



Roman Catholics and the Bible in English

An historical account of the relationship between Roman Catholics and the English Bible, from its earliest days to the present.



Henry Wansbrough

Fr Henry Wansbrough is a biblical scholar and a monk of Ampleforth Abbey in North Yorkshire.

It is astonishing to find how great a part ecclesiastical politics have played in the preference for one biblical translation over another. In the matter of translation into English this has been the case since the earliest, Wycliffite, translation. The great KJV was itself directly the child of James I's attempt to maintain a balance between different church-political positions. Within the English Roman Catholic tradition the Rheims-Douai version was for centuries a treasured symbol of union with Rome and distinction from the English Church. By contrast, recent moves towards securing a single translation acceptable to all Christians have been a powerful expression of the desire for understanding and cooperation between the different traditions.

Early Translations into English

The Wycliffite translation is politically significant in several ways. Although, of course, John Wycliffe was the force behind the translation rather than the actual translator, Archbishop Arundel could write to the Pope in 1412 'to fill up the measure of his malice he devised the expedient of a new translation of the Scriptures'.¹ It was the logical final step in his career as a stormy petrel. Continually questioning the biblical validity of accepted Church teaching, he had upset the establishment by claiming first that both secular and ecclesiastical jurisdiction depended on being in a state of grace. When this was condemned in 1377, he went a step further, to teach that neither papal authority nor vowed religious life had adequate foundations in Scripture. After this it was only logical that he should set about providing a version of the Scripture which should be open to all

who could read, rather than, by confining it to Latin, ensuring that the Bible was filtered to the people only through the clergy. It was, however, the adoption of his position as the war-cry of the Peasants' Revolt of 1382, and the enduring fear of unrest provoked by that Revolt, which led in 1407 to prohibition of any unauthorised translation of the Bible. In consequence, England remained fixed for over a century in a position well behind other European countries with regard to vernacular translations.

A century later, as the Lutheran Reformation got under way, Bishop Tunstall did everything in his power to prevent William Tyndale's translation from being disseminated in England, no doubt because he considered that it was tainted by Lutheranism. An English translation was still not welcome. It was not until 1538 that the situation was altered and, at the royal command, a copy of The Great Bible was placed on the lectern of every parish church. This Bible proved hugely popular, 20,000 copies being printed in the first three years. The excited crowds gathered round the six copies placed in St Paul's Cathedral caused so much disturbance that the Bishop of London was compelled to forbid reading during services. Nevertheless, within a couple of decades it was ousted from its leading position by the heavily Protestant Geneva Bible. With its explanatory notes and apparatus, it was printed copiously in every size, from folio to sextodecimo. Within a few years, Archbishop Parker had formed a team to remove these 'bitter notes', but the resultant 'Bishops' Bible' never won the acclaim and support enjoyed by the Geneva Bible.

James I, however, found the Geneva Bible 'the worst' of all. Different versions were clearly becoming instruments in the sectarian struggle. The Geneva Bible notes were not favourable to kingship; the new king found them 'very partiell, untrue, seditious and savouring too much of daungerous and trayterous conceits'. The word 'tyrant' was sometimes used instead of 'king' and some notes even questioned the royal authority.² This version was not going to be a unitive force, helpful for maintaining the balance between the Puritan and the traditionalist tendencies of his new kingdom. At the Hampton Court conference in the first year of his reign he grasped eagerly the suggestion of John Rainolds that a new translation should be made and, thus, at this ideal moment of widespread literary and scholarly skill, the King James Version came into being. Within a few years its genius and monumental dignity swept away all others – or nearly all.

and scintillating as a translation, but a memorial to the skills and style of Oxford common rooms in the 1940s.

With the revival of Catholic biblical studies after the groundbreaking 1943 papal Encyclical *Divino Afflante Spiritu*, a completely new scene developed. Two thrusts by English Catholic scholars began almost simultaneously. For ten years from 1946 the French Biblical School in Jerusalem worked on the Bible de Jérusalem to produce a new translation into French, primarily from the Hebrew, secondarily from the Greek, incorporating in its ample notes and introductions the fullest and latest biblical scholarship. Alexander Jones, then teaching in Liverpool, determined to make these findings available in English. He soon found that for this purpose he needed a new translation not only of the notes themselves but of the biblical text which they supported. He assembled a distinguished literary team who translated the French text, which Jones then edited and published as The Jerusalem Bible in 1966. This was a groundbreaking achievement, for it was the first translation of the whole Bible into modern English. It has remained a monument of clear, attractive and legible prose and poetry, widely accepted throughout the English-speaking world in a multitude of editions, authorised and pirated!

