chapter 18 [9–14]. Now there is apparently a particular tribe in the Congo where beating one's breast is a sign of pride and agression; the corresponding outward sign of humility and repentence is to beat one's head with a club. In such a context, argues Nida, it is no good for the repentant sinner to beat his breast: it is head-clubbing or nothing. Similarly, there is in New Guinea, I am told, an isolated mountain tribe to whom sheep are quite unknown, but pigs are a much cherished domestic pet. By extension, for such a people, Christ has to become the Pig of God. Coming from a background of missionary translation Nida is understandably committed to the principle of dynamic equivalence, involving, in his words, the 'interpretation of a passage in terms of relevance to the present-day world, not to the Biblical culture'. Where there is conflict between meaning and style, 'the meaning must have priority over the stylistic forms'.[3] The task of the translator, he writes, is essentially one of 'exegesis', not of 'hermeneutics'.[4]

Now it is understandable why someone coming from Nida's professional concerns should be more interested in exegesis than hermeneutics, but such a translation philosophy, attractive as it may appear in its simple over-riding priorities, is, of course, (as I have argued elsewhere)[5] profoundly simplistic in its assumption of the un-complicated nature of the 'message' to be conveyed, and, as we have already seen, no less naïve in its approach to linguistic history. So far from biblical translation being best achieved by finding appropriate 'equivalencies', it has historically had its greatest impact on the host language in precisely those cases where there was already *no* existing appropriate equivalent available. Moreover this same process was already at work in the very biblical languages that Nida is apparently prepared to take as given. Thus the first major example of biblical translation, made around the third century B. C., was the Greek *Septuagint.* It was to reveal its 'non-native source' in a way that was to have a profound effect on the subsequent development of the Greek language – and ultimately therefore on the *koiné* Greek of the New Testament itself. The Hebrew word *kabod*

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[2] Eugene A. Nida, *Towards a Science of Translating,* Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1964. See also Nida and C. Tabor, *The Theory and Practice of Translation,* Leiden, E. J. Brill, 1969.

[3] Ibid. p. 19.

[4] *On Translation,* p. 15

[5] See Stephen Prickett, *Words and the Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation,* Cambridge University Press, 1986, p. 31.

comes from a root that had originally meant 'weight' but at some point after the time of Ezekiel it had acquired a meaning closer to our word 'glory' – including the visual aspects of light. It was translated in the *Septuagint* by the Greek word *doxa* which had originally meant something like 'appearance' or even 'reputation', but now rapidly appropriated these *visual* connotations to mean 'radiance' or 'splendour' – even in other contemporary pagan texts apparently unconnected with religious discourse. The cultural and linguistic distance between Hebrew and Greek, however great it may be to the historian, is of course as nothing to the temporal and cultural gulf that separates Hebrew from English. Yet the degree to which the latter has been modified by the former is out of all proportion greater. There is a story (possibly apocryphal) that when the translators of the *New English Bible* came to the parable of the Prodigal Son they decided to find out the modern English equivalent of the 'fatted calf'. Accordingly they consulted a butcher at Smithfield Market in London as to what one called a calf that had been specially fattened up for a particular occasion. He explained that the technical phrase was 'fatted calf' – and that it came from the Bible! Similarly, astonishingly little critical attention has been paid to the way in which Western Europe, with its cool temperate climate and abundant rainfall, was able to assimilate and successfully make use of the everyday imagery of a semi-nomadic near-eastern desert people as part of its own cultural and poetic heritage. Finally, let me return to what may at first sight seem perhaps a rather trivial example. As we have already mentioned, in his *Counterblast to Tobacco* (1604) King James Ist of England, (James VI to us Scots) very properly thunders against the self-indulgence of smokers 'lusting after' the weed 'as the Children of Israel did in the wilderness after quails...' Though the individual instance may be slightly mystifying, the rhetoric of this kind of charge is so familiar to us that we rarely stop to puzzle out the question of why the outraged King James, when he wished to invoke examples of ill-fated lust, should have resorted to the Bible and to this trope of the quails in Exodus Ch. 16 in particular?

