

Wallace convincingly exposes both the theological fallacies and the methodological weaknesses in the theories that underpin arguments for either the TR or the Majority Text.

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Price, Reynolds: **Three Gospels**. New York: Scribner 1996. 288 pp, \$23.00.

Reynolds Price, James B. Duke Professor of English at Duke University, has a distinguished career as a writer of fiction, poetry, plays, essays, and memoirs. In this, his 28th published volume, he engages in Bible translation—something he had already done in *A Palpable God* (1978). The present volume consists of three parts: “The Good News according to Mark”; “The Good News according to John”; and “An Honest Account of a Memorable Life,” his own brief recounting of the gospel story, which he calls “A Modern Apocryphal Gospel.”

The book has received a favorable review by Robert Alter in *The New York Times* of May 19, 1996. Alter says: “[I]t captures the homey directness of the Gospel stories with a new freshness... In general, this new version pitches the story toward understatement, without, however, turning it, as so many recent translations have done, into a prosaically flattened version of middling modern English.”

Price himself defines his purpose as follows: “My own translations then are aimed at giving a Greekless contemporary reader the truest sense of the narrative and discursive atmosphere of my originals” (19). One way he achieves this is by not having any chapter or verse divisions, nor any section headings: like the old Westcott & Hort New Testament I used in Seminary, the reader confronts only the bare text, in all its pristine beauty.

Price is bound to stress the differences between his translation and others, which he finds less than satisfactory:

Attempts to find, for instance, what some leading students of modern translation have called a dynamic equivalence for first-century Greek are logically suspect in the extreme but have been pursued so often by individuals and groups that we now have in English several popular versions of the gospels that constitute what are well-intended but almost certainly major distortions of the originals. Among gospel versions that have most frequently stumbled in their efforts to make the originals contemporary, I note especially J.B. Phillips’ single-handed effort (often lively, but very approximate); the American Bible Society’s immensely widespread committee translation called *The Good News Bible* (so committed to oversimplifying paraphrase as to lose itself on errands of its own), long stretches of *The New English Bible*, *The Amplified Bible* (which is honest in admitting its expansive method), *The New Revised Standard version*.... (22)

For his own method (22-23) Price says he has followed the example of the forty-seven members of the King James, “the most successful version of all.” He says that their “single guiding principle” was one word of the original in the fewest equivalent words of English, with the preservation when possible of at least some suggestion of the Greek word order. And Price laments the waning popularity, in our day, of the King James Version.

How does it come out? A few samples, from Mark and John, will give us an idea:

BEGINNING OF THE GOOD NEWS OF JESUS THE MESSIAH

As it was written in Isaiah the prophet

Look, I send my messenger

before your face

Who shall prepare your way;

Voice of one crying in the desert

“Prepare the Lord’s way;

Make his paths straight.”

John the Baptizer came into the desert declaring baptism of repentance for pardon of wrong. All the country of Judea went out to him and those from Jerusalem and were baptized by him in the Jordan River admitting their wrongs.

John wore camel’s hair and a leather belt around his hips, ate grasshoppers and wild honey and declared “He’s coming who is stronger than I—after me—of whom I’m not fit stooping to loosen the strap of his sandals. I baptized you in water but he’ll baptize you in Holy Spirit.”

Price justifies rendering *hamartia* and cognates by “wrong” (a departure from his earlier translation) as follows: “[T]he word *hamartia* means at bottom *a failure of aim, a missing of the mark*, and appears to have fewer connotations of the fleshpot than the English word *sin*, so long ago hijacked by the puritan and the hypocrite” (18). So he translates Jn 8.34: “Jesus answered, ‘Amen amen I tell you that everyone doing wrong is a slave of wrong’ ” (200).

The Gospel of John begins as follows:

At the start was the Word. The Word was with God and God was the Word—he was at the start with God. Everything came to be through him and apart from him nothing that has come came to be. In him was life. The life was the light of humankind. The light shines in the dark and the dark didn’t quench it.

Does this convey to the Greekless reader “the truest sense of the narrative and discursive atmosphere” of the original? I wonder. To me, at least, this is very odd English, which I have difficulty reading, while the Greek text reads easily and intelligibly. And I also wonder if Price is aware that “God was the Word” would be considered a gross error by the vast majority of Greek scholars. He seems not to be familiar with “Colwell’s rule,” as it has been called.

Mk 2.13-17 offers another typical example of the English style:

He went out again by the sea and all the crowd came to him and he taught them. And walking along he saw Levi—Alpheus’s Levi—sitting at the tax office and said to him “Follow me.”

Rising he followed him.

Then it happened as he lay back in his house many tax collectors and wrongdoers lay back with Jesus and his disciples for there were many and they followed him.

The Pharisee scholars seeing him eating with wrongdoers and tax collectors said to his disciples “Does he eat with wrongdoers and tax collectors?”

Hearing Jesus said to them “The strong don’t need a doctor but the sick do. I came not to call the just but wrongdoers.”

Eventually one gets used to this odd English, and derives a certain pleasure out of seeing the Greek original underlying the English text. But one’s pleasure is wiped away by “the sons of the bridal chamber” in Mk 2.19. Can anyone call this a translation? Does the reader count for nothing? And are NRSV’s “The wedding guests,” REB’s “the bridegroom’s friends” and TEV’s “the guests at a wedding party” to be labeled “major distortions of the original”?

Price’s imaginative brief retelling of the Gospel story (“A Modern Apocryphal Gospel”) is at times compelling, especially in those places where he uses his talents as a novelist and an accomplished story-teller to portray the person Jesus. But his retelling of the actual accounts in the Gospels I found less interesting; it seemed to me the original stories had been told better.

I actually profited more from his introductions to the Gospels than from the translations themselves. Price (who calls himself a “renegade Christian”) is a man of deep faith—nowhere more impressively demonstrated than in his autobiographical account *A Whole New Life* (1994), wherein, without apologies, he recounts an appearance of the risen Lord Jesus to him on the shore of Lake Galilee. In these introductions Price discusses the Gospels as works of literature, and plumbs heights and depths normally not reached in standard commentaries. Just take, as a sample, his comment on Jesus’ last utterance (*tetelestai*) in the Gospel of John (19.23): “And in John his last words are a richly ironic claim of relief, acceptance, and triumph—‘It’s done’ (or ‘finished’). Jesus’ death is one of the least unfinished acts in human history” (162).

On account of these introductions I recommend this book to translators. I believe they will profit from them, as I did.

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