

N.W.T.

Review of the *New World Translation* by Steven T. Byington, in *The Christian Century*

(The following is from “*The Christian Century*”, November 1, 1950)

NEW WORLD TRANSLATION OF THE CHRISTIAN GREEK SCRIPTURES. *Rendered from the Original Language by the New World Bible Translation Committee. Watchtower Bible and Tract Society, Brooklyn, \$1.60.*

JEHOVAH’S Witnesses have made their own translation of the book for which they consider “New Testament” an illegitimate name. It is well supplied with faults and merits.

In accordance with human nature, the reader will first notice faults. The first to catch his eye will be the unwise typographical trick of distinguishing the second person plural from the singular by printing the word in small capitals when the meaning is plural. Possibly he may notice next that instead of “cross” we have everywhere “torture stake,” in favor of which translation something can be said, and instead of “crucify” always “impale,” in favor of which nothing can be said, for “impale” has in English the settled meaning of thrusting the stake through the vitals, not of fastening the body to a stake outside the body. An appendix says very positively that Jesus was fastened to a simple upright pole, not to a pole with a crosspiece. This agrees with Fulda’s book *Das Kreuz* but is against the weight of evidence, though the appendix says there is no evidence at all for the crosspiece.

The specialty which the book itself most emphasizes is the use of the name Jehovah instead of “the lord” in 237 places, besides 72 more in the margin. Fifteen pages of the preface present the arguments to justify this. I think the justification insufficient; but the “Jehovah” does not shock a reader.

The version purports to be modern in idiom. Actually this is the most uneven thing about it. Archaic expressions like “minister” (usually as verb) and “tribulation” are not rare in it. Along with them we find homely current idiom which sometimes comes with a Moffatt-like vividness. Luke 14: 18, “. . . they all in common started to beg off.” Acts 16: 15, “And she just made us come.” Rev. 18: 16, “Too bad, too bad, as great a city as she was.” The verb “resurrect” is used freely.

Conjunctions are treated loosely; *de* in particular is commonly rendered as an adverb, and becomes a surprisingly wide variety of adverbs.

The main fault is overtranslation. I mean that, where a Greek word may be found to carry an implication in addition to its rough meaning, this implication is made explicit, frequently by an added word. This fault is common to various translators, who usually claim it as a merit, but the New World Translation goes rather far. The tenses of verbs are rendered not only by such forms as “would say” or “was saying” but also by inserting “begin to” or “continue to” where the tense is deemed to be inceptive or continuative. Other words have an extra word added to “bring out the meaning”; a bad case is the regular insertion of “undeserved” or the like before whatever translation is given for “grace.” Compound verbs suffer especially by overtranslation of the prefix, in which (as in other distinctions of synonyms) an imaginary meaning is sometimes brought in. The translators trusted their dictionary too much, not realizing that dictionaries are uninspired. What may happen to the words for “go” is seen in Luke 9:56-57, “So they traveled to a different village . . . I will follow you to wherever you may depart.” Yet a little work with the Greek concordance to examine the renderings elsewhere given to these same words for “go” will decidedly increase your respect for the skill and good taste of the translators.

Another aspect of “bringing out the meaning” is exemplified by the occasional substitution of “means” for “is.” This is commentary rather than translation.

Of course where there is controversy over the exegesis of a text the translators have used their own judgment, sometimes radical, sometimes conservative. And of course, where a traditional mistranslation is not customarily pointed out by commentators, the translators have not usually corrected it. Yet sometimes they have done so. They have inserted “is,” required by both Hebrew and Greek grammar, in the translation of “Immanuel.” They have recognized that birds lodge not in nests but on roosts, and that the Greek word is the conventional biblical Greek equivalent for the Hebrew word for roost. In the parable of the mustard seed they have recognized the importance of the definite article, “the seeds” (i.e., those that men plant), “the vegetables” (the botanists’ “herb” is, in the usage of Greek botanists, a different word).

“Bishop,” as the designation of a functionary not over the local church but within it, has become “overseer” (trusting to the uninspired dictionary again). Would not “church visitor” have corresponded better to the meaning of *episkeptomai*? Or is that a delusive argument?

