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THE GOOD NEWS BIBLE. A REACTION FROM INDIA

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It is not easy to review a Bible translation. It takes more than a careful reading to appreciate it. The Bible is a lifelong companion and only a long perusal can tell whether a translation can stand the test of time.

Personally I have made frequent and attentive use of the TEV New Testament and found it excellent, exegetically accurate and often perceptive, linguistically efficient, applying successfully the double principle of simple language and dynamic equivalence.

To give an example, we may compare the RSV and the TEV translations of a difficult text of St. Paul: Rom 3.21–25.

RSV	TEV
Now the righteousness of God has been manifested apart from the Law . . .	Now God's way of putting men right with himself has been revealed. It has nothing to do with the Law . . .
the righteousness of God through faith in Christ Jesus for all who believe. For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood . . .	God puts people right through their faith in Christ Jesus. God does it to all who believe in Christ. Because there is no difference at all: everyone has sinned and is far away from God's saving presence. But by the free gift of God's grace, all are put right with him through Christ Jesus who sets them free. God offered him so that by his death he should become the means by which men's sins are forgiven . . .

Speaking of translation, Hilaire Belloc has said that the business of a translator is not to ask 'How shall I make this foreigner talk English?' but 'What would an Englishman have said to express this?'[1] In the text of St. Paul just quoted, the RSV is the language of a foreigner speaking English; TEV is the message in English, and a forceful message in forceful English.

Even in so concise a commentary as the Jerome Biblical Commentary, our few verses of the letter to the Romans need three full columns of small print to be explained, after going through which the baffled reader feels that St. Paul must have taken a sadistic pleasure in making himself as obscure and complicated as possible. In fact, it is just the cultural and linguistic gap which TEV attempts to bridge by dynamically embodying the analysis of Paul's thought in its choice of terms. "Righteousness" becomes "God's way of putting men right with himself"; the "Glory of God" is "God's saving

[1] Ronald A. Knox, *On Englishing the Bible*. London: Burns, Oates 1949, 3–4.

presence" (the *Shekinah*); "redemption in Christ Jesus" is "Jesus Christ setting men free"; blood means death and "expiation", the "means by which men's sins are forgiven". These are not adventurous paraphrases trying approximately to render the text in "basic English"; they are felicitous expressions embodying the best of present-day Biblical scholarship. In this way it may even be said that TEV is more accurate than more literal translations such as RSV. "Means by which men's sins are forgiven", even though a bit long, is certainly a more accurate rendering of the Greek *hilastērion* than "expiation", which is too abstract and has lost the reference to the Hebrew background, the *kappōreth* ("mercy seat") of the Holy of Holies (Lev. 16.2, 11–17). Moreover, by taking the paragraph rather than the word as a translational unit, TEV is able to render the dynamic movement of the sentences better than word-for-word translations. Thus, in v. 21, TEV has a separate sentence to state: "It has nothing to do with the Law", whereas the RSV has only the incidental clause "apart from the Law" dropped at the end of the sentence; the TEV construction does better justice to the Greek emphasis. Similarly, at the end of v. 23, TEV has a full stop followed by a strong adversative conjunction "but". It is true there is no "but" in the Greek text—only a participle. But the Greek participle has often the value of any vague connection with the previous clause or with the general context. It is left to the commentator to define this connection with more precision. A literal translation passes onto the reader the responsibility for disentangling the implications of a particle.[2] How can he do it in ignorance of Greek grammar? RSV makes matters still worse for the reader by using a misleading punctuation ("since all have sinned . . ., they are justified!") TEV translators do not expect the reader to check in a Greek grammar and to consult commentaries. They assume fully the translator's responsibility for producing a text that expresses its meaning.

As a counter-check, we may compare our text with its equivalent in the Living Bible:

> But now God has shown us a different way to heaven—not by "being good enough" and trying to keep His laws, but by a new way . . Now God says He will accept and acquit us—declare us "not guilty"—if we trust Jesus Christ to take away our sins. And we all can be saved in this same way, by coming to Christ, no matter who we are or what we have been like. Yes all have sinned; all fall short of God's glorious ideal; yet now God declares us "not guilty" of offending Him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in His kindness freely takes away our sins.

The LB has the same aim as TEV: to produce a simple and forceful text. But solid exegesis is replaced by a projection of the translation's theological presuppositions: the *dikaiosunē* of God strangely becomes "a way to go to heaven"; there is a heavy stress on forensic justification and on faith as trust.

[2] See for example O. Michel, *Der Brief an die Römer*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck and Ruprecht 1963, 106: "instead of the participle *dikaioumenoi*, the proper construction that would be expected would be a verbal form of the indicative (like *dikaiountai de*)."

