

Adam Nicolson: *Power and Glory. Jacobean England and the making of the King James Bible.* London: Harper Perennial, 2004 (first published by HarperCollinsPublishers 2003), 281 pages exclusive of preface

When Queen Elisabeth the first died in 1603 James VI of Scotland (the son of Mary, Queen of Scots) succeeded to the English throne and became James I of England. At this point in time two Bibles were in general use, the official The Bishops' Bible (or Church Bible) – not a very good translation and generally disliked - and The Geneva Bible – translated by Calvinists and used by the English Puritans. Both Puritans and Roman Catholics had been persecuted by Elisabeth, but James' ambition was to unify and in 1604 he commissioned a new translation of the Bible. The new version was to be an irenicon, a peacemaking instrument, unifying the nation. As head of the Church of England James saw himself with a kind of divine authority, rather like the one which used to belong to the Pope. The purpose of the new Bible was to merge the kingliness of God with the godliness of kings. "...to make royal power and divine glory into one indivisible garment which could be wrapped around the nation as a whole" (p. xviii). *Power and Glory* is an interesting and highly readable historical account of the times, the spirit and the people who produced the new version from 1604-1611. The main focus of this review, though, is the relevance of this book to translation scholars.

As organiser/overall coordinator of the translation James chose Richard Bancroft, newly appointed Archbishop of Canterbury. Bancroft acted as a royal agent and organised the work very tightly and professionally during the seven years it took to complete the new version. The overall framework established by Bancroft was the setting up of a translation committee consisting of six translation companies (two Westminster-based, two Oxford-based, two Cambridge-based). About fifty scholars participated, most of them belonging to the clergy.

From a translation theoretical point of view it is very interesting that many of the overall instructions to the translators have survived and to note how well-organised the work was and how much the instructions resemble what we would recommend today on the basis of a functional approach. Everybody involved new that the **Commissioner** was King James himself. They new the **Skopos**; that the bible was to function as an irenicon, that it was to be used in church – in other words that it was to be read aloud (it was probably foreseen that the Geneva Bible, with its profusion of notes and references, would continue alongside as a kind of "bible for study"). It had to be clear and understandable, but at the same time it was "to merge the kingliness of God with the godliness of kings". The **Translation Brief** was very explicit and consisted of 16 rules

(of which the book mentions 15, pp. 73-82). These rules are still to be found at Cambridge University Library in a document entitled “The rules to be observed in translation”. It should be borne in mind that, though very explicit, the rules are at the same time deeply encoded with meaning bound to the context of the time and accessible to the chosen translators – a subject elaborated on in the book.

Rules 1 to 5 and rule 14 were to do with continuity, with intertextuality:

1. The ordinary Bible read in Church commonly called the Bishoppes Bible, to be followed, and as little altered as the Truth of the Originall will permitt.
2. The names of the Profyts and the holie Wryters, with the other Names in the text to be retayned, as near as may be, according as they are vulgarly used.
3. The ould ecclesiasticall words to be kept viz. as the Word Church not to be translated Congregation, etc.
4. When a word hath divers Significatons, that to be kept wch hath ben most commonly used by the most of the ancient Fathers being agreeable to the proprietie of ye place and the analogie of fayth.
5. The Division of the Chapters to be altered either not at all, or as little as may be if necessity soe requier.
14. Names the translations to be consulted (Tyndale’s, the Geneva Bible, etc.)

Note how e.g. rule 2 is specific about the level of formality.

Rules 6 and 7 are concerned with marginal notes and references and it is quite clear that the King does not favour the tradition of the Geneva Bible:

6. Noe marginal notes att all to be affixed, but only for ye explanation of ye Hebrew or Greeke Words, which cannot without some circumlocution soe breifly and fitly be expressed in ye Text.
7. Such quotations of places to be marginally sett downe, as shall serve for fitt reference of one Scripture to an other.

Rules 8, 9, 10 and 13 are about the organisation of the work, the cooperation and, with a modern term, quality assurance:

8. Every particuler man of each company to take ye same chapter or chapters, and having translated or amended them severally by himselfe where he thinks good, all to meete together, confer what they have done, and agree for their Parts what shall stand.
9. As one company hath dispatched any one booke in this manner they shall send it to the rest to be considered of seriously and judiciously: for His Majestie is verie carefull of this poynt.

10. If any Company, upon ye review of ye books so sent, really doubt, or differ upon any place, to send them word thereof, note the place, and withal send their reasons; to which if they consent not, the difference to be compounded at ye generall meetinge, which is to be of the chiefe persons of each company, at ye ende of ye worke.

