

## BOOK REVIEW

John Barton, *The Word: How We Translate the Bible - and Why It Matters*, Penguin Books, London. 2023. pp. 351. ISBN9780141993041. pbk. £10.99

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Rather remarkably, almost immediately after its publication in 2019, John Barton's *A History of the Bible* leapt into the hardback non-fiction bestsellers list in the *London Times*. For some weeks, it was number one. It is good to start here since this present volume was effectively inspired by his writing of the earlier book. As with the *History*, so too here, the approach is to treat both books as speaking to the joint legacy of Jewish and Christian culture – both books include the *Hebrew Scriptures* and the *New Testament*. Also, both books, while being thoroughly scholarly, are written in an engaging style and using humour wherever appropriate.

Barton begins by reminding the reader that anyone reading or using the Bible inevitably does so through a translation. No one now speaks either *Biblical Hebrew*, *koine Greek* and certainly not Aramaic! Beginning with early Greek translations and, of course, Jerome's mammoth achievement of the Vulgate in Latin, the reader is presented in the first chapter with a concise history of biblical translation. The next two chapters set out, with exemplary clarity, the two key approaches to biblical translation highlighting their strengths and weaknesses with plenty of examples from the text.

Barton contrasts the two main approaches and sets out the issues early on: 'All translation has to mediate between the source language and the target language, and be faithful, in some sense, to both. Translators must, as a bare minimum, both render the text before them without distorting it and produce something new that is comprehensible to the vernacular reader'. (p.32) Both Richard Hooker and John Dryden set out this challenge well. But it was Friedrich Schleiermacher, who, early in the nineteenth century, set out the classical contrast between two key approaches. So he noted in a lecture in Berlin in June 1813:

'Either the translator leaves the writer as far as possible in peace, and moves the reader towards him; or else he leaves the reader as far as possible in peace, and moves the writer towards him'. (p.34) From this approach, developed the contrast between what are now described as 'formal equivalence' and 'functional equivalence'.

Some of the modern translations have tended towards functional equivalence emphasizing the need to communicate the basis of the source text in a manner that they believe will render the intended meaning of the original text in words, which mediate the message in the contemporary world. The *Good News* translations, J B Moffat's work and to some degree the *New* and *Revised English Bibles* all tend in this direction.

In contrast to this, formal equivalence places the emphasis on a literal translation of the original source documents. Martin Buber, a key figure in the early twentieth-century translation, and more recently Robert Alter, the literary critic, who is a companion of Barton's at various times in the book, stress the importance of sticking with the source text exactly as it is, rendered entirely literally. Barton makes an interesting comparison here with the Roman Catholic translators who, fairly recently, were charged with the task of providing revised renderings of the liturgical texts in succession to the 1960s *Missa Normativa* translations, often known simply as the Pope Paul text. Many have commented on the 'clunkiness' of these recent liturgical texts, and Barton quotes similar 'clunkinesses' in some of the formal equivalence translators of Holy Scripture.

Barton notes how versions, which attempt to compromise between these two, often produce the most useful translations, especially for public use. Perhaps the classical example is the *Revised Standard Version*. More recently, in the light of the development of contemporary language and idioms, the *New Revised Standard Version* was intended to update the Revised Standard Version, and certainly, it is the most often quoted English translation in the scholarly community. Here, however, the old saying of 'the path to hell being paved by good intentions' comes into play. A clear example of this has been the desire to eliminate sexist or 'gender specific' language. In the *King James Version*, adjective 'Christian' appears only three times, whereas in the *New Revised Standard Version*, it appears c30 times. Not only does this change the words set out in the source text but it also implies a far more self-conscious understanding of the church in the earliest communities of those who followed the teaching and life of Jesus.

Later in the book, there is an emphasis on style and register. Here, once again, the poetic feel of the *King James Version*, and to a degree, of the *Revised Standard Version*, has been lost in some of the more prosaic translations of the *New Revised Standard Version*. The antepenultimate and penultimate chapters consider a variety of issues. So words and meanings are explored – can the word *soul* be used following Gilbert Ryle's refutation of 'ghost in the machine' language? Then, on the retranslation within both the Hebrew Scriptures and the New Testament raise issues – is it the *Biblia Hebraica*, which is the starting point, or the *Septuagint*? Finally, there is a discussion of how modern translators have responded to biblical criticism.

It would be easy to assume that a book with this title would be a 'dry as dust' collection of reflections by those interested only in minute scholarly detail with little relevance to our broader culture. Barton makes it clear that all that is reflected upon here is anything but the territory of just the academic world. The Bible has been a great shaper of Western thought and morality. He concludes in memorable fashion:

‘Translation has been powerful as both an agent and an index of change in the two religions that regard the Bible, in its various forms, as a central part of their heritage. Much of the history of its reception is the history of its translation’. (p.288)

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