The arrangement of verse numbers is that of the Revised Standard Version. But where the hasty eye confuses the R.S.V. verse numbers with quotation marks, the N.W.T. escapes this confusion by making its verse numbers much lighter. The use of a cheap quality of paper enables the publishers to cut the price below the already low price of the R.S.V.

The book does not give enjoyable continuous reading; but if you are digging for excellent or suggestive renderings, this is among the richer mines.

STEVEN T. BYINGTON

(The following is from “The Christian Century”, May 9 1951, pages 587 – 589)

How Bible Translators Work

Behind the Scenes in the Preparation of a New Version of the New Testament

Explanation by the Editors of “The Christian Century:

A NEW VERSION of the New Testament in English was published last year by the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society (Jehovah’s Witnesses). This translation, prepared by the New World Bible Translation Committee with evident intent to achieve faithfulness to the precise meaning of the Greek text, contained a number of variations from the familiar translations of so striking a nature as to arouse the interest of scholars everywhere. It was reviewed for The Christian Century on November 1 by Steven T. Byington, himself a noted translator. Later, the *New World Bible Translation Committee* prepared an extended comment on points raised by Mr. Byington in his review, and at the request of The Christian Century Mr. Byington has written a reply to this comment. The exchange between the committee and Mr. Byington gives such an illuminating glimpse into the way in which translators of the Bible work that we are sure it will prove of great interest to the readers of this paper.

-THE EDITORS

SIR: The Nov 1, 1950, issue of your magazine has come to our attention, as its Survey of Books takes under review the New World Translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures. The criticism on this translation which you published gives evidence of being made by a Greek scholar who has given the work no cursory examination but has delved into it deeply with an appreciation of values, being himself a Bible translator. We value his criticism and respect the standards of judgment by which he is guided.

Theories of Translation

When entering upon such a responsible task and exacting work as translating the Scriptures into modern English, the translator has to choose between two schools of thought, that which believes the *koine* Greek of apostolic times had lost much of its fine classical distinctions between words and hence only the rough meaning of the words should be used and rendered into the English; and that school which believes the Christian writers wrote with still a sense of the precise meaning and usage of words indicated by various prefixes to words which have a

common root. Out of regard for Christian feelings toward the Holy Scriptures the New World Bible Translation Committee leaned toward the literal translation of the Greek text and this inclined it to the latter school of thought. The translation it produced was meant not merely for good, enjoyable reading but more particularly for use of searching students of God's Word who do not have ready access to Greek dictionaries and exhaustive Bible concordances.

This accounts, for instance, between *gnosis* and *epignosis*, for the renderings "knowledge" and "accurate knowledge," the prefix *epi* denoting a distinction between the two Greek words. (See Rom. 1:28; 2:20.) Turning to page 787 of the appendix of the translation you note the "Chain of Outstanding Bible Subjects and Proper Bible Names," by use of which you can follow the same English word or the basic Greek word straight through its appearances from first to last. You note the list contains *kindness*, *lovingkindness* and *undeserved kindness*. These three English expressions represent three different unrelated Greek words, the last one being *charis* which many translators render *grace*. But the proper meaning of *grace* is not clear to readers in general. In Scripture it has many times the meaning the New World Translation gives it, *undeserved kindness*, so that using the qualifying adjective "undeserved" is not to be viewed as needless or an overtranslation of the Greek word *charis*. It differentiates *charis* from other forms of kindness represented by other Greek words. Correspondingly the verb *charizomai* contains the element of kindness and this is retained in translating it *kindly* or *freely forgive*, to distinguish it from merely *forgive* which renders the verb *aphiemi*, as in the Lord's Prayer.

"YOU" is rendered in all capitals when it is in the plural, in the same way that in some other translations "LORD" is put in all capitals to indicate to the eye that it stands for "Jehovah," in contrast with "Lord" which means merely "master" or "sir" or which applies to Jesus. How valuable this feature is can be appreciated, for instance, in the Sermon on the Mount where Jesus swings back and forth between singular *you* meaning an individual there and plural *YOU* meaning the people. The plurality is sometimes pointed up by rendering it "YOU men" or "YOU people" (Luke 16:26; 22:31,32).

Why 'Jehovah'?