The oddity of this reference is underlined by the fact that though the feeding of the Children of Israel in the desert is itself presented quite clearly as a one-off and not-be-repeated miracle, the provision of manna was at least in the form of a consistent daily supply over forty years sojourn in the wilderness, while the flight of quails was a once-only event, apparently to support God's proclamation to Moses in verse 12 that 'at even ye shall eat flesh'. A typical seventeenth-century commentary makes the standard typological connection with the manna:

> This Figure doth most lively represent to us the Holy Eucharist, as
> Jesus Christ himself witnesseth in the Gospel; and we may boldly say
> That how wonderful soever this Food of the Jews was, yet had not
> they in this, nor in any other miraculous Favours bestow'd upon them,
> any Advantage beyond the Christians, who do truly feed on the

Heavenly Manna, the Bread of Angels, which Jesus Christ gives to
those who are come forth out of Egypt, that is, from the Corruptions
and Defilements of the World, and wherewith he comforts and
supports them in the Wilderness of this Life, until they enter into the
true Land of Promise, as the Jews were maintained with Manna till
their entering into Canaan.

The condemnatiry note in James' diatribe comes, of course, from the fact that
those who tried to horde the manna found that it went bad on them, and this provides
the excuse for a rather nasty little anti-Jewish homily:

Wherefore also Christians ought to take great Care to acknowledge
and improve this divine Grace and Favour better than the Jews did,
and to tremble at the Thought of falling into a distaste and dislike of
this Heavenly Food, after their Example; who though at the first View
of this Miraculous Bread, they were struck with Wonder, yet, being
once accustomed to it, they preferred the Garlick and Onions of Egypt
before it.[6]

No seventeenth-century commentary that I have yet discovered makes a special
typological case for the quails on their own, and it is not, in any case, part of my theme
to speculate too closely on what exactly was in James's mind in referring to them. My
point is rather a threefold one: first, that such reference was second-nature both to the
King and to his intended audience, for whom it was much more than just an illustration;
it was, however inappropriate and baffling we may find it, a typological fixing, locating
an excessive love of tobacco within the entire divine scheme of the fall and redemption
of humanity. The Bible was a part the standard referential language of King and people
alike, and even the most trivial incident within its pages could thus legitimately be given
an immediate contemporary significance.

My second point, of course, is diametrically opposed to this. Nothing could in
fact be further removed from the experience of early Seventeenth century London than
the story of the wanderings of the Children of Israel in the desert, and the miraculous
processes by which we are told they were sustained for forty years. Everything about the
narrative of Exodus 16 serves to stress its extraordinary nature and its place as part of
the story of an alien and far-off people – even down to the explanation of such weights
and measures as omers and ephahs in verse 36. My third point arises directly from the
inherent tension between these two and concerns the way in which by the seventeenth
century it is a matter of historical record that the English language found itself shaped
and even dominated by the terms and figures of a book inherited from another time,

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[6] *The History of the Old and New Testaments Extracted from the Sacred Scriptures, the Holy Fathers, and
Other Ecclesiastical Writers...* Fourth Impression, London 1712. p. 50.

culture, and place – and mediated by means of not one translation, but several. In other words it concerns the very processes of linguistic change which Nida, and his fellow modern biblical translators, have neither understood in their own language nor sought to develop in other languages.

