

For Latter-day Saints accuracy must certainly be the most important standard of judgment in Bible translation. But the NEB is more readable than reliable. Since readability is also desirable, modern translations have their place. The L.D.S. Church is wise to retain its use of the King James Version, because its literalism permits a non-Greek reader to get as close as possible to the original language of the scriptures. In picking a supplementary translation, many of the last generation favored Goodspeed and many now favor Phillips. But both of these are characterized by the same freedom that moves the NEB away from translation and toward paraphrase. Certain conservative modernizations of the KJV have appeared. Although subject to the valid textual criticism of President J. Reuben Clark, the Revised Standard Version represents the best American scholarship, and it has the advantage of being a fairly conservative revision within the framework of the King James Version, in both goal and result. The NEB goal was different. Long ago a master of languages (George Barrow) said that translation is at best an echo. The New Testament of the New English Bible has more than its share of strange reverberations and muffled tones.

## THE NEW ENGLISH BIBLE: A LITERARY VIEW

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There is no use discussing the Bible as literature (whether the King James, the New English Bible, or any other version) with anyone who doesn't read it *as literature* but merely searches its pages for proofs of his predilections and prejudices. The proof-texting reader has never read the Bible.

One must remember, however, that it is because the Bible is great *literature* that it became important as theology, and not the other way around. It has had an amazing impact — and largely because of the way it is written. Great art doesn't merely reflect reality but creates it.

To fail to read the Bible as literature is to miss its intent. If Genesis is not read as epic, for example, its language will be easily distorted into a thousand foolish superstitions. If the Garden of Eden story is not read as myth, it becomes silly. If Jeremiah is not read as apocalyptic literature, it will lead one to disbelief. If the story of Job is read as a lesson in patience (the way Paul misread it) rather than as a collection of dramatized philosophical fragments championing man as rebel, it will have no impact. If the parables of Jesus are not read as riddles for excluding the weak-minded (as Jesus himself said they should be understood), they will be turned into soppy moralisms after the manner of the *Reader's Digest*. And so on through all its beautiful pages. If the Holy Ghost is to be found anywhere in its pages, it will be found by means of the literary form and style of the books, correctly understood and fully enjoyed.

I think, though, that over the ages the Bible has been read less for its meaning than for its sound. Think of all the ignorant who have taken to

it even though they may not have understood it and all the learned who have taken to it even though they may not have believed it. It has perhaps served more as ritual than as doctrine. That is, it has affected the ear more than the intellect. It has done what ritual does: not so much educate a body of believers as hold them together as a body of believers, and does so by virtue of its sensuous effect on them.

For that reason, if for no other, it may seem disturbing when a new version of the Bible is published, for it means that the ritual is changed, the effect of the sound of the words is changed, the way the body of believers coheres is changed. Change the sound of the ritual — whether the Mass or the sacrament prayers — and you change the way people are affected (if they are at all sensitive) by the ritual.

The Psalms are an example of the function of ritual in religion. They have by and large little intellectual content to them, certainly little or no doctrinal import for anyone other than the distorting fundamentalist, but yet have a great effect on people by virtue of the sound of the words, the rhythm of the phrasing, the movement from one image to another, and the conciseness of the structure. As a result, the Psalms have perhaps meant more to Jews and Christians than any other book in the Bible, though few seem to remember what they say, what they mean. They have performed the service of ritual. To varying degrees, the Bible may have served mainly this function for western religion — not as uplifting ideas but as unifying ritual. But such ritualization of religion is very much dependent on rigidity of form, and so when the form is changed, as it is in a new translation or a new interpretation or a new arrangement of the Scriptures, the ritual is disturbed and the faith dependent on that ritual is upset.

1611 is the most important date in English literary history. That is when the Authorized Version of the Bible (nicknamed the King James) was published. The Protestants rushed to canonize it as the true Word of God (as did the Mormons in due time, in 1868) and have by and large held to it as a means of keeping the believers together. (One must remember that the KJV was not so much a translation as a compilation and reworking of the best available texts by Renaissance England's best literary scholars and was specifically worked up to add power to the English Church.) Though there have been a number of doctrine-clarifying versions of the Bible since 1611 (few of them making substantial differences in the theology; even Joseph Smith's is hardly any different from the KJV), it is only with the liberalizing of Protestant politics and morality, mainly within this century, that new versions have been acceptable. Of course, with little justification, some still hold that what was published in 1611 is holier than what has been published since.