Linguistically the text reflects the other-worldiness which is typical of much Christian homiletics—but not of Paul ("heaven", "coming to Christ", "trusting Jesus Christ to take away our sins"). It is not that I consider this language as an invalid expression of Christian faith. It is *also* to be found in Scripture. The point I wish to stress is the unconscious one-sidedness that gives one set of terms and images a privileged status, to the extent of projecting them even on texts which have something else to tell us. In short, the LB distorts the text, not deliberately but by its amateurish handling of the translator's task. Paul's thought is submerged under the tone and themes of an evangelical homily.

But we must now come to the Old Testament part of TEV. Does it reach a level of excellence equal to the New Testament? Before long familiarity enables us to answer that question with confidence, let us at least make a few soundings.

We may begin with Gen. 1.1–2.

> In the beginning when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the power of God was moving over the water.

In the beginning when God created . . . A footnote tells us of two other possible translations ("In the beginning God created . . ." and "When God began to create . . ."). There is indeed a problem of Hebrew grammar and the three translation are possible. The choice made by TEV is to be found also in NAB and NEB.

the universe . . .: Literally, "heaven and earth": the Hebrew phrase follows the Semitic usage of expressing totality by naming the opposite terms. "Heaven and earth" means therefore the cosmic totality. "Universe is a correct rendering. But is not some poetry lost in the process?

The raging ocean that covered everything . . . The "deĕp" of RSV is here a "raging ocean that covered everything". A bit long; but it is actually the image the Hebrew author had in mind when he used the word *tehôm*, a word akin to the *tiamat* of Mesopotamian cosmogony and found also in Ugaritic *thm* with the meaning of ocean. NAB explains in a footnote that the "abyss" is in reality "the primordial ocean according to the ancient Semitic cosmogony", TEV decided that, if *tehôm* means primoral ocean, one may as well say this in the text; there is no need to put the reader off the track by speaking of "deep" or of "abyss". Similarly in Ps. 93.3 "ocean depths" of TEV is a very good rendering for *naharoth*, which literally means rivers. That the word may mean also "ocean" has been proved by Ugaritic parallels where it is found in parallelism with *ym* ("sea") and *thm*.[3] "Ocean *depth*" just adds the aura of mystery corresponding to the Semitic mythological background. The TEV rendering is much better than the "floods" of RSV and NAB and particularly than the literal "rivers" of JB.

was engulfed in total darkness. The English passive verb is a good rendering of the Hebrew implied stative construction without a verb. It might be said

[3] See evidence in L. R. Fisher, *Ras Shamra parallels*, Rome: Pontificium Institutum.

that "engulfed" introduces a forceful image which is not in the Hebrew text. But in modern English, the word "darkness" has lost the threatening overtones it had in the narrative of Genesis and in general in the ancient cultures, where night had not yet been colonized by the invention of electricity and street lighting. The translational unit is not the word but the sentence; "engulfed" and "total" restore some of the fearsome impact that the description of the original chaos must have left on the old Hebrew reader.

and the power of God was moving over the water. Literally, it is "the spirit of God" or "an awesome wind"; the Hebrew *ruah* may mean both spirit and wind. Translations hesitate between the first (RSV, JB), and the second (NEB, NAB). Exegetically, TEV follows the first translation, correctly, I think; Genesis 1 belongs to the Priestly tradition, a late highly theological stratum of redaction. In this context the more theological meaning of "spirit" appears probable. But when it came to choosing an English word, TEV hesitated to use "spirit"; it preferred its equivalent "power". Is it because they feared that a Christian reader might be inclined to read too much of the Christian theology of the Spirit into the text? If this is the reason, I would express disagreement. Obviously I accept that Gen. 1.2 does not speak of the trinitarian Spirit. We reach here a basic problem of hermeneutics. What does reading mean? Crawling back into the past and attempting to reconstitute the mentality of these people of old? Or allowing a text to live on and to resound in the reader? Both views are probably exaggerated extremes. But is it the role of the translator to neutralize the life of the text? I may read too much into the word "power" of TEV, but I have a feeling that here the translation perpetuates the old hermeneutic principle of Schleiermacher (understanding as transforming oneself into the person of the author), whereas Heidegger and Gadamer have since shown that language is creative and that the reader cannot but enter into its dynamism and engage in a living dialogue with the text. Hesitatingly I submit that, in the translation committee, I would have voted for "Spirit", or at least "spirit". I say "hesitatingly" because I may miss a point which the discussion in committee would have made me aware of.

TEV is at its best in the down-to-earth style of Proverbs. It is a delightful experience to find hoary old sayings revived by being put in the language of daily life. Thus a few examples taken at random:

RSV	TEV
The beginning of strife is like letting out water, so quit before the quarrel breaks out.	The start of an argument is like the first break in a dam; stop it before it goes any further (17.14).
Why should a fool have a price in his hand to buy wisdom, when he has no mind?	It does a fool no good to spend money on education, because he has no common sense (17.16).
A man's gift makes room for him and brings him before great men.	Do you want to meet an important person? Take him a gift and it will be easy (18.16).