13. Names the directors of each company

Rule 11 advices on the consultation of experts:

11. When any place of speciall obscuritie is doubted of, letters to be directed by authority to send to any learned man in the land, for his iudgment of such a place.

And rule 12 on the consultation of practitioners:

12. "Every Bishopp" was to admonish his clergy and to ask for their "particular observations"

Finally, rule 15 speaks on the subject of consistency:

15. "Ancient and Grave Divines, in either of the Universities", were to ensure that passages and references translated one way in the Old Testament were translated concordantly in the New.

Another document described in the book deserves mention, namely a kind of translation protocol discovered in the late 1950s in Corpus Christi College in Oxford:

"Jotted down in quickly assembled notes is the whole scene: the scholars arguing, consulting, losing their tempers, bringing in learned evidence from church fathers and classical authors, testing variants on each other, seeing what previous translators had done, insisting on the right rhythm, looking for the unique King James amalgam of the rich-plain word, the clarity within a majestic phrase, the court-Puritan perfection. It is as if the ghosts have walked on stage" (p. 201).

The result of this great work was a version which is rich and clear at the same time. Plain words, strong basic words have been successfully coupled with rich and majestic language, but first and foremost with rhythm. In Nicolson's words (p. 209): "This is the kingdom of the spoken. The ear is the governing organ of this prose; if it sounds right, it is right. The spoken word is the heard word, and what governs acceptability of a particular verse is not only accuracy but euphony." However, the language of the new Bible was not clear and understandable in the sense that it was ordinary. The sentence structure was essentially

Greek, not English, i.e. the King James Translators did exactly what Luther had described as absurd: they mimicked precisely the form of the original – they did not search for the language of mothers, or the man at the market stall (p. 195). It was “more important to make English godly than to make the words of God into the sort of prose that any Englishmen would have written” (p. 211). Nida (1974: 1) talks about the old and the new focus of translation:

”The older focus in translating was the form of the message, and translators took particular delight in being able to reproduce stylistic specialities, e.g., rhythms, rhymes, plays on words, chiasmus, parallelism and unusual grammatical structures. The new focus, however, has shifted from the form of the message to the response of the receptor.....Even the old question: Is this a correct translation? must be answered in terms of another question, namely: for whom?”

The King James translation has aimed at living up to both “the old and the new focus” – stylistic richness as well as clarity, but it is important to note that what Nida calls “the older focus” can in fact be divided into two, namely the translation of sacred and the translation of non-sacred texts. Even though the translation of non-sacred texts was very free indeed the translation of sacred texts was equally faithful.

According to Nida (1974: 123) the only translation of the Bible from the early period which exerts a significant continuing influence is the King James Version. “...the phrase *thus saith the Lord* is not merely equivalent to *the Lord says*, but carries with it the connotations of King James language and ecclesiastical intonations” (Nida 1974: 94) (and similar examples cause great difficulties to present day translators of the Bible, see, e.g. Jeppesen 1990: 18). As an account of its translation and its historical setting *Power and Glory* is a fascinating book to be recommended to anybody interested in translation or in the Jacobean era. Whether King James succeeded in unifying the nation is quite another story.

A Danish graphic designer has recently been honoured by Cambridge University Press with the task of making a new font for the first digitally printed version of the King James Bible (Kristeligt Dagblad fredag d. 22. oktober, p. 20). With this act it seems that we have been forgiven the appalling behaviour of King Christian IV of Denmark and Norway when he came to England to pay a family visit - James was married to his sister Anne - in 1606 (during the years of the translation). According to Nicolson (p. 117) “They [Christian and his Danes] scandalised even the Jacobean court with the depth of unbuttoned drunkenness they unleashed on the capital.”

References

Nida, Eugene A.; Taber, Charles R (1974/1969). *The Theory and Practice of Translation*. Leiden: E.J.Brill.

In Hermes no. 5 (1990: 15-33) Knud Jeppesen, theologian and bible translator, wrote an interesting article called "Problemer ved at oversætte Bibelen til dansk på ny". In Denmark a new bible translation was published in 1607 and revised in 1647 (den resen-svanningske oversættelse) and if any bible translation has influenced the Danes the way the King James version has it in the English-speaking world then this is the one. Jeppesen writes about general translation problems connected with a new Danish translation of a very well known version of the Bible and many of the points he raises were equally relevant when the King James version was produced four hundred years ago.

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