

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF SCRIPTURE

J. P. M. WALSH, S.J.

Georgetown University, Washington, D.C.

A GENERATION has passed since English began to be used in the liturgy, and concomitantly the Douai-Rheims and CCD versions were supplanted in public and private reading of Scripture by up-to-date translations of the entire Bible, done under Catholic auspices. The experience of these 25 years seems ripe for assessment. The principles guiding the newer translations, and their strengths and weaknesses, by now have come into clear focus. This article will study the two versions that have become familiar to American Catholics, *The New American Bible* (NAB) and *The Jerusalem Bible* (JB); these are the translations most commonly heard at Mass and used for study.

For some time, there seem to have been second thoughts about these versions, for each has undergone revision. Thus we have the 1985 *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB) and the 1986 reworking of NAB called *The New American Bible New Testament, Revised Edition* (hereafter NAB RNT), which in fact is virtually a fresh translation of the NT. (The NAB OT remains unchanged, though the Psalter is being translated afresh for the revision of the lectionary due to appear in 1990 or 1991.)

It will be useful to make some general comments about modern translation practice and illustrate them by reference to JB and NAB, and then to study more in detail the two newly released reworkings.

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

The theory of translation that has guided much of contemporary translation practice derives from the work of linguists as it has been applied in the efforts of evangelical scholars preparing versions of the Bible for use in missionary countries. Faced with the enormous differences between the biblical world and the world of Eskimos or aboriginals (for instance), and the seeming incommensurability of Hebrew and Greek with the languages spoken in the antipodes and tropics, translators turned with enthusiasm to the theory articulated by Eugene Nida, called by him "dynamic equivalence."

In the introduction to the third volume of his *Anchor Bible* commentary on Psalms, the late Mitchell Dahood sketched the basics of this theory of translation. Dynamic equivalence "seeks to produce identity of

thought without any attempt to retain the forms of the original. Its chief concern is to create in the contemporary reader a response as close as possible to that of the original reader" (xviii). The alternative to dynamic equivalence is called formal equivalence: keeping to the word order of the original, carrying over *tel quel* into the translation the images and terms found in the text being rendered, and so on. The appeal of dynamic equivalence to scholars preparing texts for missionary use derives from the great differences between the ancient Near Eastern world and the various cultures for which translations are being prepared. In parts of Africa there are no wolves, but hyenas are equivalent; in other places one might speak of "tigers in sheep's clothing." Dynamic equivalence appears to offer a means of getting across the message of the original text in a way readily accessible to readers from other cultures. In the translations prepared by the American Bible Society, under Nida's direction, dynamic equivalence has been used with great discernment: every effort is made to adhere as closely as possible to the original text. But since such adherence is not always possible, dynamic equivalence seems to offer a way out of difficulties. Thus, as a principle of translation, dynamic equivalence is most attractive—once certain premises are granted.

One premise is, of course, that the Bible is of central importance for the salvation of souls. Another, consequent premise is that the message of the Bible must be gotten across to people of every culture and language. It must be "translatable." Yet this ideal comes to be understood in the sense that the Bible can be rendered intelligible to people just as they are, without more: they must be able to grasp it in terms familiar to them. Thus the criterion for translation is the response of the reader, and the ideal seems to be an immediate response. No mediation, or minimal mediation, is required—no explanation or instruction about matters peculiar to the world of the Bible, whether geographical, cultural, historical, linguistic, social, economic, or even botanical and zoological. This way of accommodating the biblical narratives to quite different cultural and historical settings is by no means unfamiliar: one has only to think of medieval European woodcuts, where the crowd on Calvary wears 14th-century garb, or the buildings of ancient Jerusalem are those of contemporary France. Yet what has always been done spontaneously and uncritically seems in the theory of dynamic equivalence to be made a matter of principle: readers of the Bible should be able to understand it on their own terms.

One underlying premise of all this seems to me most questionable. It is this: there is a message that can be disengaged from the concrete, historically and culturally determined forms in which it was originally expressed, and gotten across to readers in other forms, equally determined

by history and culture, which are different from those of the original text. The message is separable from the medium, so to speak.

One clear example of this presupposition is a contemporary poet's attempt, some years ago, to translate psalms according to modern English prosody, dropping any vestige of the parallelism that is the heart of Hebrew poetry. This way of translating psalms would strike most people as extreme, not to say cavalier, but modern translators have proceeded in the same fashion, though not in most cases to the same extent, of manipulating the original text.

The presuppositions I have been trying to make explicit are troubling from several points of view, theological as well as literary. The term "gnostic" may be unhelpful, and is probably too harsh, but it is suggestive. There seems to be at work a notion that truth, the truth of the Bible in this case, is separable from historical concreteness. It exists (in the original text) in a certain embodiment, but that embodiment is of no real importance; truth is something that is merely "clothed" in one kind of garb or another. Again, the motivation that recommends dynamic equivalence to translators is laudable: it is zeal for souls, and a desire to make the riches of Scripture available to all. But it also seems to brush aside history, and the difficulties that embeddedness in history presents to efforts at cross-cultural interpretation. In seeking to spare readers of the Bible from finding difficulty in it, and making normative the ideal of immediate intelligibility, this approach to translation does readers a disservice, by presenting a text that in significant ways distorts what the original says.