The sluggard buries his hand in the dish, and will not even bring it back to his mouth.	Some people are too lazy to put food in their own mouths (19.24).
He who gives a right answer kisses the lips.	An honest answer is a sign of true friendship (24.26).

One could quote many more examples, but it is better to make for oneself the experiment of rediscovering Proverbs through TEV.

On the other hand, it seemed to me that TEV does not do so well with the Psalms. It is not that they fail to be clear and accurate. On the contrary, they become too clear and sound pedestrian; poetry needs an aura of evocative mystery and does not go with too explicit a style. Thus in Ps. 93.4 the logical reconstruction of the sentence transforms into a flat statement the emphatic acclamation of the psalm:

> The Lord rules supreme . . ., greater . . ., more powerful . . . . It is printed in verse form,
>
> but it is not enough
> to print like that
> and like that
> to make poetry!

as a reviewer of the Jerusalem Bible has already remarked. Similarly in Ps. 96.2, "Proclaim every day the good news that he has saved us", what follows is clear but lacking in tension. Poetry does not brook overtranslation.

Again, in Ps. 45.6, "throne" becomes "kingdom", and "sceptre" is "rule", and the whole verse becomes very abstract. After all, v. 3 has kept the sword and v. 5 even the arrows which, to the modern man, are as old as the old legends of William Tell.

In Ps. 8.5, we may even wonder whether the desire to be clear has not resulted in a mistranslation. "You have made him inferior only to *yourself*" is hardly possible as a translation. We have to opt for one of the alternatives given in footnote: "inferior to the gods", or "to the angels" (or why not "to the heavenly beings" as in 29.1 ?).

Since we are considering the Psalms, we may just remark that the titles have been replaced by simple headings giving the tonality of the psalm, rather than its literary form in the strict sense of the term. However, I do not know why Psalm 27, a lamentation, has come out as "a psalm of praise".

These occasional critical remarks would not be understood as disparaging. They simply show what is obvious to anybody who has gone through the harrowing experience of belonging to a translation committee—that the perfect translation of the Bible does not exist. The final assessment must be that TEV is to be rated very high.

To conclude, a word of caution and two requests.

The word of caution is to prospective Bible translators in India and elsewhere. TEV is so good that the temptation may be great to take it as a "Translator's translation" that could be fairly literally rendered in the local languages. This would be an error of judgement. TEV is a fine translation

which has done a full job of restructuring the original text in plain idiomatic English. Each translation has to do its own restructuring of the linguistic components of the text, according to the genius of its language. This restructuring is not transferable from language to language. For instance, TEV makes a liberal use of the passive, which is quite congenial to English but which would be most awkward in South Indian languages. One may also ask whether the secularized homely style of modern English should set the pattern for an Indian formulation of the Word of God? But this is another question that would take us too far.

The first request is to the translators. Could they find it possible to publish a Translators' Commentary that would give us the fruit of their deliberations: explanation of the choice they made of variant readings, of interpretations, of formulations? This would be of great help to translators and would also interest exegetes. It is true that the UBS is already publishing a set of Translator's Handbooks. But here we could see the method applied *in vivo*.

The second request is to the publishers. May we hope to have as soon as possible an edition of TEV "with Apocrypha", like the NEB, and thus see the *opus magnum* brought to completion?[4]

Finally, a question. Is the translation suitable for liturgical use? For the psalms, I doubt it. For the rest, I do not know. In their preface, the translators do not mention that they have taken into account the special requirements of public reading. Only practice will show whether the present translation manages to get across in public reading or whether we are still to wait for another translation to set us free from the bondage of RSV and JB, both of which are equally widespread in lectionaries and equally inadequate for public reading.

[4] A TEV translation of the deutero-canonical books is in preparation (*Ed.*).

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PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION IN MATTHEW

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Translators will be grateful to Dr Philipose for his article in the July 1977 issue (pp. 312–26) in which he courageously tackles some difficulties in the First Gospel that are often unrecognized. Not all his solutions, however, can be accepted as final.

For instance the translation suggested for Matthew 5.1–2 (page 317) is not an accurate rendering of the Greek text. What the Greek says is that Jesus, seeing the crowds, went up a hill (apparently to escape from them, not to teach them). When he had climbed the hill he sat down (as a teacher would) and his disciples (who had no doubt followed him up the hill) gathered round him, Jesus then began to teach them (the disciples, not the crowds). It falsifies the text to say that Jesus went up the hill to teach the crowds and his disciples also went up there. It is for the commentator, not the translator, to reconcile