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THE FRENCH ECUMENICAL TRANSLATION

A notable event took place at the Sorbonne in Paris on January 16th of this year. A new translation of the Epistle to the Romans, the first fruit of the efforts of a joint committee composed of Roman Catholic and Protestant scholars, was presented to the public. In this issue we are reprinting in French the introduction which accompanies it.

The great interest taken in this translation is in part due to the importance of the French language, but it is in no small degree due also to the fact that the team of translators contained both Roman Catholic and Reformed scholars of the highest calibre working together.

Moreover, this project has the official backing of a famous Roman Catholic Publishing House in Paris, Éditions du Cerf, and also of certain Bible Societies. We have been privileged to see an article in the Roman Catholic periodical *Lumière et Vie* contributed by Professor Georges Casalis, the French Protestant scholar, who is one of the secretaries of the Translation Committee. In it he has traced the three phases of the enterprise so far; the period of preliminary negotiations extended from the autumn of 1963 to the beginning of 1965. It appears that one idea at the beginning was to attempt a revision of the text of the Jerusalem Bible but this was dropped in favour of preparing a fresh translation. The second phase was an agreement between Éditions du Cerf and certain Bible Societies who are members of the U.B.S., as a result of which one experimental panel was appointed to prepare a translation of the Epistle to the Romans, while another was entrusted with the task of preparing a translation of Exodus. It is noteworthy that in the discussions that followed about the difficulties of translation, it was found that the divisions in the committee were never on confessional lines.

The third phase began in the middle of 1965. It is the period of actual work. A timetable has been adopted in the hope that the whole of the Bible will be completed in ten years.

An interesting feature is seen in the method (only possible in such an

area of concentrated scholarship) which consists of calling together, before they start working, all the translators engaged on the same kind of books, e.g. Johannine writings, Synoptic Gospels, Pastoral Epistles, O.T. Historical books etcetera. Such consultations should help in achieving a considerable degree of consistency and in reducing eventually the amount of work needed later to ensure uniformity.

Professor Casalis emphasizes the fact that although the project is a serious work of scholarship the result is intended to nourish the souls and minds of ordinary people. It is not to be a translation for scholars only. In the context of this translation the name 'ecumenical' indicates something more than that the translators are an inter-denominational group. It has been adopted to indicate a desire that the translation may promote reconciliation between Christians, but not unity as an end in itself. The major purpose of the project is its missionary aim and Professor Casalis refers explicitly to the French-speaking areas of Africa.

An immense amount of preparatory work has been done. An example lies before us in a paper entitled 'A vocabulary of words and expressions to help unify the Ecumenical translation of the Bible with special reference to the Old Testament'.

The writers of this paper draw attention to the peculiar risk attending any translation undertaken by several different hands, the risk of an extreme diversity in the use of terms. It is particularly important to safeguard the translation against the possibility that such diversity might reflect differences of approach as between Catholic and Protestant translators. Some prior agreement is, therefore, essential if the translation is to be a unity. At the same time there is adequate recognition of the fact that a vocabulary must not be fixed in advance by the application of a few simple rules or by employing rigid definitions. Only by a patient exegesis of the text is it possible to reach a definite settlement in individual cases and final decisions must wait until the work of translating has been completed.

It is not always easy to reconcile these two principles. However the committee has made suggestions about vocabulary which are open to modification in the light of experience. They have drawn up a statement of a theoretical nature and followed it with a consideration of some 200 Hebrew words and expressions, together with alternative translations in French.

The discussion on the theoretical aspects of the problems involved has in it much to teach others. Incidentally it is pointed out that the Jerusalem Bible, which, of course, was the work of a group of Roman Catholics, reveals a diversity which, although it was not sought as an end in itself, was nevertheless felt to give the translation a certain literary quality. Among the examples cited, it is pointed out that in the Jerusalem Bible, the verb *g-z-l* (take, seize) which occurs 30 times in the Old Testament, is rendered in 17 different ways.

The next section speaks of the theological importance of unification in translation. We must never forget that Bibles are meant to be studied as well as to be read like any other book and it would appear to follow that there should be some attempt made to ensure some consistency in the rendering of theological terms.

The failure of any attempt to translate *h-s-d* (loving-kindness) by one word is mentioned as a warning against trying to find simple solutions to the problems of consistency, but nevertheless an attempt should be made.

Another interesting point is that it is not always easy to determine the boundaries of a theological vocabulary. For example, does *p-k-d* (to visit) come into this category or not? An early decision to translate it by 'to intervene' was later modified by the translators of Hosea in at least one instance in favour of 'to punish'. And how should it be translated in Psa. 8: 5 (English v. 4)?

The foregoing discussion raised in the minds of the committee the question whether or not it is possible to speak of a 'French biblical language' which avoids on the one hand an incomprehensible Semitic flavour and on the other hand an anarchy masquerading as 'literary' or 'modern' language. The translators believe it is possible. They are fully aware of the difficulties, but they believe it is possible to agree on the right kind of balance. If they cannot do so, they believe they will have failed in the task they have set themselves.

They are not too concerned about the possibility that they might fall into excessive Semitism. They are more concerned to avoid, as they say, flattening out the language of the Bible into an unvarying mould. A Hebrew word does not have the same meaning in all contexts, but account must be taken of the fact that different words may be said to possess different 'areas' of meaning. The discussion shows up some of the tensions involved in a tussle between the demand for 'fidelity', as they understand it and the desire for an effective style.

The vocabulary of terms is divided into five sections as follows: (a) contains stereotyped expressions; (b) a theological vocabulary grouped under different themes; (c) a miscellaneous group of words and expressions; (d) the divine names; (e) proper names.

The following article is taken from the introduction to Épître aux Romains: Traduction œcuménique de la Bible, pp. 11–17 and reproduced by the kind permission of Les Éditions du Cerf, Paris.

ESPRIT ET MÉTHODE DE LA TRADUCTION ŒCUMÉNIQUE DE LA BIBLE

Au moment où paraît l'Épître aux Romains dans la *Traduction œcuménique de la Bible*, les responsables de cette traduction se doivent de donner quelques précisions sur la méthode qu'ils suivent dans leur travail et sur l'esprit qui les anime.

Le projet d'une traduction française de la Bible commune aux diverses