EXAMPLE 1

Some examples will be helpful at this point. The first is from the NAB version of the "Jacob's ladder" story, Gen 28:10-22. The editorial decisions that determined the final form of NAB were governed by a concern for smoothness, understood according to the canons of contemporary English style. One such canon is that the same word should not be repeated in the same sentence; variety of wording is desirable. Thus, in the sentence that recounts the moment when Jacob settled down for the night, NAB varies the usage of the Hebrew text, so as to avoid what a literal translation, following the principle of formal equivalence, would render this way:

And Jacob arrived at the place, and overnighted there, for the sun had gone down; and he took one of the stones of the place and set it up as his headrest, and lay down in that place.

We have in the Hebrew a series of verbs. Jacob arrives, makes camp

(the western sky darkening, suggesting a certain urgency about settling down for the night), prepares for sleep. The narrative keeps coming back to the “place,” with the threefold repetition of the word *māqôm*, “place.” Under the prosaic and detailed recounting of Jacob’s very ordinary actions, there is a muffled drumbeat, as it were, of insistence on that “place.” There is something afoot, something about that *māqôm*, not spelled out but only suggested. Now in Hebrew the word *māqôm* can mean not only “place” but a special place, a sanctuary. But there is no reason to think that this place is in any way special. Jacob is unaware of any special character to it, and so at this point is the reader or hearer of the story. Yet there is a foreshadowing of the rest of the story in that *māqôm . . . māqôm . . . māqôm*. (The word occurs at the beginning, middle, and very end of the verse.) When Jacob awakens from his dream, his reaction is one of dramatic realization: “Surely Yahweh *is* in this place” (v. 16, J). “How fearsome is this place!” (v. 17, E). That is, the “place” turns out to be a holy place—a *māqôm* in the special sense. The narrative discloses this to the listener bit by bit, just as it is disclosed to Jacob: we share in his revelation. And the revelation is the origin of the name of the place familiar to hearers of the story in ancient Israel: “house of God” (v. 17), i.e. Bethel.

The delicate artistry of this story of disclosure is simply destroyed by NAB:

When he came upon a certain shrine, as the sun had already set, he stopped there for the night. Taking one of the stones at the shrine, he put it under his head and lay down to sleep at that spot.

A footnote annotating the first clause tells us that “shrine” is “literally ‘place,’ often used specifically of a sacred site,” but the damage has been done: the punch line has been given away at the very beginning of the story.

Very likely the reason for this translation choice was the assumption that (as it is often put) the paucity of vocabulary in the Hebrew language left no alternative to the writer than to repeat *māqôm* thrice, and there is no reason to limit the expressiveness of prose style in English, with its greater lexical variety. Yet the question might have been asked, why did the storyteller use the word three times at all? That it seems not to have been asked arguably reveals another assumption of NAB: that literary skill was not at work in the ancient narrative, or in any case that the writer’s choice of words and of word order does not much matter. The message is separable from the medium.

In airily proceeding according to the principle of dynamic equivalence, therefore, the translators have fallen far short of its ideal: “to create in

the contemporary reader a response as close as possible to that of the original reader." Just the opposite has happened.

EXAMPLE 2

Contemporary research into the nature of covenant has shown that in the ancient Near East the word "brother" was used as a technical term for a treaty partner. This usage came clear from the study of extrabiblical texts, but it was there all along in the passage in 1 Kgs 20:31-34, where Ahab, king of Israel, spares the life of the defeated king of Syria, Ben-hadad, and makes a treaty with him. Ben-hadad carries on negotiations through emissaries, who inform Ahab of their king's petition to let him live. "Is he still alive?" Ahab asks. "He is my brother!" (v. 32). This declarative formula—creating the partner relationship—establishes a treaty between the two kings: Ben-hadad is now Ahab's "brother."

In Gen 26:26-31 Isaac and Abimelech make a treaty. An oath establishes the relationship. The Hebrew says, "They swore each to his brother"; the usage seems to be the same as that found in 1 Kings 20 and in the extrabiblical treaty texts mentioned above. Yet translators, most likely feeling no need to follow the original text closely, have obscured the usage. The *King James Version* (KJV) tells us that they "swore one to another," and its successor, the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), follows suit with "took oath with one another." NAB is quite paraphrastic: "they exchanged oaths," which is also the rendering of JB and NJB. Now it may indeed be the case that the use of "brother" in this passage has nothing at all to do with the ancient Near Eastern treaty term; but that is a question to be decided by exegesis, not translation.

EXAMPLE 3

Another example can show what happens when a translation tries to be helpful to the reader. It comes from the crucial passage, in 2 Samuel 7, known as the Dynastic Oracle. In 2 Samuel 5 we are told that David, having captured Jerusalem as his fiefdom, has a house built for himself there. A Canaanite king, David's vassal Hiram, sends artisans and building materials. It is clear that the house is constructed in the fashion appropriate to a Canaanite king. But it is not merely a matter of architectural style. 2 Sam 5:11-12 shows that the house is a proof of his royal status:

And Hiram, king of Tyre, sent messengers to David, and cedar wood, and woodcarvers, and stoncarvers, and they built a house for David.
And David knew that Yahweh had set him up as king over Israel.

This emblematic function of a king's house is central to the very ancient pre-Israelite Canaanite story of how the warrior god Baal became

king: the old god El decrees that a house of cedar be built for him. Without that house, it is clear from the myth, Baal's kingship is incomplete. The notice of David's house of cedar in 2 Sam 5:11 indicates that this motif is still influential in the culture of the Canaanite littoral, hundreds of years after the social situation reflected in the second-millennium Baal myth.