In 1970 the remarkable New English Bible was published (the New Testament of which was published separately in 1961). And though it is bound to ruffle the feathers of a few amateur church theologians,<sup>1</sup> still it

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<sup>1</sup>Job 19:25, for example, no longer reads, "For I know that my Redeemer liveth, and that he will stand at the latter day upon the earth," but to correct a corrupted text it has

should be a delight to those who at last wish to read the Scriptures in their own language — that is, in modern rather than Elizabethan English. For those to whom the Bible served as ritual (that is, one believed something because it *sounded* right and found others responding the same way), the new language of the NEB may be offensive. One gets used to Genesis 1:1-2 sounding like this:

In the beginning God created the heaven and the earth. And the earth was without form, and void; and the darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters.

rather than like this:

In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void, with darkness over the face of the abyss, and a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters.

And as a result one is tempted to see the newer version as untrue. But in reality its meaning is not substantially different, only its ritual effect. Likewise, when James 1:5-7,

If any of you lack wisdom, let him ask of God, that giveth to all men liberally, and upbraideth not; and it shall be given him. But let him ask in faith, nothing wavering. For he that wavereth is like a wave of the sea driven with the wind and tossed.

appears as

If any of you falls short in wisdom, he should ask God for it and it will be given him, for God is a generous giver who neither refuses nor reproaches anyone. But he must ask in faith, without a doubt in his mind; for the doubter is like a heaving sea ruffled by the wind. A man of that kind must not expect the Lord to give him anything.

things may fall apart in one's belief. Many will no doubt prefer the sound they are used to, however, to the clear sense they ought at last to understand. One may feel as the seventeenth-century New England Puritans felt about changing the wording of Scripture: "God's altar needs not our polishings."

But the New English Bible is not to be disregarded in this way. With some retraining of one's ear, one may come, through the NEB, to a greater enjoyment and understanding of Scripture — because here the language is apprehensible whereas in our own time the KJV isn't, and because here quite a number of ideas come clear where in the KJV they don't. Several examples may illustrate this.

(1) In the KJV account of Cain, the nature of his punishment is not

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in the NEB become: "But in my heart I know that my vindicator lives/and that he will rise last to speak in court." Similarly, Revelation 1:18, which makes Christ jailmaster of hell — "I am he that liveth, and was dead; and, behold, I am alive for evermore, Amen; and have the keys of hell and death" — now in the NEB does away with hell altogether: "I am the first and the last, and I am the living one; for I was dead and now I am alive for evermore, and I hold the keys of Death and Death's domain."

very clear. "Now art thou cursed from the earth. . . . When thou tillest the ground, it shall not henceforth yield unto thee her strength; a fugitive and a vagabond shalt thou be in the earth." The NEB clarifies the first part of this: "Now you are accursed, and banished from the ground," so that we do not take it that Cain is to be excluded from all the productive things of the earth but simply that he will from that point on do something besides farming. In the second part of this in the KJV, one may feel that the repeated, archaic "shall" is emphatic and final or that it shows God's relish in meting out cruel justice, whereas in the NEB the tone is compassionate: "When you till the ground, it will no longer yield you its wealth. You shall be a vagrant and a wanderer on earth." More important is the clarification over the mark on Cain. Cain complains that the punishment he has received is too great, for it leaves him without the Lord's protecting care; anyone can kill him. The KJV says rather flatly and sternly: "Therefore whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold. And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him." But again, in the NEB a compassionate Lord says that is not his intent; his intent is to protect and care for him even though he has done wrong: "'No,'" he says defensively and emphatically, "'if anyone kills Cain, Cain shall be avenged sevenfold.' So the Lord put a mark on Cain, in order that anyone meeting him should not kill him." In the KJV the negations may seem to be against Cain, because of the ambiguous syntax ("vengeance shall be taken on him"), the ambiguous reference to "him" (is it Cain or the one who harms Cain who will be punished?), and the archaic and unclear connective "lest." In the NEB the Lord specifically denies any malice, and it is perfectly clear that He is on the side of Cain against anyone who may try to take justice into his own hands.