Our modern interest in linguistic change, like our idea of history in general, is essentially a Romantic and post-Romantic phenomenon, dating from no earlier than the second half of the eighteenth century. Though such acute observers as Coleridge were prepared to find in what he called the process of 'desynonymy' evidence for some kind of 'imanent will' or even Hegelian *geist* operating through the historical process of human consciousness,[7] later models tended to seek some more respectable scientific shape even when their motivation was no less overtly theological. Here, for instance, is J. B. Lightfoot, Hulsean and then later Lady Margaret Professor of Divinity in the University of Cambridge, before becoming Bishop of Durham. Lightfoot was, as it were, the Nida of his day: one of the prime movers in the creation of the *Revised Version* of the Bible of 1885, who had led the way with revisions of the New Testament during the 1870s. Like most biblical translators he also wrote about his theory of translation; where he broke new ground was in his modest willingness also to offer a coherent theory for the eventual success and acceptance of his translation. Both Jerome's *Vulgate* and the *Authorized Version,* he points out, were originally received with the same 'coldness' that now attends his *Revised Version;* both in time gained acceptance by a process which he does not hesitate to ascribe to a moral version of Darwinian Evolution.

> But the parallel may be carried a step farther. In both these cases
> alike, as we have seen, God's law of progressive improvement, which
> in animal and vegetable life has been called the principle of natural
> selection, was vindicated here, so that the inferior gradually disap-
> peared before the superior in the same kind; but in both cases also the
> remnants of an earlier Bible held and still hold their ground, as a
> testimony to the past. As in parts of the Latin Service-books the
> Vulgate has not even yet displaced the Old Latin, which is still
> retained either in its pristine or in its partially amended form, so also
> in our own Book of Common Prayer an older version still maintains
> its place in the Psalter and in the occasional sentences, as if to keep
> before our eyes the progressive history of our English Bible.[8]

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[7] See Prickett, op. cit. pp. 133–45.

[8] J. B. Lightfoot, *On a fresh Revision of the English New Testament,* Second Edn., Revised, New York. Harper and Rowe, 1873. I am indebted here, and in the following illustration, to Professor Ward Allen, who first drew my attention to this passage.

Since the Revised Version is in scholarly terms an 'improvement' on the Authorized one, it will eventually triumph by a process of moralized natural selection, where even the vestigial remains of the earlier versions in the prayerbook are given an improving significance.

Such theological faith in progress was not, however, allowed to pass unchallenged, even in late Victorian England. The Rev.E.W. Buelinger was no less for midable a scholar than Lightfoot. His *Critical Lexicon* and *Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament* was the result of nine years' research, and had established him as one of the foremost Greek scholars of his day. In 1898 he published a work called *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible* which, in spite of the slightly dilettante suggestions of its title, was a no less solid piece of scholarship – running as it did over 900 pages. In a section 'Changes of Usage of Words in the English Language' he notes gloomily 'It is most instructive to observe the evidence afforded by many of these changes as to the constant effect of fallen human nature; which, in its use of words, is constantly lowering and degrading their meaning.'[9]

Nor should we assume that this kind of debate between progressivists and deteriorationists belongs primarily to the nineteenth century. Peter Levi, for instance, in his 1974 book, *The English Bible,* agrees with the deteriorationists about the actual quality of the new translations but clings if not to a progressivist view, at least to a meliorist one, about the total cultural scene: 'it appears that the proper virtues of the language not altered so much even now, but have simply been disregarded, as happened often in the past, and will reassert themselves as they did then.'[10] On the other hand Kenneth Grayston, one of the leaders of the panel responsible for the *New English Bible* of 1970, writes with undisguised distste for the degenerate state of the contemporary English language he was forced to use in contrast with the 'richer denser' language available to Spencer, Sydney, Hooker, Marlowe and Shakespeare – not to mention the translators of the *Authorized Version.*[11]

Both these diametrically conflicting models, we note, behind their powerful scholarly and historical apparatus, are not just essentially theological in thrust, but specifically predestinarian – overtly in the nineteenth century examples, more covertly in the case of the twentieth century. The progress or deterioration of the English language, and indeed of human consciousness in general, is not so much a responsibility of individuals, nor even of the race, but of the iron laws of (according to taste) a progressively-orientated or a hopelessly fallen universe. Neither view seems to allow for

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[9] E. W. Bullinger, *Figures of Speech Used in the Bible,* London: Eyre and Spottiswoode, 1898 Reprinted Baker House Co, 1968. 15th printing March 1990. p. 856.