The name "Jehovah" is not put in the English text arbitrarily or according to whim. Why it is authorized the foreword explains. Every time the name occurs the footnotes show which of the 19 Hebrew translations from the 14th century onward agree with the New World Translation. The foreword gives a brief history of each of these Hebrew translations, as well as a table of 38 different modern missionary translations which use 20 different vernacular forms of "Jehovah" in the Christian Greek Scriptures. This helps readers instantaneously to distinguish between the Father and the Son. Why "Jehovah" is preferred to "Yahweh" is explained in the foreword.

The Hebrew words *Hosanna* and *Hallelujah* are not transliterated as though they were some ritualistic formula but are translated, respectively, "Save, we pray," and "Praise Jah, YOU people." At Rom. 9:17 concerning Pharaoh the translation says "let you remain" to agree with the Hebrew text and Greek Septuagint, instead of "made you stand" according to the usual rendering.

Since "hell" is such a controversial subject, the three Greek words which the King James Version renders by this one old English word are transliterated "Hades" "Gehenna" and "Tartarus," and the historical and scriptural explanation of each is given in the appendix. *Psyche* is rendered *soul* in each of its 102 occurrence; which serves to give the reader a revealing insight into what it is.

Was There a Cross?

Whether Jesus was suspended on an upright post or the traditional cross has long been a mooted question. When the Jews called out for him to be suspended, they properly cried "Impale him!" as they were not privileged to dictate to the Roman governor what form Jesus' impalation should take. The textual and historical bases for rendering *stauroo* "impale" and *stauros* "torture stake" are supplied in the appendix.

The endeavor to show up the tense of the Greek verb and indicate the form and not merely the time of the action results in many clarifying idiomatic expressions that give vividness to the English verb.

All in all, the New World Translation shows nothing loose, careless or indifferent about it. It commends itself to those who want to attain a more precise understanding of the inspired writings of Christ's disciples, and thereby to delight themselves more in God's life-giving Word.

NEW WORLD BIBLE TRANSLATION COMMITTEE
Brooklyn, N. Y.

Mr. Byington Comments

SIR: I agree that precise meanings and fine discriminations existed in biblical Greek, and that the authors are to be credited with saying what they meant. I agree that it is a proper translator's business to be conscious of the fine shades of meaning and, so far as the language he has to use permits, to make his readers conscious of them. Of course the historical changes of any language interfere with synonyms: a distinction may be lost, as in English the distinction between "enow" and "enough," or a new distinction may be created, as in heathen Greek *bruchō* and *trizo* are of identical meaning, "to set the teeth hard," but in biblical Greek *trizo* keeps this meaning while *bruchō* means "to grind the teeth" in anger or pain. And styles may depend on personal habit, as the evangelist Mark is continually saying *euthus* where another writer might more probably have said *eutheos* or sometimes *parachrema* or *exautes*; yet Mark means the same as the other man might have meant. And pedants may allege differences of meaning that never existed in actual use, as in English "each other" and "one another," or "further" and "farther," or may persistently echo each other in giving a false account of a difference, as in the statement that in English "between" is properly used only of two things and should be changed to "among" where more than two are in question. But a language does not lose its fineness of meaning by any of these phenomena.

More Accuracy Needed

So I do not object because the New World Translation wants to recognize distinctions. I would sometimes have had it go farther. For instance (just now my copy of the New World Translation is lent to the public library, but I think my memory is right) in Matt. 17:22 I would have had it recognize that the verb given by the best manuscripts carries the implication of assembling for an insurrectionary or riotous purpose, so we have here the record that a group tried to get up an insurrection to be headed by Jesus, and "took it very hard" when he squelched their plan by declaring that if it came to violence he would take a passive part. Correct translation at this point would be a useful wet blanket to those fiction-mongers who nowadays claim that Jesus' movement was in fact a plan of armed insurrection.

But I did object that the New World Translation, usually following dictionaries (which, as I remarked, are not inspired), sometimes gives a false "special sense" and sometimes gives a false emphasis, which to my mind is as much a mistranslation as any other falsity.

A Mistake in Emphasis

The committee's letter makes a point which well illustrates the first objection. It says, with support from dictionaries and from the revisers of 1881, that in *epignosis* the prefix has the force of "accurately" or "fully". In other words, the prefix is a mere intensive. But it is not so; see the note on this word at the end of J. Armitage Robinson's commentary on Ephesians. (I noticed the point for myself before I found it in Robinson, therefore it is obvious enough to strike different students working independently; but Robinson has collected much fuller evidence than I did.) *Epiginosko*, *epignosis*, are the ordinary scriptural words for "recognize" (Acts 4:13) and "recognition"; this carries the translator some distance, for instance over Rom.

