A FORGOTTEN TRANSLATION?

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In these days of the NIV, ESV, NLT and many other three-letter-acronym Bible translations in the English language, it is difficult to imagine days when modern translations were a rarity. However, those days are not all that far back. The New International Version appeared when I was an undergraduate (OK, it is a long time ago, I admit it).

When I first became a Christian, the only Bible I had was a King James Version and at times I struggled to understand what it was going on about. At particularly difficult points, I'd sometimes turn to a little book that my brother owned, the JB Phillips translation of the New Testament. This was the only modern translation of the Bible that I'd heard of in those pre-NIV, pre-Living Bible days.

Since the arrival of new translations which covered the whole Bible, which were better marketed and which were more suitable for the International market, the JB Phillips translation has rather slipped out of favour.

The latest edition of the Evangelical Review of Theology (scroll down to page 54) has an interesting little article about the Phillips translation which will interest anyone involved in Bible translation or who is of a similar age to me and who is feeling nostalgic.

It is fascinating to read about a translator who started his work while sheltering from the London blitz and who was encouraged on his way by none other than CS Lewis. It is remarkable, that he made no reference to commentaries and other textual aids, but only consulted the Greek New Testament. It is also interesting that Phillips realised that his attempt to translate the Bible into contemporary idiom inevitably led to it sounding old-fashioned within a decade or two.

There are many reasons why the Phillips translation has fallen out of favour, but as a pioneer in the field of modern English translations it deserves to be remembered.

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