[10] Peter Levi, *The English Bible* 1534 – 1859. London: Constable 1974.

[11] Confessions of a Biblical Translator', *New Universities Quarterly,* vol 33, no.3, Summer 1979, p. 187.

any great degree of human spontaneity and creativity, or that the English language, so far from being a monolithic linguistic code, might be a chaotic palimpsest of many cultural codes and dialects. Certainly neither of these neo-Calvinisms allows for the success of deliberate and planned human intervention. Yet in the case of the Authorized Version – held up on all sides as the paradigm of a great translation – that is precisely what the historical evidence suggests. Let me try and sketch in something of the backround.

Even before the Reformation biblical translation was recognised to be a serious matter. An anonymous pre-Wyclif translator noted that in so doing he was risking his life.[12] He was probably right. In 1408 the Convocation at Oxford passed a Constitution forbidding anyone, on pain of excommunication, to translate any part of the scriptures unless authorized by a bishop. Not merely was no authorization subsequently given, but the Lollards were suppressed and to make the message even clearer, Wyclif's body at Lutterworth was dug up and thrown into the river. So clear indeed was that message for would-be translators that for more than a century, in spite of the invention of printing in the meantime, no further attempt at translation was made. Nor was the fate of Tyndale, who finished his translation of the New Testament in 1525, any more encouraging. He was kidnapped from Antwerp on orders from the Emperor, strangled, and burned at the stake.

An important feature of English translation from Tyndale onwards is the constant and cumulative use of earlier translated material where appropriate. The *Authorized Version* is, in fact, nothing less than a palimpsest of the best of previous translations, corrected and winnowed through almost a hundred years of development. Thus Coverdale's complete English Bible printed at Cologne in 1535 is based not so much on his use of Hebrew or Greek (of which he knew little) but on Tyndale, where extant, plus Latin and German sources. Partly because Coverdale was himself a fine prose stylist, the result was remarkably successful – and though it was not licenced by the newly Protestant Henry VIII, Anne Boleyn had a copy in her chamber.

In 1537, Tyndale's disciple John Rogers, in order to preserve the still unpublished sections of the Old Testament translated by his master, produced at Antwerp under the name of Thomas Matthew another Bible which incorporated all of Tyndale's work, and made up what was lacking from Coverdale. This, in turn, was revised by Coverdale and became the basis of the new official, or, because of its size, so-called 'Great Bible', which Thomas Cromwell in 1537 ordered to be installed in every church for the reading of laymen. With the accession of Mary, however, a large number of the copies of this Bible were burned. Many leading Protestants went into exile, and

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[12] J. F. Mozley, The English Bible before the Authorized Version', *The Bible Today*, Eyre and Spottiswode, 1955. p. 127.

it was one such, William Wittingham, who began in Geneva what was to be the first truly popular English translation. Among his companions in Geneva was John Knox, and to assist him in the translation was a team that included John Bodley and his son Thomas (later to be the founder of the library at Oxford). Calvin himself wrote the introduction. Though its notes were held to be objectionable and, indeed, more to the point, politically unacceptable, because of its pocket size and use of roman type it rapidly became the standard for English Bibles – far outselling the officially sanctioned Bishop's Bible.

The accession of James 1 to the combined throne of England and Scotland in 1603 was the signal for renewed pressure for puritan reforms in the liturgy and discipline of the Church of England. At a conference of divines convened by the king at Hampton Court later in that year the Bishop of London, Richard Bancroft, was at first against any new translation:'...if every man's humour might be followed, there would be no end of translating...' James, however, was in favour: 'I profess I could never yet see a Bible well translated in English; but I think that of all, that of Geneva is the worst. I wish some special pains were taken for an uniform translation; which should be done by the best learned in both universities, then reviewed by the bishops, presented to the privy council, lastly ratified by royal authority to be read in the whole church and no other'. 'But it is fit that no marginal notes be added thereunto', rejoined Bancroft. The king could not but agree: 'That caveat is well put in; for in the Genevan translation some notes are partial, untrue, seditious, and savouring of traitorous conceits...'