This connection between the house of cedar and kingship is basic for understanding the Dynastic Oracle. The story presupposes it as David contrasts his own "sitting" (both dwelling and enthronement) in a house of cedar with the situation of the Ark in its tent shrine, and proposes to build a house for Yahweh (2 Sam 7:2). But the word of Yahweh the prophet Nathan reports to David takes the king to task for presumption: "You would build *me* a house for my 'sitting'?" (again, "sitting" comprising both enthronement and dwelling). No, the oracle goes on to say (v. 11b): "Yahweh declares to you that Yahweh will make you a house." David will be the father of an everlasting dynasty of kings: a house. Thus the promise to David depends on a pun between the two meanings of the word "house": (1) the physical structure, emblematic of kingship, in which a king "sits," and (2) a dynasty—in this case, the house of David. Roughly, "You want to build me a house? Don't bother, I will make you a house!"

This pun is admirable for concision and wit. David is put in his place at the same time his kingship is confirmed and perpetuated by Yahweh's initiative. And, ironically, even though David is to be the father of the house of David, the Davidic king will be subordinate to Yahweh, as a son is to a father—Yahweh will always be the father (2 Sam 7:14).

To show what contemporary translations have made of this crucial pun, let us line up NAB, JB, and NJB. (RSV, following KJV, gets good marks here for letting the wordplay come through.)

NAB	JB	NJB
who built a palace for David	who built David a palace	who built David a palace (2 Sam 5:11)
Should you build me a house to dwell in?	Are you the man to build me a house to dwell in?	Are you to build me a temple for me to live in? (2 Sam 7:5)
he will establish a house	Yahweh will make you	he will make you

for you.

a House.

a dynasty.

(2 Sam 7:11b)

JB, like NAB, preserves the “house” pun in the Dynastic Oracle itself, but both make it impossible to connect the cedar house of 2 Samuel 5 with the later context. But NJB introduces three distinct terms—palace, temple, and dynasty—for the one Hebrew word *bayit*, and so destroys the wordplay and the theology built upon it.

The translators’ readiness to use paraphrase, while probably intended to make the story clear to the reader, ends up obscuring the point.

EXAMPLE 4

In the Lucan parable of the Prodigal Son, when the young man has spent all his substance, and a great famine affects the country, his plight is described with the pregnant expression, “he began to be in want,” *ērxato hystereisthai* (Lk 15:14). To readers familiar with the Greek Scriptures, the phrase would suggest a number of passages, notably Ps 22(23):1, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want” (*Kyrios poimainei me, kai ouden me hysterēsei*). The language of the parable thus suggests the OT motifs of want and plenty, an impression reinforced by the mention of how the son wanted to fill his belly with the husks fed to the pigs, and his realization that in his father’s house “hirelings abound in bread” (vv. 16-17).

It seems to me that the least a translator could do is to let these associations come through, by rendering Luke’s Greek in such a way that the connection with Psalm 23 might occur to the reader. (If the allusion is unintended, then that is an exegetical problem, not one to be decided by the translator.)

How does the allusion fare in the versions under review? Again, a comparison of the translations will be helpful.

NAB	NAB RNT
he was in dire need	he found himself in dire need
JB	NJB
he began to feel the pinch	he began to feel the pinch

NAB and its successor get across the core meaning of the Greek, but obscure the allusion, or possibility of intent to allude, to the OT motif: not many people recite the words, “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in dire need.” JB and NJB seem unaware of the scriptural connotations of the Greek, to put it kindly. The young man is without resource; he has hit bottom. To my ear, “feeling the pinch” is something experienced by yuppies whose plans are not working out. It has the virtue, perhaps, of

avoiding the sound of "Bible English," but likewise nullifies the OT allusion.

The same tendency to allusion-destroying paraphrase—one is tempted to call it Marcionite in its effect—is seen in the English liturgy. The third Eucharistic Prayer, speaking of the "perfect offering" to be made to the glory of God's name, contains the phrase *a solis ortu usque ad occasum eius*, "from the rising of the sun even to its setting," and Mal 1:11 comes to mind, along with several other passages (Ps 50:1; Ps 113:3; cf. Isa 45:6; 59:19). The English translation renders the phrase as "from east to west"!

EXAMPLE 5

One more instance of how paraphrase erases allusion or resonance can conclude this overview. In Mark's account of the crucifixion we read, "From the sixth hour, there was darkness upon all the land until the ninth hour" (15:33; cf. Lk 23:44). The phrase here translated "upon all the land," Greek *eph' holēn tēn gēn*, can also be translated "over all the earth." The ambiguity of *gē* occurs also in Hebrew, where *'ereṣ* can mean both "land" and "earth"; Mark's phrase, like *epi pasan tēn gēn* in the Matthean parallel, suggests the very frequent Hebrew expression *kol-hā'āreṣ*, "the whole earth," "all the earth." And the ambiguity of the phrase—was the whole earth shrouded in darkness? the entire land?—is artfully suggestive of a number of OT passages (cf. Exod 10:21-22; Isa 5:30; 13:10; 60:2; Ezek 32:8; Joel 2:2; Amos 5:18, 20; 8:9; Zeph 1:15), where darkness covers the land/earth or is otherwise associated with God's impending judgment. Jesus' crucifixion is set against the background of this imagery.

Contrast NAB. The pleasant word "countryside"—as in picnics? landscapes?—renders *gē*: "When noon came, darkness fell on the whole countryside and lasted until midafternoon." To its credit, NAB RNT retrieves the sense with "At noon darkness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon." (But why not keep "sixth hour" and "ninth hour"?)

