

NEW BIBLICAL VERSIONS¹

BY

REGINALD GINNS, O.P.



THE desire to have Holy Writ put into modern terminology and so made easy of apprehension seems reasonable enough, especially since the past century has brought about such a remarkable revolution in manners of life and thought, a change chiefly notable for its departure from the immemorial customs of our fathers. Consequently we no longer find it easy to understand either the manners or the speech of the past. Add to this the apparent paradox that the easier communication becomes between one people and another, between one part of the world and another, the more narrow-minded and insular we seem to become. The paradox is only apparent, for true internationalism depends not on material conditions but on the things of the mind; aeroplanes and the radio do not necessarily help towards that. Someone has observed that never was the truth so hard to come by as it has been since the invention of wireless communication. Certainly there seems to have been much more true internationalism in the Middle Ages, and even further back in the heyday of Greek culture, when means of travel were difficult and news took years to arrive. Athens had already entered into its decline when, as St Luke says, 'all the Athenians and the strangers that were there employed themselves in nothing else but either in telling or in hearing some new thing'.

One of the reasons for our insularity is that we no longer have that facility for languages other than our own which was formerly so common. When we first read the boast of Roger Bacon that he could teach anyone Greek or Hebrew in a few lessons we smile sceptically; but perhaps our smile condemns us much more than it condemns him. The fact remains that most of us find it hard to read a book profitably in any language but our own, and even books in our mother tongue we like to have written in such a way that the meaning emerges without much thought. Not philosophy alone but everything else we want without tears. Not that we are altogether blameable for this. Education is not what it was, even though its cost today is fabulous in terms of pounds, shillings and

¹ *La Sainte Bible, traduite en français sous la direction de l'Ecole Biblique de Jerusalem* (Les Editions du Cerf; Blackfriars). The Holy Bible, translated by Ronald A. Knox (Burns Oates; 21s.)

NOTE.—The new French translations may be obtained from *Blackfriars Publications*, Oxford. The prices per volume range from 2s. to 8s.

penance. In the current year the poor British tax-payer is asked to find £250 million for state education, and the estimate for next year adds a further £20 million. But here again it is the material side of education that absorbs most of our efforts, and good buildings are no guarantee of good education.

A parallel sign of the times is the propaganda for the use of the vernacular in the liturgy, a propaganda that can by no means be condemned without consideration. *Sacramenta sunt propter homines*, and we have to deal with man as we find him. In his treatise on the Sacraments St Thomas observes that they are divinely intended for man's benefit in a triple way: they provide us with the essential means of worshipping God; they preserve us from man's perennial inclination to superstition; and finally they *instruct* us about our relationship to God because they are signs. Now instruction, like everything else that has to be communicated, must be received in the way that the recipient can receive it. *Quidquid recipitur ad modum recipientis recipitur*. It is in the light of the same principle that we ought to judge new versions of the Scriptures. Are they really translations? Are they adapted to the mentality of those for whom they are intended? There are other considerations, of course, but they are only secondary; I mean such considerations as the question of the idiom and literary style of the translation, and it must be admitted that in the Church's tradition these secondary conditions tended to be sacrificed in favour of the primary considerations. We have all heard of the renaissance scholars who refused to say their breviary because it spoilt their Latin style, and perhaps they said the same about the Vulgate.

Not long ago we were presented with a new Latin Psalter which some hope will replace the Latin psalms used by the Church during nearly the whole of her life, and doubtless this foreshadows further efforts to replace all the ancient Vulgate. As in the case of the Knox version of the New Testament, the new Psalter gave rise to criticism which at times became somewhat acrimonious; but no one who remembers the history of the Bible will find anything surprising in that. The justest and most damaging criticism so far made against the new Psalter is that offered by L. Bouyer in *La Maison Dieu* (No. 14, 1948). While admitting that the Hebrew text has been *admirablement établi et interprété par l'Institut Biblique*, he condemns the translation from the literary point of view as being no recognisable form of Latin literature, neither Ciceronian nor ecclesiastical. He means by ecclesiastical the language of the Latin Fathers, of the Roman liturgy, of the Psalter itself in the form used by the Church for so many centuries; it is not classical Latin, but it is none the less a language that has its beauties and is well

adapted to serve its purpose. Moreover it has the advantage of being in a certain sense a living language on account of its long usage in the Church. Whereas the language of the new Psalter is neither a living nor a dead language; '*c'est une langue qui n'a jamais existé comme langue*'. It is the sort of Latin we learnt to write at school, and it was called 'good Latin' when we kept the rules of grammar and syntax, but it was none the less a purely artificial language. Bouyer, therefore, and many of us will agree readily with him, regrets that the new Psalter has neglected what may be called the classical Latin of the Church. Here might well have been applied the saying of a wise man: when it is not necessary to change, it is necessary not to change. The occasion for such a change might never have arisen if, as the venerable Père Lagrange used to say, the commission set up to revise the Vulgate text some half century ago had not limited its labours merely to the task of reconstituting the original text of St Jerome, but had gone on to make the corrections which modern biblical scholarship had shown to be both possible and necessary.