At the same time, two other English Catholic scholars, Dom Bernard Orchard and Reginald Fuller were negotiating with the copyright holders of the newly published RSV a Catholic edition, which would have the 'Apocrypha' or (to use the Catholic terminology) the Deutero-Canonical books and passages printed in the traditional Catholic order. This Catholic edition of the RSV was achieved, under the patronage of the Scottish hierarchy, and provided a second Lectionary text for the use of English Catholics.⁵ The full edition of the Bible contains also a number of short notes on matters of importance for specifically Roman Catholic doctrines.

A revision of The Jerusalem Bible was undertaken in 1978 under the general editorship of the present writer, and published as The New Jerusalem Bible in 1985. This included a moderate revision of the introductions and notes to each book, to incorporate advances in biblical scholarship since the original Bible de Jérusalem, whose scholarship was current in the late 1940s. The process was not wholly satisfactory, since any changes from the original French text had to be agreed by the heroic but tenacious Director of the French Biblical School in Jerusalem, whose preferences had changed little since his formative work on the original French edition! There were some interesting exchanges between older and younger scholar, as – over a period of seven years – the latter submitted to the former a monthly list of *desiderata*. However, changes to the biblical text itself were less controversial. The same approach and style was retained. Some books (e.g. Psalms) were entirely re-translated to bring them closer to the original Hebrew or Greek. Others (e.g. Jeremiah) underwent lighter revisions, with a mere couple of thousand minor

it is astonishing to find how great a part ecclesiastical politics have played in the preference for one biblical translation over another

Notes

1. Quoted by M Deanesly, *The Lollard Bible* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920), p. 238.

2. For details see my article, 'History and Impact of English Bible Translations', in *Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Volume 2* (edited by M Saebø; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2008), p. 550.

3. So firm was the conviction that the Vulgate was the 'real' Bible that, when in 1520 the great Complutensian polyglot Bible printed the text in three parallel columns, Hebrew–Latin–Greek, this was described as 'Christ crucified between two thieves'.

4. I remember wondering at his work-desk and apparatus at the age of eight, in 1943.

5. The two Lectionaries are still to this day the texts authorised

During the period of proliferation of Protestant Bibles in the previous century it had seemed essential to the authorities of Cardinal William Allen's College at Rheims, training Catholic clergy to return to the English mission, that Catholics should have their own version, based on the official Bible of the Catholic Church, the Vulgate³ (but with marginal notes referring to the Greek), and equipped with notes on specifically Catholic doctrines, such as the virgin birth and the Petrine primacy. The New Testament was ready by 1582, and the Old Testament by 1610, by which time the College had moved to Douai in Flanders. The resultant Rheims-Douai version remained, in a version revised under Bishop Challoner in 1772, the stable Bible of English Catholics until the middle of the twentieth century. Its occasional slightly comic Latinisms were patiently tolerated, such as 'every knee shall bow, of celestials, terrestrials and infernals' (Phil 2.10).

The Twentieth Century

It was a sign of the growing confidence and talent of the Catholic community in England in the 1930s that the Cardinal Archbishop of Westminster should commission Ronald Knox to do a new translation of the Vulgate. It was completed in 1950. The translation was basically true to the Vulgate text, but in fact Knox kept his eye also on several other ancient versions.⁴ However, the Knox version was never a full success. It was authorised for use by the Catholic hierarchy, but never fully adopted or incorporated into the official lectionaries. Knox's aim was to produce a timeless English, which would never go out of date. For this purpose he evolved a unique style of locution, sometimes tortuous, often inverted, brilliant

changes. Still others (e.g. Acts) remained virtually unchanged. This Bible has also been widely diffused and popular throughout the English-speaking Catholic world, though it has never been incorporated into the official Lectionary.

A Limited Convergence

The principal reasons for divergence between Catholic and Protestant Bibles have always been two, one scholarly, one ecclesiastical. I state the former, without apology, from the Roman Catholic viewpoint.

