

# The English New Testament from Revised Version to Moffatt

Rendel Harris

*(The following article by Rendel Harris with an introduction by Prof. Henry J. Cadbury will be of interest to translators concerned with some of The Bible Translator may get the other side of the story. — Ed.)*  
*type of problems which Dr. Harris discusses are relevant today, even as they were some thirty years ago, though there is now a somewhat different attitude among scholars as to the justification for conjectures and re-ordering of context. Accordingly, we have also included Comments on Rendel Harris' Article by Mr. Wilfred Bradnock, Translations Secretary of the British and Foreign Bible Society, in order that readers of the Bible Translator may get the other side of the story. — Ed.)*

*The following paragraphs are the beginning of an unpublished paper by the English scholar J. Rendel Harris. They express so clearly his own prophetic views of the direction in which New Testament translations should move that they seem useful in these later days and in connection with versions in all languages. The paper is entitled "Dr. Moffatt's New Translation of the New Testament." It is undated, but the book it reviews appeared in 1913. The remainder of the paper illustrates the seven points (a) to (g) which are listed at the end of this extract. For permission to use the manuscript I am indebted to H. G. Wood of Birmingham.*

Henry J. Cadbury

It has occurred to me, in reading the new translation which Dr. Moffatt has given us of the books of the New Testament, and in making a rapid survey of the notices and reviews which it provoked, that there were many features of the new translation which had entirely, or almost entirely, escaped the observation of those who discoursed on the matter to the ear of the public. Their criticism was too fragmentary, too confined to the examination of occasional passages which were known to present peculiar textual or hermeneutic difficulties, to be regarded as a just estimate of the value of Dr. Moffatt's work. For that reason I propose to set down in order certain features of the new translation which are significant to those who do not regard any rendering of the New Testament as an isolated phenomenon, but who look upon it as one of a series in which one must lose sight neither of the great historical translations of the past, nor of the successive attempts made in our own time to reproduce the New Testament Greek in adequate English, and incidentally, (a feature which was hardly prominent in the translations of the Reformation period) to give a more correct idea of the underlying Greek text, so far as investigation has disclosed or verified it. It is especially important, on this account, to put Dr. Moffatt's book on the shelf of translations side by side with the Revised Version, the so-called Twentieth Century New Testament, and the translation of Dr.

Weymouth, for all of these are sufficiently near to one another in point of time to be sensibly occupied with the same problems. If we do not discuss them in detail, they can hardly be left out of mind, on account of the new departures which they may represent in the region of textual study or in the art of the interpreter.

The Revised Version, for example, was characterized by an entirely new Greek text on the one hand, and in some parts of it, on the other hand, by an entirely new English language. We must always remember that we are treating of the New Testament and not of the Old. The two parts of the Revised Bible are under separate linguistic controls; they must be judged independently; we are speaking of the latter part of the work, to wit, the New Testament. After more than thirty years' study of this translation and its underlying text, I do not hesitate to say of the text that it is often so hopelessly wrong that one wonders how it ever can have been so edited; and of the translation, that the bad Greek has often been done in worse English. The reviser who is reported to have said at the conclusion of the work that it was the greatest literary bankruptcy of the nineteenth century was really not very far wide of the mark. One of the proofs of this lies in the efforts which the succeeding translators have made for its emendation or its replacement. Dr. Weymouth's translation is often presented in a purer classical English, and at the same time it condenses into the form of a scientific revolt the dictum of Matthew Arnold that "the aorist was made for man and not man for the aorist." It is an unequal piece of work, as might have been expected in the work of a single man, without adequate controls and with a life the thrums of whose looms were cut too soon (as in most work of this kind). Still Dr. Weymouth's translation was sufficient to show that there was a higher intelligibility possible for the New Testament in English than was attainable for those who held the absurd views on the Greek aorist and the Greek article which were adumbrated in the preface to the New Testament of 1881 and disclosed throughout the book.

The Twentieth Century New Testament was an attempt after intelligibility, and not, in the first instance, after scholarship. It was the will to carry out the Biblical maxim of condescension to men of low estate in the presentation of the text itself. Hence it was not surprising that the group of amateurs, men and women who were engaged in it, accepted with childlike innocence the Greek text of Westcott and Hort, and with childlike goodwill transferred it to the language of the man in the streets. They succeeded, at all events, by a happy instinct, in divining the meaning of many elusive passages, and if we do not like the street English, we may often use the book as a genuine and just commentary. I had the pleasure of acting as occasional referee in the production of the second edition, which ran the risk of being badly vitiated by *secundas curae*.