However there is much to be said for the slowness and conservatism of the Church in the matter of biblical translations, and the recent discovery of the old Hebrew MSS of the Bible confirms this view. In the April number of the *Revue Biblique* there is an article in which the author discusses the value of these MSS and the various opinions of the palaeographical experts. Some think they date from the second century B.C., others put them a century later, others again assign them to about 100 A.D. According to one opinion they cannot be earlier than the twelfth century A.D., while some declare that they are forgeries. The author finds it *impossible de se prononcer d'une façon ferme sur la date probable de nos manuscrits*; but he goes on to pronounce firmly that the style of writing leads him to assign them to the Herodian epoch, therefore at the earliest to the latter half of the first century B.C. He wrote too soon, for further investigations at the place of discovery made it necessary to add a postscript which confounds most of the critics and the experts. As was pointed out in the *Times* of 9 August by G. Lankester Harding, who is in charge of the investigations, it may now be taken as certain that the MSS are more than a thousand years older than any Hebrew text of the Bible previously known, the oldest dated copy being the Leningrad MSS of the Prophets written in 916 A.D. None of them is later than the beginning of the first century B.C. and some of them are probably much older. So the Church is not so unreasonable as she might seem in hesitating to give official sanction to new translations, seeing that any day a new discovery may throw much needed light on what

is at present obscure. Experienced biblical scholars use the same prudence when, in dealing with obscurities of the sacred text, they bid us not to sacrifice a difficult reading for the sake of a facile emendation; the difficult reading is likely to be the correct one. We do not yet know the full extent of the recent discovery since there has been much secrecy observed; but it may be that among the MSS there will be found an ancient copy of the Psalms which may necessitate changes in the new Psalter. Nothing is so confusing for the faithful as frequent changes in the sacred text. It was for this reason that St Jerome made his first revision of the Latin version of the New Testament with so light a hand, at the same time bitterly complaining of the facile way in which unpractised hands had dealt with the Scriptures. *Exemplaria scripturarum toto orbe dispersa . . . inter se variant. Tot sunt paene quot codices.* And the reason is that they are *vel a vitiosis interpretibus male edita, vel a praesumptoribus imperitis emendata perversius, vel a librariis dormitantibus aut addita sunt aut mutata.*

St Jerome would, it seems to me, welcome with approval *La Sainte Bible traduite en Français sous la direction de l'Ecole Biblique de Jérusalem*. It may be said in the first place that this is no production of hasty work or undigested scholarship. The Ecole Biblique has to its credit more than fifty years of continual study and research, and as far as I know this is the first time it has put its hand to the work of producing a new translation of the Bible. Nor is it the work of one man, for no one man seems sufficient for such a task. A team of translators and revisors has been gathered from among eminent French biblical scholars and literary men, and the first results of the enterprise fulfil the promise held out by such a prudent scheme. The work is published in small fascicules by the well-known *Editions du Cerf*, and already there have appeared seven containing Mark (Huby, S.J.), Luke (Osty, P.S.S.), Macchabees (Abel, O.P.), Ecclesiastes (Pautrel, S.J.), Ezechiel (Auvray, Oratorian), Aggeus, Zacharius and Malachias (Gelin, P.S.S.), and the Epistles to the Corinthians (Osty, P.S.S.). It will be objected that there can be no literary unity in a work of this kind. But why should there be? The sooner we get rid of the idea that the Bible is a book the better. It is not a book but a library; its authors were spread over a period of at least 1,300 years, and the matter treated of in its various books deals with such a diversity of subjects as history, law, ethics, poetry, religion and drama.

The text of this translation is not broken up in verses but into paragraphs according to the sense, with titles descriptive of the subject inset in heavy type. Textual references are placed in the margin and there are numerous explanatory notes at the foot of

the page. One criticism may here be offered, namely that the text is over-encumbered with signs indicative of versification and notes. Thus the first four verses of Luke are marked with seven such signs to the detriment of straightforward reading. Verse figures might have been put alongside the text, and the intelligent reader will not need to be reminded to look at the foot of the page for notes. Each book is preceded by an introductory essay dealing with the sacred author and the character and purpose of his book, all done in excellent style. Indeed the whole work promises to fulfil a long-felt need on the part of the Catholic student and layman. As for the application of the above mentioned principle according to which we ought to judge the value of the translation, namely its fidelity to the original and its adaptability to the mentality of the general reader, it seems to me that it easily passes the test. It deserves to be called a translation and not a free paraphrase. No liberties are taken with the sacred text in an endeavour to produce a fine French style which is not the style of the author, an endeavour which always runs the risk of sacrificing substance for the sake of accidental form. Indeed, as it has been wisely said, 'the problem confronting every translator is the choice of sacrifice, because all translation implies some loss'. Hence the Italian proverb, *Traduttori traditori*. No one felt this more strongly than Dante who, in the *Convivio*, warns us that no literature can be changed from one language to another without shattering all its sweetness and harmony; and that, he says, is why Homer, 'the monarch of sublimest song' has never been turned from Greek into Latin up to his time.