NAB AND NAB RNT

No sooner had NAB begun to be used in the liturgy than expressions of dismay, even outrage, began to be heard from the faithful. Notoriously, in the Christmas Gospel reading from Luke, the phrase "there was no room for them in the inn" (2:7) was supplanted by "there was no room for them in the place where travelers lodge." The familiar "To dig I am unable, to beg I am ashamed" of the Rheims version (Lk 16:3) became "I cannot dig ditches. I am ashamed to go begging." NAB RNT has the more literal "I am not strong enough to dig and I am ashamed to beg"

(and, happily, restores “there was no room for them in the inn”).

People resist what is unfamiliar, of course, but reservations about the new translation were shared among scholars as well. NAB RNT represents an awareness that the entire translation project would profit by being brought back to the drawing board. Thus the newly released NT was based on principles of translation quite different from those sketched above.

A statement of these principles can be found in the Preface to NAB RNT, but a summary of them will serve our purposes. Between the lines of the Preface can be discerned a critique of NAB. The work of a series of literary revisors, “touching up” the text the translators had contributed, introduced many real errors in NAB. Similarly, the NAB ideal of variety of expression had led to the unfortunate result that lexical consistency—so necessary for close textual study, especially in the case of the Synoptic Gospels—was lost. (Cf. above, examples 1 and 5; in the latter case the identity of wording in the three accounts is obscured.) One of the functions of NAB was to be oral proclamation; the biblical text was to be read aloud in church; but that need was not taken into account in making translation choices. The tone of NAB was unduly colloquial. Perhaps most unfortunate was that adherence to the principle of dynamic equivalence had led to a more or less radical abandonment of traditional terminology. The needs of systematic study of, say, Pauline theology, or the ability to follow a motif or term—*paradidonai*, “deliver up,” for example—through the NT tradition were ill served. Finally, a salient and frequently remarked defect of NAB lay in the notes and other explanatory materials accompanying the text: these were (and, in the case of the unrevised OT, continue to be) largely unsatisfactory. (The note on 1 Sam 28:12 could have been written by Bishop Challoner.)

In contrast, as the Preface puts it, NAB RNT had as its aim “to produce a version as accurate and faithful to the meaning of the Greek original as is possible for a translation,” and so dynamic equivalence is simply dropped as a working principle, for

it has the disadvantages of more or less radically abandoning traditional biblical and liturgical terminology and phraseology, of expanding the text to include what more properly belongs in notes, commentaries, or preaching, and of tending toward paraphrase. A more formal approach seems better suited to the specific purposes intended for this translation.

Thus, to the benefit of all, the defects of the original NT version of NAB have been addressed, and with remarkable success.

INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

There is one more aim this revision, or retranslation, set for itself: to be sensitive to discriminatory language, and especially what is called noninclusive language. In this latter area "the present translation attempts to display a sensitivity appropriate to the present state of the questions under discussion, which are not yet resolved and in regard to which it is impossible to please everyone, since intelligent and sincere participants in the debate hold mutually contradictory views."

For all practical purposes, this solution to the problem of "sexist" language means that, consistent with fidelity to the original text, gender-inclusive terms are used. The generic "man" is avoided, "though it is retained in cases where no fully satisfactory equivalent could be found." The resumptive pronoun after "everyone" continues to be grammatically masculine. The Greek *adelphoi*, "brothers," remains "brothers," even though the Greek usage is inclusive of men and women. (My own preference here would have been the archaic "brethren": its very strangeness to our ears would give a signal that something more than merely "brothers" is meant.)

The question continues to be explored, as the Preface indicates, and the translation committee was doubtless wise in letting the text reflect the present state of the discussion. It may not be amiss here to offer some considerations about the issue. There is nowadays a tendency to avoid any masculine pronoun, and even any term ("Lord," "King") that smacks of masculinity, in references to God, but this solution to the problem seems to me to labor under certain difficulties. The effect, at least initially, is odd: "For God so loved the world that God gave God's only child. . . ." "God has made known to us the mystery of God's will in accord with God's favor that God set forth in [Christ]." It would of course be possible to get used to this pronominal slaloming. Yet the avoidance of all masculine pronouns raises certain deeper questions. What image corresponds to the words used? If no gender-specific terms or pronouns are used, how is God imagined? For language reflects, as it shapes, how one imagines reality. Avoiding any gender-specific words allows an understanding of biblical texts that is informed by the imagining of a female deity, or at least a deity possessing "feminine" qualities (in itself, I think, a splendid idea). If one says "Parent," one could have either Mother or Father in mind: the wording leaves either possibility open. If one says exclusively "God," avoiding any resumptive pronoun (as in the examples above), a feminine image can shine through the text, as could a masculine image: the text would not determine the image. The point, however, is this: the reader or hearer *will* imagine the referent of the language one way or the other. That is how the imagination works. It would take a

supreme effort of intellect to try and suppress this imaginative tendency—and the effort would be unsuccessful. To the extent that it might succeed, the effect is of a generic or generalized, unspecific, featureless deity, an image entirely at odds with the vivid, pungent, passionately involved God of the biblical tradition. (A philological note in this connection: the name Yahweh is a verb, third-person singular masculine; the corresponding feminine form would be “Tahweh”—so determinate, grammatically, is the Hebrew.)

THE NAB NT AND ITS REVISION

Some few instances will be helpful to show how far the translators of NAB RNT have been successful in their task.

In 1 Jn 3:11-21 the tendencies of NAB noted above appear clearly: expansionism, rearranging of word order, “lexical variety,” and so on. The original text sets forth ideas in a certain order, so that as the words come out the reader or hearer takes them in and anticipates what is coming next; the epistle then either confirms or reverses these expectations, dialectically, phrase by phrase, moment by moment. NAB short-circuited this process, by eliding or conflating ideas, anticipating conclusions, putting them at the beginning of a sentence rather than at the end, and above all by obscuring the connections of thought that the repeated use of the words “heart” (vv. 19-21) and “dwell” (*menein*, vv. 14-15, 17, 24), with great economy, sets up.