The original Bible of the Christian Church, both Eastern and Western, was the Greek Septuagint, and the Greek New Testament. The Septuagint was the Bible overwhelmingly quoted in the New Testament, and some of the quotations would lose their validity if given according to the Hebrew (e.g. Mt 1.21; Acts 2.21). When, in the earliest centuries, the Bible came to be translated into Latin it (the so-called *Vetus Italica*) was done from this Greek text. It was only when Jerome, resident in Bethlehem, was teased by local Rabbis into believing that the Septuagint was inaccurate, that he evolved the concept of *hebraica veritas*, that the true text is the Hebrew text. In fact, recent Septuagintal scholarship leaves no doubt that the Hebrew and the Greek are simply slightly different traditions, neither of which can be classed simply as right or wrong. Nevertheless, in the Church the Greek tradition is more venerable. Augustine had the temerity to point out to Jerome that when his new translation, based on the Hebrew, was read out in Tripoli (North Africa) it occasioned a riot of dissatisfaction; he was not thanked for this observation! Luther, however, for his own theological reasons, adopted the viewpoint that the Hebrew was superior, and that the portions of the Old Testament written in Greek were less inspired and less authoritative. This is the reason why the 'Apocryphal' books, not extant in Hebrew,⁶ are excluded from the Protestant canon.

The ecclesiastical reason for divergence between Catholic and Protestant versions of the Scripture is that the Catholic Church has always held that the Bible is the book of the Church, and that it is the task of the Church to safeguard and to interpret this book, to present the authoritative interpretation of the book. For this reason it is part of the Church's teaching and guiding role to present to the faithful not only the authentic and authoritative text of the Bible but also some guidance on how it should be understood. The absence of notes from the King James Version was a means of refusing to decide between the different interpretations of opposing factions. By contrast, the Roman Catholic point of view is that the Church, while leaving open huge areas for discussion and disagreement, does have the right and duty to provide guidance on some disputed matters. In fact, the areas in which the Church has prescribed one interpretation of a text and proscribed another are rare.

Despite these two matters of disagreement between the Catholic and the Protestant traditions, a significant

convergence has become evident in recent decades. In the wake of the Second Vatican Council (1962–65) a carefully planned three-year cycle of readings was introduced into the Roman Catholic liturgy. With some adjustment to allow for the existence of subsidiary services in non-Catholic traditions, this was speedily adopted as a Common Lectionary. It has become a significant point of convergence that Christians of different traditions hear, and may share and reflect on, the same readings Sunday by Sunday. This particular point of convergence, however, pales into insignificance beside the much more general point of convergence represented by the re-valuation of the Bible in Roman Catholicism since Vatican II. In the mid-twentieth century familiarity with the Bible was the preserve of Protestants, and it was rare for 'ordinary' Catholics to open a Bible. With the encouragement of Vatican II a biblical spirituality has flowered in the Roman Catholic Church, including such elements as regular meditative reading of the Bible, alone or in groups, attendance at the choral

the lack of a single version of the Bible familiar to all Christians has long been felt as a serious lacuna

or parish offices based on the Psalms, and the private recitation of the psalms as daily prayer,⁷ not to mention a whole host of methods of biblical study which were formerly the preserve of non-Catholics.

Crystal Balls

The lack of a single version of the Bible familiar to all Christians has long been felt as a serious lacuna. The KJV provided memorable phrases which entered into the fabric of the English language. These often stemmed from Tyndale himself, such as 'the powers that be' or 'the fat of the land'. However, the plethora of versions and revisions produced in the late twentieth century has meant that none has the authority enjoyed by the KJV. Despite a lively affection among Roman Catholics for the Jerusalem Bible family, a consensus seems to be forming that the NRSV is the way forward both to a replacement for the ageing RSV and Jerusalem Bible lectionaries and to a Bible acceptable to all Christians. In accordance with the teaching office of the Church, a series of principles and guidelines for acceptable liturgical translations was recently (2001) issued by the Vatican, codenamed *Liturgiam Authenticam*, to which the NRSV does not entirely correspond. An International Commission for Preparing an English-language Lectionary (ICPEL), under the chairmanship of Archbishop Coleridge of Canberra, is at present working to overcome the difficulties.

by the Bishops for the Eucharistic readings in the Catholic Church.

6. In fact, in recent years some 60 per cent of the Hebrew text of the 'apocryphal' Ben Sira or Ecclesiasticus has been rediscovered.

7. For this the version of the Psalms which has become almost universal is the Grail Psalter, a simple but noble translation which is also rhythmical. It 'sings' well. It has recently been revised by Abbot Gregory Polan of Conception Abbey, USA.