Still there is no reason why a man should not seek his own and others' advantage by trying to express idiomatically in his own mother tongue the thoughts of some ancient classic. Most of us have tried it at one time or another, whether for our own amusement or under the compulsion of the school-master. This is what Monsignor Knox has now done for us with the Old Testament, half of which he has recently presented to the public in a new English dress, modestly inviting criticism. With equal modesty he warns the reader that it is in no sense what we are accustomed to call an authorised translation, even though it bears the *imprimatur* of the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster and was undertaken at his request, as the title page informs us. In the fine dedication he claims no more for himself than the title of *indignus interpres*. But while manifesting such a becoming modesty he is ready to lay aside the garments of humility in order to deal with those who make criticisms of his work that seem to him foolish and inept, as one may see in the little book recently published under the title *Englishing the Bible*. He has thoughtfully adopted his standpoint and is

prepared to defend it vigorously. To those who object that his manner of translating is untraditional he replies that he could not agree with them more completely. Has he not said from the start that he does not wish to be traditional in the sense of translating after the manner of his predecessors? 'There is no official translation of the Bible known to me', he wrote in the *Clergy Review* of February 1940, 'which does not abandon from the start the dream of preserving its native idiom, which does not resign itself from the start to being a word-for-word translation'. And this he says not merely of Catholic but also of Protestant official translations. With no undue modesty he here declares that this latest work 'gives my idea of how the Old Testament ought to be translated'. It is a brave claim for any man to make, especially in view of the weight of tradition behind the contrary opinion.

Critics of his work naturally fall into three classes: the traditionalists, especially those who like the taste of the old phraseology to which they have grown accustomed by long use; those who pass judgment on the literary style of Monsignor Knox; and lastly, the biblical experts.

The last named are disarmed by the translator's frank avowal that he does not 'prejudge the question whether the mind of the sacred authors is accurately and fully represented'. On the contrary he invites their help. On this point it seems necessary to say that one reviewer has done Monsignor Knox no service in writing that the translator 'has made it plain that he does not intend to preserve a *faithful* rendering of the original texts'. If the rendering is not faithful, then what we have is not the Bible but something new and foreign to the mind of the sacred authors. Surely faithful in Mgr Knox's context means that word-for-word translation which he has rejected from the start, in favour of the attempt to express in English idiom what a writer said two or three thousand years ago in Hebrew idiom. Most of the literary critics agree, and have said in a flattering manner, that he has succeeded here in a way that perhaps none of his contemporaries could hope to rival. Whether those of us who are less literary will show an equal welcome to the new translation still remains to be seen. At any rate the generality of the Catholic laity will have no reason to object to it because it differs so remarkably from the Douay Version, since as a rule they are not noticeably familiar with the style of the Douay Old Testament. When Protestants accuse Catholics of not reading the Bible they mean the Old Testament, for which they have always shown a great predilection. An old convert of mine used to remark that his former Protestant colleagues were Old Testament Christians. So if Monsignor Knox's translation succeeds

in persuading Catholics to read their Old Testament we shall be gainers all round. And those who do not like his style need not read it, since his translation is published 'for private use only'. They can always return to the Douay. Unless I am mistaken, this is what has happened in the case of the New Testament translation; many have tried it and returned to the Douay.

But there is no need to be surprised if this is the case. St Jerome was well aware of how traditional we all are in matters of this kind. When at the request of Pope Damasus he undertook the work of revising the Latin text of the New Testament, his first difficulty was which of the Latin texts in use he should adopt as exemplar; there were almost as many versions as copies, for as he complains, 'whenever a Greek codex came into any person's hands and he thought he had sufficient knowledge of the two languages he ventured to make a translation'. Eventually he made up his mind which of the versions was the least reprehensible, but even then 'to avoid any great discrepancy from the Latin we are accustomed to read, I have used my pen with restraint'. So while correcting the passages which gave a manifestly false rendering of the Greek original, he allowed the rest to remain as they were despite their imperfections. He used the same moderation sometimes in his work on the Old Testament when producing a fresh translation into Latin from the Hebrew.

It might be objected, however, that there are limits to what ought to be done in making allowances for traditional sentiment, and perhaps Monsignor Knox feels that the limits have been reached and passed. Certainly the history of St Jerome seems to indicate that he might have done better work had he not been so much hindered by such considerations as well as by the objections of his antagonists.