In the left column I give a very literal translation of the Greek (in fact, much of it is word for word the RSV).

Greek	NAB	NAB RNT
Because this is the message which you have heard from the beginning, that we should love one another, not as	This, remember, is the message you heard from the beginning: we should love one another. We should not follow the example of	For this is the message you have heard from the beginning: we should love one another, unlike
Cain was of the evil one and killed his brother. And for the sake of what	Cain who belonged to the evil one and killed his brother. Why	Cain who belonged to the evil one and slaughtered his brother. Why

killed he him?
Because
his works (*erga*)
were evil,
those of his brother
just.
Do not wonder,
brethren,

if the world
hates you.
We know
that we have passed
from death into life,

because we love
the brethren.
He who
does not love
dwells (*menein*)
in death.
Everyone who hates
his brother
is a murderer,
and you know
that no murderer
has eternal life
dwelling (*menein*)
in him.
By this (*en toutō*)
we came to know love,
that he
for us
his life
laid down;

and we ought
for the brethren

our lives
to lay down.

did he kill him?
Because
his own deeds
were wicked
while his brother's
were just.
No need, then,
brothers,
to be surprised
if the world
hates you.

That we have passed
from death to life
we know

because we love
the brothers.
The man who
does not love
is
among the living dead.
Anyone who hates
his brother
is a murderer,
and you know
that eternal life

abides
in no murderer's heart.
The way we came
to understand love
was that he

laid down
his life
for us;
we too must

lay down
our lives

for our brothers.
I ask you,
how can God's love
survive in a man

did he slaughter him?
Because
his own works
were evil,
and those of his brother
righteous.
Do not be amazed,
brothers,

if the world
hates you.
We know
that we have passed
from death to life

because we love
our brothers.
Whoever
does not love
remains
in death.
Everyone who hates
his brother
is a murderer,
and you know
that no murderer
has eternal life
remaining
in him.
The way we came
to know love
was that he

laid down
his life
for us;
so we ought

to lay down
our lives

for our brothers.

Whoever has

the life of the world
and sees his brother
having need,
and closes
his compassion
from him,

how does God's love
dwell (*menein*) in him?

Little children,
let us not love
in word or speech
but in work (*en ergō*)
and truth.

By this (*en toutō*)
we shall know
that we are
of the truth,
and before him
reassure our hearts,

that if ever
our hearts
condemn us,
that greater
is God
than our hearts,
and he knows all.
Beloved,
if [our] hearts
do not
condemn us,
we have confidence
before God;
and whatever we ask
we receive
from him,

because
his commandments
we keep,
and what is pleasing
before him

who has
enough
of this world's goods

yet closes
his heart
to his brother
when he sees him in need?

Little children,
let us love

in deed
and in truth
and not merely
talk about it.

This is our way
of knowing
we are committed
to the truth

and are at peace
before him
no matter what
our consciences
may charge us with;
for God
is greater
than our hearts
and all is known to him.
Beloved,
if our consciences
have nothing
to charge us with,
we can be sure
that God is with us

and that we will receive
at his hands
whatever we ask.
Why?

Because
we are keeping
his commandments
and doing

If someone who has

worldly means
sees a brother
in need
and refuses him
compassion

how can the love of God
remain in him?

Children,
let us love
not in word or speech
but in deed
and truth.

This is how
we shall know
that we belong
to the truth

and reassure our hearts
before him
in whatever
our hearts
condemn,
for God
is greater
than our hearts
and knows everything.
Beloved,
if [our] hearts
do not
condemn us,
we have confidence
in God

and receive
from him
whatever we ask,

because
we keep
his commandments
and do

we do.	what is pleasing in his sight.	what pleases him.
And this is his commandment, that we believe the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, as he has given a commandment to us.	His commandment is this: we are to believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and are to love one another as he has commanded us.	And his commandment is this: we should believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love one another just as he commanded us.
And the one who keeps his commandments in him dwells (<i>menein</i>) and he in him.	Those who keep his commandments remain in him and he in them.	Those who keep his commandments remain in him, and he in them, and the way
And in this (<i>en toutō</i>) we know that he dwells (<i>menein</i>) in us, from the Spirit which he has given us.	And this is how we know that he remains in us: from the Spirit that he gave us.	and the way we know that he remains in us is from the Spirit that he gave us.

In this passage the author is weaving certain words and themes together, in an intricate design. There are markers, in the recurrences of terms and phrases, to help us negotiate the thought—most clearly, *en toutō . . . hoti*, “in this, . . . that.” Parallelism of structure helps, too, as in “his commandments we keep, and what is pleasing before him we do.” The thought progresses step-wise: one thing is established, and then the argument moves on from there. “This is his commandment, that we believe . . . and love one another . . . and the one who keeps his commandments in him dwells, and he in him, and in this we know that he dwells in us. . . .” The epistle plays with ideas: we reassure our hearts, but if our hearts condemn us God is greater than our hearts, and if our hearts do not condemn us we have confidence before God. The Johannine theme centering in the word *menein* returns again and again: to “dwell,” “remain,” “abide” (no one translation is satisfactory in every context). Lastly, the literal translation reveals how pictures are doled out, moment by moment or (again) step by step: someone has worldly substance, he sees someone in need, he withholds his compassion. Then the question: how can God’s love dwell in him? The reader’s or listener’s imagination takes these pictures in, likewise, step by step.