1 :28, the committee's citation. But apart from this, the compound word has the sense of knowledge by direct observation and not by intellectual process. I Cor. 13:12 is easier to understand when you know the sense of the verb than to translate; I felt driven to translate "I shall be aware in the same way as he was aware of me," sacrificing the passive voice to avoid sacrificing the special meaning of the verb. It will be noted that this interpretation, based on evidence, gives a much more special sense than "know accurately," which appears to be based on some past scholar's hasty guess.

What the Apostle Meant

My second objection is illustrated by the committee's next example, *charis* (on which see another note by the same Robinson in the same book). They talk as if undeservedness were part of the essential sense of the word. But it is not so; this is the regular word for our thanks to God, which are never undeserved. Paul uses the word frequently of cases where there is in fact no desert, but not because this word says so. In texts like Rom. 4:4; 11:6, the essential point is that this benefit comes from an act, attitude or quality of God, not from an act or status of the man; by making "undeserved" the emphatic word we are making the man's status the prominent thought. James 1:5 says that God gives generously and does not keep throwing his gifts in our faces by ungenerously reminding us how much in his debt we are; to keep translating "undeserved kindness" with labored persistency makes on me the impression that the writer who writes on God's behalf is in fact throwing up to us how generously we have been treated. I should feel that the proper meaning of "grace," associated as it naturally is with "gracious," "gratis," "gratuitous," was clear to readers in general. If in this respect I am not sufficiently conscious of the difference between past and present usage, I would sooner try either "favor" or "graciousness" than load a three-syllable adjective on the back of the noun.

Capitalisation Can Mislead

It is a notorious evil that the foremost languages of modern Europe do not distinguish singular from plural "you." A leading Spanish grammarian-Salva, I think, devotes a subsection of his grammar to boasting of the superiority of his language in that its ordinary "you" has a distinctive plural form. The evil is felt especially in translation. So everybody will agree that the New World Translation's capitalized plural YOU has a worthy purpose. My objections are, first, that to the ordinary reader it does not serve this purpose: unless he has given himself special training in the use of the New World Translation, the capitals will not suggest plurality to him, nor their absence singularity. And second, that the capitals inevitably do suggest emphasis, an emphasis which is not usually given by the original and which in many cases is inappropriate.

Consider the effect of these capitals in the 16th chapter of Matthew or the 2nd chapter of James, with their implication that every second person plural in these chapters is more emphatic than any second person singular. These capitals seem to combine two of the failures of the King James Version. One is that that version undertook to discriminate the plural imperative by arbitrarily adding a pronoun subject to the imperative when it was plural, at least very generally. The reader does indeed get the idea that "go ye," "come ye," "know ye" are plural; but he does not get the idea that the omission of "ye" makes imperatives presumptively singular. The other is that King James' committee in their black-letter edition put words that are "not in the original" in smaller roman type, not very black, with a note in their preface explaining the purpose. Subsequent printers, often having available no distinctive type except italics, have put such words into italics, with the result that today the usual reader takes them to be emphasized words, commonly misemphasized. My father's stock example of the consequence was 1 Kings 13:27. The New World Translation capitals, I charge, combine these two old-time failures.

If we need to argue the point of translating "the Lord" where the Greek says "the Lord," my argument would be that when Jesus and the apostles and their friends spoke an Old Testament text aloud, they said "the Lord" for "Jehovah" even in so careful a quotation as Mark 12:29

(the newly found manuscript of Isaiah may be cited as fresh evidence that the custom of saying “the Lord” began before the time of Christ, for it has cases of wavering between the readings “Jehovah” and “the Lord,” and the explanation of such wavering is that the two were pronounced alike), and we cannot presume that the apostles wrote otherwise than they spoke. And it is a translator’s business to reproduce his original.

‘The Lord’ and ‘Jehovah’

This is the same principle that requires keeping the proper name in translating the Old Testament. I understand that among the Old Testament Revision Committee there is afloat a theory that their version will be more acceptable to the public by saying “the Lord.” The theory is erroneous. For there are on the American market two standard revised versions of the complete Bible, one published by Nelson with the name “Jehovah” and one published by the Oxford University Press with “the Lord”; and the one that everybody buys is the one from Nelson.