(2) In the KJV, the universality of God's love is described in Romans 2:11 in usage that is no longer current and which is easily misunderstood: "There is no respect of persons with God." But the NEB makes Paul's intention much clearer with the simple line: "God has no favourites."

(3) Likewise, Matthew 5:48 is often used out of context to justify the Protestant Ethic, various secular self-improvement programs, and overweening human arrogance, because of its wording in the KJV: "Be ye perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect." But in context it means no such thing. Jesus is discussing love for one's neighbor and one's enemy and the NEB translation takes that into consideration when it says that Jesus ended by saying: "There must be no limit to your goodness, as your heavenly Father's goodness knows no bounds." As the NEB clarifies, one is not expected to be perfect in everything, but perfect in love.

By recommending the NEB, I do not mean to underestimate the literary and doctrinal importance of the KJV. J. Reuben Clark was right to call it "the best record . . . that has yet been revealed."<sup>2</sup> However, a good case can

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<sup>2</sup>*Why the King James Version?* (Salt Lake City, 1956), p. 7. President Clark's discussion, which is much more concerned with the ritual effect of the KJV than with either accuracy or clarity, is an attack directed against the Revised Standard Version of 1946.

be made, I believe, for now moving on and reading the NEB instead of (or rather, after and alongside) the King James.

In the first place, the NEB is in our language. *How* the Bible is written should no longer be a barrier to anyone. To hold to the KJV because archaic usage sounds more "literary" and "lofty" and therefore more "spiritual" is both phony esthetics and foolish religiosity. It is also arrogant, in view of the fact that most people have not read, do not read, will not read anything in the Bible. The archaic language of the KJV itself is often to blame. For a theologian to maintain that a certain Bible should be kept because it justifies his religious interests rather than caring if the version is even readable or not is a dangerous religious leader. Would one always prefer correctness to understandability? That would take us back to the Middle Ages when only scholars knew what the Scriptures said. Even for the experienced reader of Scripture today, with the fog of remote usages removed, it should be much easier to see how Genesis functions as epic, Jeremiah as apocalypse, Job as revolutionary literature, and so on. The new clarity in language can help one to see the meaning of works in their entirety rather than having one's attention focused on the ritual delight of a few memorable lines.

For a Latter-day Saint, the main barrier to an acceptance of the clearly readable NEB will no doubt be the widely held and not entirely well-founded belief that when God desires that the world should have a new Bible, He will direct the proper authorities in the Church to accomplish this.<sup>3</sup> There were of course no Mormons among the King James scholars. Joseph Smith's reworking of the KJV is not an authorized version in the Church. No one is undertaking a version in the Church nor seems inclined at present to do so. And one must remember that our Articles of Faith emphasize *belief* in the Bible and not the exclusive attachment to any particular translation.

Officially, we may cling to the KJV as a missionary tool<sup>4</sup> out of the assumption that if anybody knows the Bible at all he will know the KJV, out of the fear that outsiders may suspect we are using some inside version advantageous to our own dogma, and out of the desire to communicate our faith as widely as possible. But my experience is that the first two of these assumptions cannot be safely made. The missionary who gives a man the KJV to read may be putting a great barrier between him and the truth. As to the last defense, if communication is the objective, then the NEB would make a much more effective missionary version, for the main doctrinal points of the Church are made much more clearly and honestly in it. Some rather

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<sup>3</sup>How seriously and fallaciously this idea is held to is seen in the example of Reed C. Durham, Jr.'s discussion, "A History of Joseph Smith's Revision of the Bible" (unpub. diss., BYU, 1965), which claims that this is one of the basic tenets of the Church but offers no authoritative proof that this is so.

<sup>4</sup>Typically, J. W. Fleming of the School of the Prophets proclaimed in 1868: "[The] King James translation is good enough; it is a great club in the hands of the elders bringing sinners to light — I feel to support the old bible until we can get a better one." — *Minutes of the School of the Prophets*, July 6, 1868, pp. 53-4.



foolish dogma has been concocted because somebody somewhere couldn't read Elizabethan English and some mighty strange things have been believed because the language of the KJV led one to believe them.