When we come to Dr. Moffatt's translation, we are face to face with a rendering whose literary beauty was evident to those who had no specially trained artistic sense. People read the 13th chapter of the First Epistle to the Corinthians and noted that almost every word had

a new rendering and almost every new rendering was an improvement. It was something new in literature and provoked an immediate resilience of approbation from those who had been uncomfortable, without exactly knowing why, in the barbarisms of 1881. The English language has resumed its freedom; Lazarus was out of the graveclothes of pedantry and half-scholarship. Not only so, but the revolt had spread, somewhat timidly, into the region of the text; the reader noted that Westcott and Hort's text was at last definitely abandoned. In its place stood the new text of von Soden, and even that was treated freely, as of course it ought to be. We had thus the two preliminary observations, that literary grace had been restored and that the older textual mechanisms were being discarded. Now let us look a little more in detail into the peculiar features of this new translation, especially into those points which appear to have eluded the critics and the reviewers. For convenience, we reduce the matter to seven heads:

(a) We have a newer and freer text, in which for the first time the translator has made liberal use of conjectural emendations.

(b) There has been an editorial rearrangement of such passages as might be supposed to be originally or early displaced.

(c) The practice is widely employed of printing in stanzas such passages as are suspected to be poetical in form.

(d) The translator has condescended (or, if we prefer it, descended) in certain cases to the use of provincialisms, vulgarisms, and slang.

(e) The use of quotation marks is introduced into the Epistles in order to distinguish between St. Paul's own views and those of the correspondents whom he may be quoting.

(f) Occasionally the translator is brave enough to say that the passage upon which he is engaged is beyond recovery as to its meaning and must be left untranslated.

(g) He recognizes the help given the work of translation of the New Testament by the modern Greek language.

All of these points are practically new, at least in the extent in which they are employed.

#### *Comments on Rendel Harris' Article*

In my view, Rendel Harris' observations on the Moffatt translation, though stimulating as always (for he was a brilliant NT scholar), must be treated today with some reserve, especially by would-be translators. As marking a breakaway from the artificial rigors of the Revised Version, and a new freedom of approach to the problems of text and translation, they have a freshness characteristic both of the author and the best New Testament scholarship of his day.

But his very brilliance sometimes got him into difficulty, for example, in the matter of conjectural emendations and in his enthusiasm for the

re-ordering of the text, where very few New Testament scholars would follow him today.

Further, I doubt whether the verdict of time would support the judgment that Moffatt's translation could be unreservedly commended for its "literary beauty," though none would question that it marked a great advance on the Revised Version. Rendel Harris was an outstandingly adventurous and individualistic New Testament scholar; but that itself involved him in two things which the ordinary Bible translator cannot afford to indulge, excessive daring and subjectivity. Perhaps it is on this account that translations which have leaned too heavily on Moffatt have not in the main stood up to the test of time, but such seems to be the fact and it is worth noting.

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## Pioneers, What First Objective?

*William Lees*

No well-planned military operation or business enterprise is ever undertaken without a clearly-defined first objective. Can we who are in the spearhead of missionary endeavor afford to be less orderly? Can we be casual or haphazard and go ahead without knowing precisely our first objective?

The nature of this first objective will, of course, depend upon the nature of our final objective. What, then, is the goal? What are we setting out to accomplish? In that we are co-workers with God, we must ask the obvious question, What is His purpose? His purpose is to prepare the bride—to complete the church. We are therefore to work with Him in establishment of the local church in the new area to which He has sent us.

### **An Essential**

Now we can ask, Is there any *sine qua non* for the accomplishment of the task? Is there anything that is essential and without which this task cannot be completed? Of course, unless God works His glorious work, then all is in vain; but He has also given us our part. And a review of missionary history reveals this alarming fact, which G. Campbell Morgan summarizes thus: "The story of missions the whole wide world over shows that the success or failure of . . . missions has always been dependent on whether those brought to Christ had the Scriptures in their own language or not."

The most important thing, then, that we will ever do is to translate the Scriptures into the mother tongue of the people to whom we go, irrespective of the smallness or greatness of their numbers. This must be done at the same time as the preaching and teaching if there is to be a permanent work.

Look at the pioneers: Carey and Ziegenbalg in India; Morrison in China (he produced a New Testament in Chinese within six years