On some points, as “hell,” I agree with the committee so far as its position is made clear in its letter. “Soul” is a hard nut for the translator; but where the word designates the animal life and bodily appetite, as in Matt. 2:20; 6:25; 10:39; 20:28; Luke 12:19; 14:26; John 10:11; 1 Cor 15:45, I am not sure that the translation “soul” gives best insight into what it is, For some of these texts I propose the noun “self.”

‘Impale’ Erroneous

All we know about the form of Jesus’ cross is the presumption that it was such a cross as the Romans most commonly used. The question whether to say “impale” for “crucify” is a question not of Greek nor of archaeology, but of English. The committee will hardly deny that in Jesus’ case the stake was outside his body; and I should like to see their evidence that “impale” can refer to a stake that does not go into or through the body.

I grant that vividness is sometimes profitably gained by marking the special force of a Greek tense, perhaps even when this is done with exaggerated specificity. But when one translates the Greek imperfect often by “began” and often by “continued,” it is hard to see how the fact that the tense is imperfect tells us which of these two exactly opposite meanings to take; and where the most natural English is a simple past, and the Greek is the best representation the Greek language could give for a simple English past, to carry the English beyond the simple past may be a gratuitous bother not only for the translator but for the reader.

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(The following is from “The Christian Century”, October 7, 1953, pages 1133 – 1134)

Jehovah’s Witnesses’ Version of O.T.

NEW WORLD TRANSLATION OF THE HEBREW SCRIPTURES, RENDERED FROM THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES BY THE NEW WORLD TRANSLATION COMMITTEE. *WATCHTOWER BIBLE AND TRACT SOCIETY*, \$1.50.

The fact that this volume (from Genesis to Ruth) is the first of three volumes, the second to end with the Song of Solomon, is not indicated on the title page but only on the contents page. I presume the volumes will come at intervals of a year or two. The third volume is to contain certain helps to systematic study. If you want to buy a copy, I suggest that you consult the nearest available active member of Jehovah’s Witnesses. They do not seem to me to be especially eager to have their publications carried by ordinary booksellers; if I am wrong, let them correct me. But a bookstore can furnish it, perhaps at a slightly higher price.

It is a matter of course in any publication of Jehovah's Witnesses that the name of Jehovah is used as a proper name. The translators also announce their intention of restoring this name in the passages where recorded Jewish tradition says that the scribes have removed it from the text. This is sound scholarship (at least so far as the tradition appears to be truthful), and will be accepted as such even by those who think it an unwise policy for practical translation into English. For my part I think it a wise policy for that purpose. If in their second volume the translators should in the second part of the book of Psalms (Pss. 42 to 83) restore the name of Jehovah where it was cut out by some scribe too ancient to be recognized by Jewish tradition, they would thereby restore to sundry texts, as commentators have remarked, a vigor and intelligibility of which the scribe's unwise has robbed the words.

Those who speak to Jehovah use the pronoun "you" to him. This is undoubtedly faithful translation. The use of the religious "thou" in addressing God is an artificial element in 20th century language; and the founders of Israelite religion addressed God without artificiality. In some of the latest and most formal chapters, e.g. Psalm 119 and Daniel 9, "thou" might be appropriate translation; but Abraham and Moses, Elijah and Jeremiah, spoke to God as they spoke to men, and Psalm 119 and Daniel 9 may as well follow the analogy of the earlier texts.

The plural is typographically distinguished from the singular by using small capitals for "you" and "your" when they refer to more than one person, and for plural imperative verbs. I have not changed my opinion, already expressed (*The Christian Century*, May 9, 1951) on occasion of the New World translation of the Christian Greek Scriptures, that the purpose is highly laudable but the method used to accomplish it atrociously unwise.

As to the diction of the translation, it reads more smoothly than did its predecessor the New Testament work of the same translators, but its characteristics are that it is padded and bookish. Even the street toughs in Genesis 19 and Judges 19 talk more bookishly than colloquially. A bit of colloquialism may be noticed in this passage:

Next he said: "Throw it on the earth." So he threw it on the earth, and it became a serpent, and Moses began to flee from it. Jehovah now said to Moses: "Put your hand out and grab hold of it by the tail." So he put his hand out and grabbed hold of it and it became a rod in his palm. "In order that," to quote him, "they may believe," etc.

