

REVIEW

Common English Bible. New Testament: A Fresh Translation to Touch the Heart and Mind. Nashville: Christian Resources Development Corporation. 2010. x + 444 pages. \$15.00. ISBN: 978-1-60926-006-4

It's hard to understand the purpose of this translation, or the readership for which it is intended. The first paragraph of the preface seems to indicate it was undertaken because "it has proved difficult to combine concern for accuracy and accessibility in one translation that the typical reader or worshipper would be able to understand." That's odd. People and committees have been at work on this at least ever since the *Twentieth Century New Testament* of 1901, many with considerably more success than CEB achieves. Perhaps this is an experiment in translational methodology, with well over a hundred biblical scholars—every one of them top notch—taking part in a joint venture with seventy-seven reading groups from many denominations. Maybe it was too complicated a procedure, with people getting in each other's way. The end result does not read smoothly and there are frequent translational stumbles of the most elementary sort.

Register. The register is constantly shifting. One can be reading along at a steady clip and then run up against a series of staccato sentences with a certain "Mac sees Muff. See Muff run" quality, e.g., Luke 3.16-17; Acts 13.4-7. Or one can be stopped cold by a sudden colloquialism ("You said it!" Matt 27.64; "He's done for," Mark 3.26; "Herodias had it in for John," Mark 6.19; "Isaiah really knew what he was talking about," Mark 7.6; "Take it easy," Luke 12.19; "No way!" Acts 16.37; "Don't fall for it," Acts 23.21; "no strings attached," Rom 12.8; "con artist," 2 Cor 12.16; "the person who walks all over God's Son," Heb 10.29). None of these are mistranslations. Each one expresses almost perfectly the meaning of the text, as colloquial idioms often do, but each one jumps out of the context and calls attention to its own cleverness. (A little too clever: Matt 3.2: "Change your hearts and lives! Here comes the kingdom of heaven!") The problem with colloquial expressions such as these is that no one can tell which ones will survive. This makes CEB a translation for a moment in time. Ten years from now some of these idioms will strike readers in the same way that "peachy keen" does us, and twenty years from now they will make the whole begin to sound a bit quaint. I can see such passages being illuminating in small group discussions, but for private devotion or liturgical use—not so much (if the reader will allow me a current colloquial idiom).

Poor translations. Some passages are just simply badly translated. In Matt 2.14, the Holy Family's flight to Egypt is done overnight (maybe an El Al flight?). Matt 6.18 raises the question: How do you fast to people? CEB: "Then you won't look like you are fasting to people." Matt 12.42 tells us why the Queen of the South will condemn this generation. It is because "she came from a distant land to hear Solomon's wisdom." Mark 11.11 offers an example of a very badly misplaced

clause: “After he looked around at everything, because it was already late in the evening, he returned to Bethany with the Twelve.” In Heb 9.13 the reader is arrested in midverse: “the sprinkled ashes of cows made spiritually contaminated”—before the sentence can be finished: “people holy and clean.” Consider Heb 11.39: “All these people didn’t receive what was promised,” which implies that some of them did—not the author’s intent. The ordinary reader is not going to understand what the scholar means at John 4.26, when Jesus tells the Samaritan woman, “I Am—the one who speaks with you.” Listeners will not hear that capital A. At Matt 15.24 Jesus says “I’ve been sent only to the lost sheep, the people of Israel.” Are the Gentiles not lost sheep? In John 1.45 we learn that Moses wrote the prophetic books as well as the Torah: “the one Moses wrote about in the Law and the Prophets.” The armor metaphor of Eph 6.13-17 is abandoned in v. 15, where the purpose of wearing shoes is to spread the gospel.

Consider this sentence: “The cat sat on the chair, watching her kittens, walking across the floor.” Who is walking across the floor? If you think “kittens,” you will not be surprised to learn in Matt 14.25 that the disciples, not Jesus, are walking on the water.

We all know that “happy” is not a particularly good translation of *makarios* in the Beatitudes, but we tolerate it since no one’s come up with anything better (unless it’s “blessed”), but it’s really weird to have happy eyes and ears in Matt 13.16.

Awkward grammar. Mark 4.23: “Whoever has ears to listen should pay attention.” Mark 4.27 talks of someone who “sleeps and wakes night and day.” Ambiguity: Heb 9.7: “only the high priest enters the second tent once a year.” By using “came” instead of “went” there is a sudden change of viewpoint in the middle of John 6.24: “When the crowd saw that neither Jesus nor his disciples were there, they got into the boats and came to Capernaum, looking for Jesus.” Maybe this is quantum translation, with the narrator on both sides of the lake at the same time.