There is a second justification for the NEB besides its impressive clarity of ideas. That is, its value as a literary classic: it is *beautifully* written. The 25 years that have gone into its making have paid off in a book worth reading often alongside the KJV. The beauty is of a different kind from that of the KJV and a great deal of retraining of one's ear may be necessary to learn to delight in it. Missionary work is a small fraction of the use to which the Bible is put; in all others the factor of beauty is an important one. To find beauty in its language is to consent to it. To delight in it is a form of religious devotion.

There is some extremely delightful phrasing in the NEB. Notice, for example, the following:

## KJV

For as the body without the spirit is dead, so faith without works is dead also.

The wilderness and the solitary place shall be glad for them; and the desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice even with joy and singing.

Remember now thy Creator in the days of thy youth, while the evil days come not, nor the years draw nigh, when thou shalt say, I have no pleasure in them.

As God liveth, who hath taken away my judgment; and the Almighty, who hath vexed my soul; all the while my breath is in me, and the spirit of God is in my nostrils; my lips shall not speak wickedness, nor my tongue utter deceit. God forbid that I should justify you: till I die I will not remove mine integrity from me. My righteousness I hold fast, and will not let it go: my heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.

## NEB

As the body is dead when there is no breath left in it, so faith divorced from the deeds is lifeless as a corpse.

Let the wilderness and the thirsty land be glad,  
let the desert rejoice and burst into flower.  
Let it flower with fields of asphodel,  
let it rejoice and shout for joy.

Remember your Creator in the days of your youth, before the time of trouble comes and the years draw near when you will say, 'I see no purpose in them.'

I swear by God, who has denied me justice,  
and by the Almighty, who has filled me with bitterness:  
so long as there is any life left in me and God's breath is in my nostrils, no untrue word shall pass my lips and my tongue shall utter no falsehood.  
God forbid that I should allow you to be right;  
till death, I will not abandon my claim to innocence.  
I will maintain the rightness of my cause, I will never give up;  
so long as I live, I will not change.

Resist no evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also. And if any man will sue thee at the law, and take away thy coat, let him have thy cloke also. And whosoever shall compel thee to go a mile, go with him twain. Give to him that asketh thee, and from him that would borrow of thee turn not thou away.

Do not set yourself against the man who wrongs you. If someone slaps you on the right cheek, turn and offer him your left. If a man wants to sue you for your shirt, let him have your coat as well. If a man in authority makes you go one mile, go with him two. Give when you are asked to give; and do not turn your back on a man who wants to borrow.

Search the scriptures; for in them ye think ye have eternal life: and they are they which testify of me. And ye will not come to me, that ye might have life.

You study the scriptures diligently, supposing that in having them you have eternal life; yet, although their testimony points to me, you refuse to come to me for that life.

Quotations such as these put the NEB to a real test for the KJV seems to express the ideas perfectly. In such cases the NEB is not more delightful than the KJV; it is simply *also* beautiful. To have both modern clarity and delightful language in a version of the Bible is a kind of miracle.

Moreover, the books of the NEB are printed in literary form the way they should be. The Song of Songs/Song of Solomon, for example, is printed as a play, and so one realizes that there is a marriage ritual going on in it; it is not merely an allegory of the Messiah and the Church. The poetry of individual books is printed in Hebrew verse form, and a difference in meaning and enjoyment results, as one sees in Isaiah 2:3, where the parallel lines of verse tell us that not a separate Zion and a separate Jerusalem are meant but a single, central Zion. Throughout, chapter and verse marking no longer disturb one's reading, and there are, blessedly, no prejudicial footnotes. One is much more alone with naked ideas, and that is as it should be. To be put in the position of having to deal with the ideas of the Bible more directly and honestly is a valuable spiritual challenge.

If one has read the KJV sensitively over the years, his loyalty will be to the KJV, for it has trained his ear. It is valuable to learn, however, that religion is not a matter of the ear but of clear thinking and honest feeling. Reading the NEB can encourage these in a new age, the latter days.