But the colloquialism here is not a sample of what the book is like; not so much as is the padding which acute readers may have noted.

In their preface, the translators defend this padding on the ground that a literal rendering lacks the color implicit in the terse original Hebrew. "Hence auxiliary words that lengthen the expression are at times required to bring out the vividness, picturesqueness and dramatic action of the verb, and the point of view and the idea of time of the Bible writer." Of these "auxiliary words," those that most dominate the style are such verbs as "began," "proceeded," "continued," "went," "kept." Examples: "And he put faith in Jehovah, and he proceeded to count it to him as righteousness" (Gen. 15:6); "The surging waters proceeded to cover them" (Ex. 15:5).

But there are other auxiliary words, as the preface says again:

To avoid such monotony we have resorted to various English conjunctions to show the transition of the thought and to indicate whether the verb shows an action or state that is beginning, becoming or still keeping on and hence not yet come to completion. So in many cases at or toward the beginning of the sentence or clause we have used the following conjunctions or phrases, (a) to indicate temporal sequence: after a while, after that, after which, afterward, at length, at once, eventually, finally, further, furthermore, gradually, immediately, in time, in turn, later, later on, meantime, meanwhile, moreover, next, now, once, promptly, subsequently, then, when; (b) to indicate logical result: accordingly, and so, at that, at this, at which, consequently, hence, so, thus, to this, to which, upon that, well, with that; (c) to indicate logical cause: because, for, since; and (d) to indicate logical contrast: but, however, nevertheless, still.

Bear in mind that the above is avowedly a list of translations used for the Hebrew word “and.”

Obviously this sort of translation leaves a great deal to the personal judgment of the translator, while it puts no trust in the personal judgment of the reader. This work is not really translation, making the text say to the English reader just what it had said to the Hebrew reader, but a concise running commentary. When the verb is given the auxiliary “began” in Exodus 14:10-11 and the auxiliary “continued” in Numbers 14:1, in each case supposedly to show the force of the grammatical form of the Hebrew verb, but the grammatical form of the Hebrew verb is the same in Numbers as in Exodus, obviously this is not because the grammatical form (which was identical) told the translators to say “began” here and “continued” there, but because the translators, acting as rewriters at their own discretion, thought “began” would be a good word to use here and “continued” there. The committee is substituting itself for the author.

A striking passage will, besides having its own interest, be a peg to hang one or two more remarks on:

Nevertheless, Moses said to God: “Suppose I am now come to the sons of Israel and I do say to them, ‘The God of your forefathers has sent me to you,’ and they do say to me, ‘What is his name?’ What shall I say to them?” At this God said to Moses: “I shall prove to be what I shall prove to be.” And he added: “This is what you are to say to the sons of Israel, ‘I shall prove to be has sent me to you.’ “

There is much to be said for “I shall prove to be.” The only fault I would find with it is that the insertion of “prove to” sacrifices terseness where terseness is very necessary. And I think I would say “will” for “shall.”

But “your” and “you” are in small capitals because they are plural, without emphasis, while “I shall prove to be” in both sentences is in small capitals for the reverent emphasis of a most notable statement. The use of the same typographical device for two utterly different purposes side by side is always confusing. The “do say” stands in accordance with these words of the preface: “When we show the emphasis of the perfect verb in the present time, we prefix ‘do’ or ‘does’ to the English verb, as, ‘I *do* say,’ ‘I *do* make,’ ‘he *does* do.’ “ That is, the translators have read in a school grammar that “do” gives the “emphatic” form of the verb. But if they had looked in a grammar of higher grade they would have seen that this is true only when “do” is to be pronounced with a marked stress of voice. If “do” is spoken as an unstressed syllable, as in “Nor did she seem to be much displeas’d,” it does not make the verb emphatic. But I think the translators will agree with me that if “they do say” is read with a special emphasis of voice on “do,” it will pervert rather than express the meaning of the Hebrew. Consequently this “do” is an awkwardness that fails to accomplish its purpose. And so with “do” on many pages.

STEVEN T. BYINGTON