Pronoun antecedents. Ironically, the preface devotes a paragraph to the problem of making clear the antecedents of pronouns. Let’s look at a few examples: Matt 11.1 (this verse is an entire section): “When Jesus finished teaching his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in *their* cities.” Mark 3.2 uses “they” as subject of a sentence, but nothing in the context (this is the second sentence of a section) tells who “they” are. Mark 7.34-35: “Jesus sighed deeply and said . . . ‘Open up.’ At once, his ears opened. . . .” The deaf man is further back; usually a pronoun refers to the last noun mentioned. Rules of inclusive language notwithstanding, “he” in Mark 8.38 sounds like it refers to “that person” rather than Jesus, the “Human One.” Another example of an unclear antecedent is at Mark 11.5-6: “Some people standing around said to them, ‘What are you doing, untying the colt?’ [Of course we are, what does it look like? I don’t think the translators or editors or anyone gave much thought to the force of that comma.] *They* told them just what Jesus said, and *they* left *them* alone.” Mark 15.21 is a paragraph to itself. “Simon . . . was coming in from the countryside. They forced him to carry *his* cross.” Consider Matt 13.4-5: “As he was scattering seed, some fell on the

path, and *birds* came and ate *it*. *Other seed* fell on rocky ground where the soil was shallow. *They* sprouted immediately.” The birds sprouted? At Mark 14.3, the woman is apparently pouring perfume on *Simon’s* head. Hebrews 5.13: “Everyone who lives on milk is not used to the word of righteousness [but some are?], because they are babies.” At the opening of a paragraph we read in Heb 8.7-8: “If the first covenant had been without fault, it wouldn’t have made sense to expect a second. But God did find fault with *them*.” In Heb 11.23-28 we have been reading about “he,” that is, Moses, as the subject in parallel sentences beginning with “By faith *he* . . .,” but suddenly in v. 29 we have “By faith *they* crossed the Red Sea.” The change is jolting and the only nearby plural antecedent for that pronoun is “firstborn children.” Are the children toddling across the sea all on their own? In truth, unclear antecedents for pronouns is one of the most striking grammatical faults in this translation.

We must mention the *qere perpetuum*: “the Human One” for “Son of Man.” I am not at all convinced that this is a good equivalent. This is not the place to discuss the matter in detail, but grant me leave to write a few words of protest. The Human One as opposed to the Canine One? Or maybe John’s Ovine One? If “Son of Man” can refer to humans in general, as perhaps it does in Mark 2.10 and parallels, “the Human One” excludes the possibility. In passages where Jesus is clearly referring to himself (Matt 8.20, 11.19, and parallels), “your humble servant” would be a better translation than “the Human One.” In the apocalyptic Son of Man sayings, “the Divine One” would be closer to the meaning. “Human One” sounds rather a peculiar term for a man to use when talking to a group of people—human ones. Until scholars get all this sorted out, it seems better to me simply to swallow hard, grind our teeth, and say “Son of Man.” It isn’t toxic. Plus, it’s parallel to “Son of God,” which often appears in CEB as “God’s son,” which misses the full implications of that term as well.

Footnotes. Footnotes are rare, which is not a criticism. But if there are going to be any at all, it seems that the reader deserves to know why the doxology to the Lord’s Prayer in Matthew is not in the text. Some cultural footnotes would have been nice, to explain such things as a sabbath-day’s journey, for instance. The alternative translation given in a note to Titus 1.6 is worth mentioning: for “spouse” in the text, the note reads “Or *they should be a one-woman man.*” That should “touch the heart and mind” of country music fans, anyway.

Section headings. The text is helpfully divided into sections with short section headings. I can’t help but point out, however, that some of them are funny if not mystifying. Mark 7.24: *An immigrant’s daughter is delivered* (no midwife around). Acts 5.1: *Pretenders of sharing*. Acts 16.1: *Paul adds Timothy*. Heb 1.5: *Speaking to the Son and angels*.

Fresh new translations. Now I must be fair and point out that there are some little gems here and there in CEB—imaginative, fresh translations. Let me mention some: In Matt 9.9, Matthew is sitting at a “kiosk”; Matt 26.73, “the way you talk gives you away”; Matt 27.29, “Hey! King of the Jews!”; Mark 3.22, “over and over they charged” (to translate the imperfect); Mark 4.37, “gale-force winds”;

Mark 6.6, “appalled by their disbelief”; Mark 11.16, “hideout”; Luke 12.55, “a heat wave is coming”; Acts 9.1, “spewing out murderous threats”; Acts 21.38, “terrorists”; James 3.10, “It just shouldn’t be this way.” The two men crucified with Jesus are “outlaws.”

Purpose of this new translation. I wish I could give a better accounting than this, but I am left still wondering what this translation is for. Who is the intended audience? What is the purpose? How do the translators and sponsors expect it to be used? I can’t really see it being widely used in services. It has no redeeming literary value at all. For college and seminary classes? I doubt it. Private or group study of small segments? Maybe so. I salute the superlative scholarship behind CEB, and wish it well, but the attractive illustration on the cover (the crown-like pattern left by a drop falling in water) has come to have a different meaning for me than the one intended. It seems that something just fell into the water. And sank.

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