NAB obviously deals with this text quite highhandedly. "Heart" is now conscience, now heart. The connection between Cain's "works" and how we are to love—in work and truth—is obscured (NAB RNT is at fault here, too). The man [*sic*] who does not love does not "dwell in death," as the text has it: he "is among the living dead." Apart from the unfortunate reminiscence of George Romero's classic horror movie, this rendering obscures the play on "dwell" or "remain," as is the case also with the translation "how can God's love *survive* in a man" etc. And the rich NT notion of *parrësia*, "confidence," with its many associations in Pauline usage and in Hebrews, is trivialized: instead of "we have confidence before God," we are told that "we can be sure that God is with us." Even NAB RNT is defective here, though. "We have confidence in God" is quite different from "we have confidence (*parrësia*) before God." Mostly, though, thanks to its rejection of dynamic equivalence, NAB RNT has done well in restoring the delicacy and beauty of the text, simply by letting it speak for itself.

A quick survey of a few other places may conclude this section. One of the howlers of NAB came in the saying about "those who have made themselves eunuchs for the kingdom of heaven" (Mt 19:12). NAB presented us with this:

Some men are incapable of sexual activity from birth; some have been deliberately made so; and some there are who have freely renounced sex for the sake of God's reign.

This is a good example of how NAB manages to be simultaneously precious and pedestrian. NAB RNT makes amends with

Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some, because they were made so by others; some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven.

Surely, though, the phrase *ek koilias mētros* could have been kept: there is a poignancy in the mention of "from the[ir] mother's womb," with its vivid suggestion of the ongoing processes of life, that is wanting in NAB RNT's "because they were born so."

Another troubling passage in NAB came in the dominical saying, "I have not come to call the just, but sinners" (Mk 2:17; Mt 9:13; Lk 5:32). Jesus is answering the complaints of the Pharisees' scribes that he ate with tax collectors and prostitutes. By any standard reckoning of their time and tradition, the Pharisees are the "just," Jesus' table companions are the "wicked." Jesus' answer takes these categorizations, and how they would be applied to the parties involved, at face value. There is irony in this, of course. The Pharisees would walk away unaware of the judgment

on them that is implicit in the saying. The dispute and its punch line work, however, only if the terms are rendered literally. This is how NAB, not only missing the point but adding a certain tone of petulance, translated the verse: "I have come to call sinners, not the self-righteous." NAB RNT, again, returns to the meaning of the text: "I did not come to call the righteous but sinners."

A final example, again from Mark. At the beginning of his ministry, Jesus comes with the call to "repent" (Mk 1:15b). This repentance involves taking in the good news that "the *kairos* is fulfilled, the kingdom of God is at hand" (Mk 1:15a). God is up to something! *Metanoia* is the only proper response: a change of consciousness, an awakening to the divine action already at work in the world. This theocentric emphasis—*metanoia* as response to what God is doing—disappears in NAB's virtually Pelagian call: "Reform your lives." In contrast, NAB RNT returns to the faithful "Repent."

The retranslation of the NT we have in NAB RNT, then, represents a hopeful sign. Perhaps we may look forward to the announcement of a decision by the Catholic Biblical Association that the NAB OT will likewise undergo revision, on the same principles that have guided this most welcome redoing of the NT.

JB AND NJB

The Jerusalem Bible appeared in 1966 like a breath of fresh air. It boasted a distinguished pedigree. The introductory matter, scriptural cross references, and notes came from the justly praised work of the Ecole biblique, the *Bible de Jérusalem*. The English translation, done for the most part from the original languages, had been vetted by a group of scholars notable for literary skill, including J. R. R. Tolkien. The "look" of the pages was itself refreshing: instead of the verse-by-verse arrangement familiar from editions of the KJV, JB actually looked like a book, with paragraphing and unbroken blocks of print and headings, uncluttered by verse numbers, which were discreetly pushed to the margins.

The notes, introductions, cross references, and typography were indeed excellent, but the translation itself, though it was both up-to-date and smooth, and even in its way elegant, proved disappointing to many, for the reasons already suggested in the examples above.

Now comes *The New Jerusalem Bible*, touted by its publisher as new indeed. In fact, while there has been some revision of the text, what is new about this version is the introductory, marginal, and other explanatory material, and that material is for all practical purposes a translation of the 1973 revision of the *Bible de Jérusalem*. These notes are generous, comprehensive, and altogether admirable, from the viewpoint of both

scholarship and devotion; even after 15 years (12 years if we reckon by the publication date of NJB), they wear well.

The text itself, however, continues to labor under the difficulties of the original JB: paraphrastic tendency, glossing over textual difficulties, rearrangement of word order, and so on.

IMAGE OF GOD IN JB AND NJB

To me, one of the chief defects of JB is theological. Because its translators and literary revisors did not feel bound to follow the word order, nor to stay with the images and terms, of the original, nor to translate words consistently even in the same passage, it was easy for a certain image of God to find its way into the pages of JB. (NJB, because it is less paraphrastic than its predecessor, does represent an improvement on this count.)

Two examples of what I mean are Ps 147:10-11 and Ps 135:6 (with its parallel in Ps 115:3). The first passage has to do with Yahweh's purposes. The psalm verses focus on what Yahweh pays attention to or takes seriously, and what therefore we do well to take seriously ourselves. Human inclination is to rely on military resources, the "sure thing" that will guarantee security and salvation. Yahweh's view, the psalm asserts, is quite different—and so should ours be. Trust, obedience, "fear of the Lord"—these are what matter, and what bring security, not "horse and chariot." This is a core conviction of Israelite tradition. Yahweh's "pleasure" (the root *hps*) and "favor" (the root *rsh*)—what he takes seriously, the object of his predilection, the focus of his interest and involvement in our lives—have to do with trust, expectation, faith.