The ground rules for the new translation laid down as a result of this debate indicate very clearly what was to be expected of the projected *Authorized Version*. It was from the start deliberately conceived of not only as a document of political and theological compromise, but as a text that would refer to and incorporate previous texts. Among the instructions given to the translators were:

    I. The ordinary Bible read in the church, commonly called the Bishop's Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the original will permit.

    II. The names of the prophets and the holy writers, with other names in the text, to be retained as near as may be, accordingly as they are vulgarly used.

    III. The old ecclesiastical words to be kept, viz. as the word church not to be translated congregation &c.

    IV. When any word hath divers significations, that to be kept which hath been most commonly used by the most eminent fathers, being agreeable to the propriety of the place and the analogy of faith.

    V. The division of chapters to be altered either not at all, or as little as may be, if necessity so require.

VI. No marginal notes at all to be affixed, but only for the explanation of the Hebrew and Greek words which cannot without some circumlocution so briefly and fitly be expressed in the text...

... XIV. These translations to be used when they agree better with the text than the Bishop's Bible, viz. Tindal's, Matthew's, Coverdale's, Whitchurch, Geneva.[13]

Not merely was it intended that, where it was useful or politically expedient, it should be heavily reliant on the collective endeavours of earlier translations, this element of collectivity and consensus was heavily reinforced by an elaborate committee structure which ensured that each of the 47 appointed translators had his individual work reviewed by the others in his group, and the work of each group was then reviewed by all the other groups. Finally, two members from each of the three centres of translation, Cambridge, Oxford, and Westminster, were chosen to review the entire Bible and to prepare the work for publication in London. There was to be no authorization of individual idiosyncrasy in this version. It is frequently said that committees encourage mediocrity and are inimical to the production of great art or literature, but if a camel is a horse designed by a committee, then the *Authorized Verson* is the ultimate camel.

This explicit commitment both to tradition and consensus left its mark on the text in two very important ways. Firstly, it meant that the language of the translation was deliberately archaic. In a period when the English language was changing more rapidly than ever before or since, the Bible was set in words that were designed to stress the essential continuity of the Anglican settlement with the past by recalling the phraseology not merely of the familiar Geneva Bible, but of Coverdale and Tyndale – and beyond that even of the Vulgate itself. At a time of threatened disorder – that within a generation was to culminate in Civil War – the new Bible was a statement of stability, order, and above all continuity with the past. It was in the fullest sense of the word, a political document.

Secondly, there was no room for individual interpretation. Tyndale had drawn the wrath of Church and Government alike by translating the Latin *Ecclesia* as 'congragation' rather than 'Church'. In the volatile atmosphere of the day that was little short of a revolutionary act. Not merely were such interpretations politically inexpedient moreover, they were also theologically inappropriate and even, in extreme cases, blasphemous. If the Bible was inspired by the Holy Spirit and the source of its own authority, then it was doubly dangerous of man to seek to amend it in any way. Indeed Nicholas von Wyle, a fifteenth century German translator, had gone so far as to declare

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[13] Cited by Norman Sykes, 'The Authorized Version of 1611', Ibid. pp. 141–3.

that in the case of the Bible even copyist's errors should be faithfully transcribed.[14] The King James translators had the added sanction of the Catholic translators of the Rheims and Douai Bibles – the Old Testament, by the latter group, had only just finally appeared after a 27 year delay in 1609 – who had attacked their Protestant rivals for softening the hard places whereas they themselves, they claimed, 'religiously keep them word for word, and point for point, for fear of missing or restraining the sense of the holy Ghost to our phantasie...' Thus John Boyes, a fellow of St. John's College, Cambridge, who was both a translator of a section of the New Testament for the Authorized Version, and a member of the final revision panel, recorded in his notes that he and his committee had been careful to preserve ambiguities in the original text. Referring to the word 'praise' in 1 Peter 1. v. 7, which might refer either to Jesus or the members of the church, he commented that 'We have not thought that the indefinite ought to be defined'.[15] Seventeenth century translators, whether Protestant or Catholic, were under no doubt that whatever the difficulties or peculiarities of the Hebrew or Greek they were there for a divinely ordained purpose, and were not to be lightly corrected by human agency.

