'DUMBED DOWN' TRANSLATIONS

Posted on September 7, 2008 by Eddie

Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

Both Jim West and Iyov comment on an article in *Haaretz* which takes issue with a new translation of the Hebrew Bible into what it calls 'skimpy slang'. The original article is rather long, so I won't quote it all here, but this should give you a flavour:

> *The idea of translating the Bible into simple contemporary language is "scandalous," Drora Halevy, the ministry's National Supervisor for Bible Studies, told Haaretz. The booklets present the text in "skimpy slang" that cheapens the Bible, she added.*
>
> *"It's a purely marketing initiative intended for the below-average; it's a disaster," says Professor Yaira Amit, a Bible instruction expert.*
>
> *Booklet publishers Rafi Moses and Reches Publications say the Bible is a foreign language to Israeli children, who need to read it in simple language to understand it.*
>
> *Halevy and other Bible and Hebrew language experts fear that children will simply not bother to read the Bible, but use the simple language version instead.*

The relationship between the Hebrew language and the Hebrew Bible is a complex one. The Bible is seen by many as a repository of authentic Hebrew and so it is important that children learn to read and understand the Scriptures as they were originally written. This is an important function, but it's not what the Bible is all about. The purpose of the Bible is to communicate the message of God reaching out to his creation to reconcile all things to himself. The point is that it is God who reaches out, God who communicates and God who reconciles: he is the one who steps towards us - he does not expect us to become experts in Biblical Hebrew if we are to understand his message. To my mind, the concept of a book which includes a new translation of the Bible side by side with the original Hebrew serves both God's purposes and those of the Hebrew language elite. Though, of course, I have no way of checking the quality of the new tranlsation - it may well be a stinker: but the concept of rendering the Scriptures into modern Hebrew is perfectly valid.

Both Iyov and Jim West build on their dislike of the idea of the translation into modern Hebrew to make points about the translation of the Bible into English. Iyov first:

> *We have the same problem in the US, with some schools and religious institutions using translations of the Bible into â€œskimpy slang.â€ Â Â I have also heard of schools that use versions of Shakespeare that have been â€œtranslatedâ€ into simplified modern English.Â I agree that this is â€œscandalous.â€ Â (I am even uncomfortable about putting Chaucer into Modern English.)*
>
> *I simply am unable to fathom an English-speaking college student, college graduate (or even a graduate of an academically-oriented high school) who is incapable of reading Shakespeare, Milton, or the King James Bible.Â I simply do not understand why failure to be*

> *able to read and comprehend English classics is not regarded as illiteracy.*

Well, I like Shakespeare and I had to study Chaucer in the original. I would hope that any well educated English speaker would be in a position to enjoy both of those - but they are not written in the language that I speak. I grew up reading the AV and when I quote Scripture it is to the AV that my memory turns. But, once again, the purpose of the Bible is not to provide examples of highbrow English or to provide language lessons for the elite. It was Wycliffe who wanted to translate the Bible so that the ploughboy would understand it and today's ploughboys do not understand Elizabethan English.

We might wish that levels of literary English were higher than they are, but as long as people speak normal, everyday English, it will be neccesary to provide translations which speak their language. Jim West almost gets it right when he writes:

> *Better Bibles arenâ€™t produced with an eye to the masses. Better Bibles are produced with an eye to the experts.*

No! Better Bibles are produced by experts but with an eye to the masses who need to understand the message. We need the highest level of Biblical studies possible and we need people who can produce translations that accurately reflect the literary genres of the original. But this must go hand in hand with producing translations that are comprehensible by the ploughboy. Otherwise, our translations miss the whole point of why the Bible was written in the first place.