A literal translation of Ps 147:10 runs as follows:

Not in strength of horse does he take pleasure (*hps*),
not in legs of a man does he take delight (*rsh*),

where "legs of a man" refer to swiftness and ease in military action, as "horse" is shorthand for the phrase "horse and chariot," itself shorthand throughout the biblical tradition for the might of armaments as the means of national security or victory in war. The next verse gets to the point: What *does* Yahweh focus on and look for?

Yahweh takes delight (*rsh*) in those who fear him,
those who wait for his *hesed*.

"Wait for" means to look to, with expectation and trust; the untranslatable *hesed*, of course, is Yahweh's faithful love, the kind of love that keeps its promises.

This passage JB renders this way:

The strength of the war horse means nothing to him,
it is not infantry that interests him.

Yahweh is interested only in those who fear him,
in those who rely on his love.

The image that comes through to the unwary reader is that of one haughtily indifferent to anything but subservience and craven dependency: “interested only in those who fear him.”

NJB does better:

He takes no delight in the power of horses,
no pleasure in human sturdiness;
his pleasure is in those who fear him,
in those who hope in his faithful love.

JB’s translation had the merit of making it clear that chariotry and infantry were what was in mind. To this extent NJB is still misleading: v. 10 might have used the standard “horse” rather than “horses.”

The second passage (Ps 135:6 || Ps 115:3) likewise deals with Yahweh’s purpose, but here the emphasis is on how he carries it through. He means business, and he can be relied on.

Everything that Yahweh *hâpêš*, he does,

[that is, what he takes pleasure in, is focused on—*hâpêš*—he follows through on]

in the heavens and on the earth,
in the seas and all the deeps.

The imagery is that of creation: the power of Sea and the Deep is no match for Yahweh.

JB here is paraphrastic, and the effect is that the psalm no longer speaks of Yahweh’s steadfastness of purpose but of a generalized, even impersonal “will”:

In the heavens, on the earth,
in the ocean, in the depths,
Yahweh’s will is sovereign.

The wording of NJB, while more literal, ends up presenting a deity that is arbitrary, self-willed, even priggish:

Yahweh does whatever he pleases.

This is even worse than the Grail version, “The Lord does whatever he wills”!

"JUSTICE" OR "VIRTUE"

As these translations reflect a certain image of God, so they are informed by a conviction that what is central in human life is ethical rectitude. Again and again, moral dispositions, effort, and attainment are presented as being the focus of God's attention.

This is perhaps not surprising, since it accords with the way many people—certainly at the level of popular piety and practice—understand the Christian life, but it seems to me questionable, in light of certain emphases in the biblical tradition. Yahweh is presented as the God who hears the cry of the oppressed, who upholds the widow and orphan and stranger. That is what is central in human existence; that is what Yahweh's "justice" consists in. The "just" are those who identify with this "justice," in their choices and actions. They are the ones who are "in the right," as that "right" is defined by Yahweh's compassion for the powerless. When there is a case of exploitation or unfair treatment of neighbor by neighbor, the one who is being exploited is the one who is "in the right." That is why biblical poetry can without explanation use the parallelism "poor" and "just," and the corresponding parallelism "rich" and "wicked."

All this seems to me far from the realm of moral effort and ethical rectitude as such, yet JB and NJB consistently obscure the point. Instead of "the just" we have "the upright" or "the virtuous." Ezekiel 18 comes to mind, with its contrast between the "wicked" and the *ṣaddîq*, the "just person." Throughout, "justice" (*ṣ' dāqāh*) is "integrity," and the *ṣaddîq* is "the upright man." (NAB: "virtue" and "virtuous"!)

Psalm 33 begins, in JB,

Shout for joy to Yahweh, all virtuous men,
praise comes well from upright hearts.

NJB emends to

Shout for joy, you upright;
praise comes well from the honest,

but the net effect is the same.

In fact, in the NJB there seems to be a consistent effort to replace "virtuous" with "upright": comparison of the two versions of Proverbs shows this to be true.

What I have put forth as a defect of these translations—what I might call the "ethical" bias that informs them—has a history, of course, and one need only to go back to the Reformation to see how "justice" and "just" came to be understood as "righteousness" and "righteous." It is an easy step from "righteous" to "upright" and "virtuous." In the unques-

tioned assumptions that guide both the translation and reading of Scripture we see the triumph of what Krister Stendahl called “the introspective conscience of the West.” The best strategy for the translator, it seems to me, is to stay with the conventional renderings “just” and “justice,” and not settle the question by using “virtue” and its cognates, nor even “righteousness” and “righteous.”

PAUL

The Pauline corpus in JB has been the object of both praise and strenuous criticism. Though the letters read smoothly, a comparison with the Greek reveals a tendency to rearrange ideas—which amounts to a rewriting of Paul.

A sampling of this corpus will serve to make the point clear. Here I present in parallel columns 2 Cor 5:17–21, as found in NAB RNT, JB, and NJB.

NAB RNT	JB	NJB
<p>So whoever is in Christ is a new creation: the old things have passed away; behold, new things have come. And all this is from God,</p>	<p>And for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation; the old creation has gone and now the new one is here. It is all God's work. It was God</p>	<p>So for anyone who is in Christ, there is a new creation: the old order is gone and a new being is there to see. It is all God's work;</p>
<p>who has reconciled us to himself through Christ and given us the ministry</p>	<p>who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the work of handing on this reconciliation.</p>	<p>He reconciled us to himself through Christ and he gave us the ministry</p>
<p>of reconciliation, namely, God was reconciling</p>	<p>In other words, God in Christ</p>	<p>of reconciliation. I mean, God was in Christ</p>

the world
to himself
in Christ,
not counting
their trespasses
against them
and entrusting
to us
the message

of reconciliation.
So
we are ambassadors
for Christ,
as if God
were appealing
through us.