Yet this manifest unwillingness to limit the meaning of the inspired words of scripture by translation did not hamper the translators linguistically as much as a modern reader might expect. Their deliberate choice of matching ambiguity with ambiguity was aided by both the range of meanings available to seventeenth century English and – just as important – the translators' own personal sensitivities to that range. For example, in Tyndale's translation, John VIII. 46 is rendered as 'Which of you can rebuke me of sin?' Instead of following this perfectly intelligible reading the *Authorized Version* has chosen the much more obscure: 'Which of you convinceth me of sin?' The Greek word in question is *elengcho* which is translated at different points in the *Authorized Version* by no less than six English words: 'convince', 'convict', 'tell one's fault', 'reprove', 'discover' and (as Tyndale had it here) 'rebuke'. Why then the need to depart from Tyndale's reading at this point? The answer seems to lie with the history of that word 'convince'. Though the OED allows only one current meaning of the word, it also lists seven other obsolete senses – all of which were current in the early seventeenth century. Lady Macbeth, for instance, says of Duncan's chamberlains

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[14] George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation,* Oxford University Press, 1976, p. 262.

[15] Ward Allen (ed.), Translating for King James, Allen Lane, The Penguin Press, 1970, p. 89.

> Will I with wine and wassail so convince
> That memory, the warder of the brain,
> Shall be a fume, and the receipt of reason
> A limbeck only.

[LVII. 64-7]

Most Shakespeare glossaries suggest that 'convince' here means 'overpower', but other meanings of the word, such as 'to prove a person guilty...especially by judicial procedure'; or 'to disprove, refute'; or 'to demonstrate or prove absurdity' all suggest how Lady Macbeth's mind is racing ahead to visualize how the grooms might be over-powered, their protestations swept aside and refuted as absurd, and finally convicted. Similarly in the *Authorized Version's* careful substitution of 'convince' for 'rebuke' we can catch a hint that Jesus is seen to be challenging the whole network of semi-judicial accusations flung against him as absurd – without, of course, allowing the reader to lose sight of the fact that one day soon these will indeed overpower him and bring him to the ultimate absurdity of the Cross.[16] More importantly for our purposes, however, it renders much less credible arguments that would attribute such subtlety of interpretation simply to the state of seventeenth century English. If that were the case, then Tyndale's 'rebuke me of sin' would have sufficed. What we are looking at here is, I suggest, clear evidence of informed and educated personal choice.

Something of the care with which these particular words were chosen is indicated by a later passage in John 16, v.8: 'And when he is come, he will reprove the world of sin, and of righteousness, and and of judgement'. Though the selected translation of *elengcho* here is 'reprove' (again replacing 'rebuke' in Tyndale) the translators have also added 'convince' in the margin. Whether or not this indicates some shade of disagreement among them, it serves to emphasize not merely how closely the words 'reprove' and 'convince' were associated in their minds but also again the degree of personal selection that was brought to that search for finer shades of meaning. It is such sensitivities both to the nuances of individual words and to their relationship to the larger rhythms of the Bible that makes the Authorized Version so remarkable a translation.

