Can God be "they"?

"Make allowances for others and they will make allowances for you", says the Phillips rendering of Luke 6.37. This is a very "human" way of looking at the sentence which Today's English Version translates as: "Forgive others, and God will forgive you". TEV similarly uses the word "God" in Matt. 5.1–10. "God will comfort them" (verse 4); "God will be merciful to them" (verse 7, in TEV 3rd edition); "God will call them his sons" (verse 9).

Since there are passives in English they tend to be used, in most versions, wherever there is a passive in the original: "they will be comforted", "they will be called sons of God", and so on. Where the context is quite ambiguous, it is possible to understand that God is the implied agent, or actor, but this is not always clear to everyone, as our first example shows. Since in daily speech the implied agent of a passive is almost always human, it is natural to assume that this is true in the Bible, unless it is clearly seen to be otherwise. In TEV, the name of God is mentioned where there could be some doubt as to who is the agent, usually using an active verb instead of a passive. The New English Bible uses far more passives or other constructions which leave God unnamed. In Matt. 5, for instance, God is named in only one of the instances where TEV does so.

A number of languages do have genuine passive forms which can be understood as having God as agent if the context permits, but as in English, great care must be taken.

In languages not having a true passive construction, it is usual to use an active verb with "they" as subject, so that "A man was killed" is said as: "They killed a man". This use of "they" is sometimes wrongly referred to as a "passive", so that there comes a temptation to use "they" automatically, without seeing if the context really permits this. In fact "they" never includes or refers to God. Of course one may argue and say that God actually underlies all actions, and therefore must be included in every "they". However, two examples show that "they" is not usually satisfactory where the reference is to God as agent:

"the world was created"—"they created the world"

"we have been saved from our sins"—"they have saved us from our sins"

The "they" in the second sentence of each pair is obviously difficult to accept, since it is much too "human". The word "God" makes them correct and clear: "God created the world", "God has saved us from our sins".

Though TEV and the other common language versions greatly help the translator by naming the agent of a passive, there remain many instances where passives are used with no agent. Even if the context makes it perfectly clear whether God is meant, there remains the tendency to use "they" uncritically where the agent is in fact God. Where God is meant, he should be named, and no "they" will suffice.

Some of the following examples have actually been found in otherwise careful translations:

Luke 24.26 Jesus departed from them and they took him up into heaven (should be: God took him up . . .)

Acts 1.5 They will baptize you with the Holy Spirit (should be: God will baptize you . . .)

Rom. 5.13 Since there was no law they didn't keep account of sins (should be: God took no account . . .)

1 Cor. 15.4 They buried him and they raised him from the dead (the first "they" is correct, the second should be "God").

This last example draws attention to the difference between "God raised Jesus from the dead" and "Jesus rose from the dead". Many translate "Jesus was raised" by "Jesus rose" as a matter of course; it must not be forgotten that "God raised Jesus" may be more suitable in some contexts.

It is instructive to examine the passives used in TEV. Choosing 1 Peter as a short sample text, we find that in only three cases is the agent stated, and only three have a human agent which can be translated by "they". Here is a list of passive verbs and participles in TEV 1 Peter, together with their active equivalents showing the agent:

1.1 God's chosen people = people whom God has chosen
1.2 you were chosen = God chose you
1.2 (you) were made a holy people = God made you a holy people
1.5 you who . . . are kept safe by God's power = you whom . . . God keeps safe by his power
1.5 the salvation which is ready to be revealed = the salvation which God has planned to reveal
1.7 gold . . . is tested by fire = they (men) test gold by fire
1.7 your faith . . . must also be tested = God must also test your faith
1.18 you know what was paid to set you free = what price God paid . . .
1.19 you were set free by the costly sacrifice of Christ = God set you free because of/by means of . . .
1.20 he had been chosen by God = God had chosen him.
1.20 (he) was revealed in these last days = God revealed him to men in these last days
1.21 your faith and hope are fixed on God = you can trust God and expect him to save you (compare Today's German NT)
2.4 the living stone rejected . . . by men = . . . which men rejected
2.4 but chosen . . . by God = but which God chose
2.5 let yourselves be used in building the spiritual temple = let God use you . . .
2.9 you are the chosen race = you are the race which God has chosen
2.9 chosen to proclaim the wonderful acts of God = God chose you to proclaim the wonderful things he has done
2.24 by his wounds you have been healed = Christ has healed you by means of his own wounds
2.25 you have been brought back to follow the Shepherd and Keeper of your souls = God has brought you back to follow Christ who can keep you like a shepherd keeps his sheep
3.18 he was put to death physically but made alive spiritually = they (men) killed him, but God's Spirit made him alive again
4.3 your lives were spent . . . = you spent your lives . . .
4.6 that is why the Good News was preached also to the dead = . . . Christ preached the Good News to the dead . . .

4.6 to those who had been judged . . . as all men are judged = to those whom God had judged . . . as he judges all men
4.6 it was preached to them = Christ preached it to them
4.14 happy are you if you are insulted = . . . if they (men) insult you
4.17 God's people are the first to be judged = God will judge his own people first
4.18 it is difficult for good men to be saved = it is only with great difficulty that God saves good men

W. A. A. WILSON

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We are happy to announce the appearance of a new UBS Journal, edited by the Rev. Paul D. Fueter and published by the UBS Sub-Committee on Distribution at the Europe Regional Centre (now Rue du Trône 160, 1050 Brussels, Belgium). The first (July 1975) issue of *The Bible Distributor* is an attractively duplicated 20-page journal which describes itself as "scientific", but "not boring or even heavy going". It is intended primarily for Bible Society distribution officers.