We implore you
on behalf of Christ,
be reconciled
to God.
For our sake
he made him
to be sin
who did not know
sin,
so that
we
might become
the righteousness
of God
in him.

was reconciling
the world
to himself,
not holding
men's faults
against them,
and he has entrusted
to us
the news
that they
are reconciled.
So
we are ambassadors
for Christ;
it is as though God
were appealing
through us,

and the appeal
that we make
in Christ's name
is: be reconciled
to God.
For our sake
God made
the sinless one
into sin,
so that
in him
we
might become
the goodness
of God.

reconciling
the world
to himself,
not holding
anyone's faults
against them,
but entrusting
to us
the message
of reconciliation.
So
we are ambassadors
for Christ;
it is as though God
were urging you
through us,
and in the name of Christ
we appeal to you

to be reconciled
to God.
For our sake
he made
the sinless one
a victim for sin,
so that
in him
we
might become
the uprightness
of God.

JB and, to a lesser extent, NJB expand on the lean expression of Paul. The "word [NAB RNT and NJB "message"] of reconciliation" becomes in JB "the news that they are reconciled," which goes beyond the evidence. "The justice of God" JB renders as "the goodness of God," which surely makes impossible any adequate study of *dikaiosynē theou* in Paul. (This is of a piece with NAB's beatitude, "Blest are they who hunger and thirst for holiness," which likewise narrows the sense of *dikaiosynē* to the ethical.) "The ministry of reconciliation" becomes "the work of handing on this reconciliation" (JB); NJB restores "ministry,"

and this would be useful to anyone who wishes to gather an understanding of *diakonia*. In v. 17, “the old things have passed away, behold they have become new,” only NAB RNT recognizes—or allows to be recognized—the allusion to Isa 43:19 and its use in Rev 21:5.

These paraphrastic tendencies, at once expansionist and narrowing of meaning, that we see in JB and in NAB have been suppressed in NAB RNT and, to a lesser extent, in NJB.

One last, brief example from the Pauline corpus of how the re-arrangement of ideas destroys or obscures the connections of thought that come through in the original. In the opening passage of Ephesians the divine choice that marked us out for adoption is said to be

according to the *eudokia* of his will

[*eudokia* is the NT equivalent of the “favor” or “good pleasure” that we saw above is expressed in the OT *ršh*]

to the praise of glory of his grace
[with] which he has graced us in the Beloved,
in whom we have redemption through his blood,
the taking away of transgressions,
according to the richness of his grace. . . .

(Eph 1:5-7)

The style is run-on, piling up phrase after phrase. Echoes occur: “his grace . . . he has graced us . . . the richness of his grace.” Redemption is “through his blood,” and is identified with “taking away,” or “remission,” of transgressions. Each of these terms (*charis*, *apolytrōsis*, *aphesis*) leaps off the page, so bound up are they with other passages in this epistle and in Pauline, and early Christian, theology.

The thought is fragmented in JB and, somewhat less so, in NJB. The “favor [*eudokia*] of his will” becomes “his own kind purposes” or “his purpose and good pleasure.” “To the praise of the glory of his grace” is expanded to “to make us praise the glory of his grace” (JB), and the echo of “grace” in the verb is erased with “his free gift.” “We have redemption through his blood” becomes “through his blood, we gain our freedom.” The close connection the original Greek makes between “redemption” and “blood” is obscured by the rewording, and so is the parallelism of *apolytrōsis* and *aphesis*. The phrase “through his blood” in the original serves as a link between these two soteriological terms, working almost *apo koinou*. And the concluding prepositional phrase, “according to the richness of his grace,” is transformed into the start of a new sentence: “Such is the richness. . . .”

Later in the passage (v. 9) the word *eudokia* of v. 5 recurs, but this

time JB reduces it to an adverb, "kindly"; NJB takes half of its previous hendiadys to translate it, "his good pleasure"—to that extent the reader could make a connection. In JB the term *proorizein*, "to mark out beforehand," which in v. 5 was rendered "determine," in v. 11 (passive participle) is "chosen from the beginning." NJB translates "mark out beforehand" in both places. In the same v. 11, *eklêrôthêmen*, "we have received our heritage" (NJB), JB paraphrases to "we were claimed as God's own"; again, any connection with the scriptural idea of "inheritance" is erased.

The long and short of the matter is that one should use JB only with caution. NJB is more trustworthy, and the notes are excellent, though sometimes at odds with the translation. If one is unable to check a passage against the Greek, trust NAB RNT.

CONCLUSION

I hope these close readings of texts are not simply fussy. I think it important that a translation allow the reader, or hearer, to make the same connections that the original text makes, and in the same order in which they are made. To this end, lexical consistency is essential, and formal equivalence is of great importance. We owe thanks to the CBA translation committee for our new version of the NT, and though the other versions surveyed here disappoint in many and dismaying ways, the villain of the piece—if there has to be one—has proved to be the way that the principle of dynamic equivalence was used. Perhaps, like so much else that both enlivened and troubled the 60s, that principle, while it will for all practical purposes be discarded, will also turn out to have taught us much, through its very wrongheadedness. It has all been, as people say, a learning experience.