We are not, however, dealing with matters of scholarship, but with theories of translation – and, in particular, with the effects of such theories on the development (or otherwise) of the English language. I have no doubt that the modern translators – Lightfoot, Nida, Grayston, for instance – knew much more about the original languages than the translators of the *Authorized Version*. What concerns us, rather, is the outworking of their principles in the personal choice of words. There is a beautiful

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[16] Again I am indebted to a suggestion of Ward Allen for this example.

if strange line in Ezekiel 27 (v.25) which the *Authorized Version* gives as 'the ships of Tarshish did sing of thee in thy market'. Though the idea of a fleet of cargo ships singing praise to its owner or nation simply by the wealth and splendour of its merchandise is a conceit that would not have seemed too far-fetched to the contemporaries of John Donne, modern translators have all insisted on explanatory paraphrase. Thus Lightfoot's *Revised Version* has 'The ships of Tarshish were caravans for thy merchandise'. For the *Good News Bible,* guided by Nida, this becomes still more plainly and prosaically 'Your merchandise was carried in fleets of the largest cargo ships'. Other probable corruptions which the more cautious translators of the *Revised Version* had left intact are clarified with similar éclat by the *Good News Bible.* For instance, Psalm 11. v. 6., in the *Authorized Version* reads 'upon the wicked He shall rain snares, fire and brimstone and an horrible tempest'. 'Snares' (or 'traps') is again an unlikely (though not impossible) reading and in fact only the most minute alteration of the Hebrew pointing is require l to change 'snares' to the more probable 'coals'. The *Good News Bible* reads 'He send down flaming coals and burning sulphur on the wicked; he punishes them with scorching winds' and adding a footnote to explain how it has amended the Hebrew 'traps'. This is unexceptionable textually, but it in addition to altering 'traps' to 'coals', however, it has introduced its own (quite unauthenticated) 'Hebrew parallelism': setting the 'scorching winds' over against the 'flaming coals and burning sulphur' rather than being the third term in the triad. The effect is to suggest not one kind of cataclysmic event (a reference presumably to the fate of the 'cities of the plain', Sodom and Gomorrah, Genesis 20) but two quite separate ones: if not fire and brimstone (on their cities?), then scorching winds (on their crops?). It is difficult to know if this is an example of substituting an equivalent cultural effect – atomic holocausts, perhaps, and dustbowls in the Midwest – or merely the kind of lack of attention to exact wording that we have already noted as characteristic of modern translation theory.

'In translating', wrote Goethe, we must go to the brink of the Untranslatable; it is only then that we really become aware of the foreignness of the nation and the language'. When we read the Bible, we do not take on a patchwork of piecemeal concepts to be matched with supposed equivalencies, we enter into a changing yet self-subsistant world that we can only learn to understand from inside. The language of the Bible forms a curiously and uniquely self-referential whole[17] – and it is important to realize that this is not in spite of its palimpsestic and translated origins, but rather *because* of them. The reason why, for instance, the language of the *Authorized Version* (in spite of its many scholarly errors) is more subtle, more suggestive, more resonant,

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[17] For a further discussion of the self-referential qualities of the Bible see Gabriel Josipovici, *The Book of God,* Yale University Press, 1988.

and in the end (I think history will show) more successful, has little to do with the supposed 'superior' state of Jacobean English, and much to do with respective translation theories and, not least, with the consequent choices of the individual translators. The seventeenth century translators believed, rightly or wrongly, that they were dealing with a seamless web of divine guidance from the first sentence of Genesis to the last page of Revelation. As we have seen, they also inhabited a world where the events of the Bible were read as both alien and immediately close. Their language was not a monolithic and opaque entity to which the unfamiliar had to be painstakingly accommodated but an essentially translucent medium *through* which other older or alternative layers and meanings could clearly be discerned. As one might expect with hindsight, this meant that though they were much less prepared to take liberties with the original texts, they were much more prepared to make such innovations as seemed to them appropriate in the English language itself. The *Authorized Version* was not the product of Calvinistic pre-destination, nor yet its modern equivalent of blind historical or linguistic engineering. As we have seen there are many contingent reasons, but no intrinsic historical necessity why it should have been a success other than the fact that it was executed by men of outstanding talent. We have every reason to give credit where credit is due and be grateful to them.