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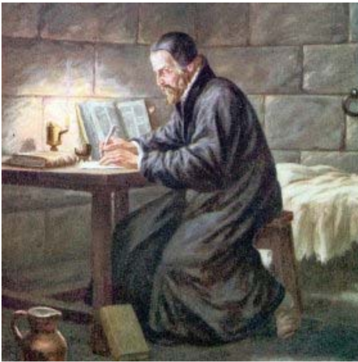
William Tyndale
Photo credit: GETTY

My youth in the very Protestant North Carolina of the 1940s was suffused with Bible translation. One version stood supreme and virtually alone: the King James, or Authorized, version of 1611, whose words and rhythms remain the stuff of memory. Schooldays, their rituals as yet uncensured by the United States Supreme Court, routinely opened with the serial recitation of scriptural verses—"Jesus wept" (John 11:35), in its brevity, being the hands-down favorite.

Were we aware, in those tender years, of the elegance of this biblical language with which few were unfamiliar? Probably not then. We were more fortunate than we knew.

There assuredly were few who knew the contentious history chronicled in Harry Freedman's useful book—not even how the Greek Septuagint replaced a Hebrew word *almah* (young woman) with *parthenos* (virgin), thus igniting a paramount issue of the Christian era. Nor could linguistic innocents of that era have identified *koine*, the demotic Greek in which the Gospels and Saint Paul's epistles to new churches were composed. As for the early translations placed comparatively side-by-side in the Complutensian Polyglot Bible in a Spanish university in the 16th century, they were mentioned only in advanced college courses.

In the Lutheran circles of my father's family, Martin Luther and his challenge to the pope's agents were familiar, especially among the many family clergymen—and possibly his formative translation into German. But information about the Latin Vulgate, the influential version Luther used in shaping modern German, was yet to come.

Unfortunately, a title emphasizing the word "murderous," like so many present-day titles and subtitles, falls strangely on the ear. It wasn't contentious translations but their doctrinal foundations that produced attitudes hardening into bigotries and hatreds. It was not, for instance, disputed phrases that sent Henry VIII's counselor Thomas More to the block. Nor dissident translations that incited that heroic figure, celebrated as a proto-libertarian in *A Man for All Seasons*, to burn heretics. More died for declining to acknowledge the king as head of the church.

Notwithstanding the learned labors of the author, an authority on Aramaic, the tongue presumably spoken by Jesus of Nazareth, it taxes the memory to think of anyone who was ever "murdered" over a disputed translation. Friction, yes, and lots of it; but a roll call of those executed for verbal error would be sparse. The pioneering English translator, William Tyndale, saw his translation burned in 1536 by Henry VIII's henchman, Thomas Cromwell. Later, in his Brussells exile, he himself was executed as a heretic.

Dr. Freedman is surely aware of the stretch of his title, just as he undoubtedly knows that the "invention of printing," which initiated a new era in the creation and circulation of vernacular Scripture, is at best inexact, though he uses it more than once. In fact, it was Gutenberg's invention of movable type that was revolutionary. But this is a common misconception, even among the learned. Printing in certain crude forms is ancient technology.

Biblical translation, and its allied controversies, remains of the greatest interest, though the mid-20th-century passion for simplification seems to have subsided. In what C. S. Lewis called "the liturgical fidgets," translators of Scripture and ritual too up-to-date for their own good—or that of the English language—supposed that the King James Bible (and the earlier Book of Common Prayer) had grown too esoteric for the common ear and needed flattening. God, wrote one British wit, now "speaks like someone you meet on the bus." Thus we passed quickly from the 17th-century "Shakespearean moment" to the 20th-century moment of banality. It was, to say no more, a misreading of human psychology, which values challenge in ultimate matters.

Translations and revisions of the 1960s and '70s, with the elegant exception of the Jerusalem Bible, revealed that tin ears were widely distributed. An example, which this writer recalls from a college English class, came from a Pauline epistle: The King James translated one admonition as "See then that you walk circumspectly . . . redeeming the time." The revised version was "See that you go carefully, making the most of time." The metaphoric bite of circumspection (looking about) and redemption (as of a pawned treasure) were both lost, and with it the sense and depth of the verse. It is fortunate that burning at the stake for verbal offenses—as imaginatively echoed in Freedman's title—had passed from use. An Episcopal priest of my aquaintance once admonished his flock not to drag out their "grief work" over the Prayer Book of 1928, then targeted for revision.

Grief work? Good grief!

Harry Freedman's scholarship is engaging and interesting, once one gets past the dubious "murderous history" notion. His book is especially enlightening in its discussion of the history of Saint Jerome's Latin Bible and the "translations of translations" springing from it—and of course, the process by which King James I finessed Puritan demands for plain language and worship by sponsoring the version that bears his name. The Puritans were represented among the 1611 translators but happily were prevented from laundering its eloquent and elegant phrases. Those hallowed words go on ringing today in the ears of those fortunate enough to be schooled in them, as do the felicities of Thomas Cranmer's incomparable Book of Common Prayer. Without the King James Version, would we know of "the world turned upside down" or "a thorn in the flesh" or "a still small voice" or the beating of "swords into plowshares" or "lambs to the slaughter"? And many other wonderful phrasings?

Those who find deep language challenging could no doubt find commentaries and dictionaries helpful, and improve their ears. The lesson of the liturgical and biblical fidgets of the 1960s and '70s is that literacy, an essential part of what Edmund Burke called "the unbought grace of life," may be damaged, even lost, by eager revisionists who miss the deeper mysteries of life and faith. If it weren't uncharitable, I would say: a pox on them and their tinseled works!

Edwin M. Yoder Jr. is the author, most recently, of Vacancy: A Judicial Misadventure.

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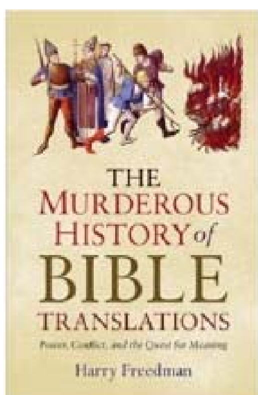

The Murderous History of Bible Translations

Harry Freedman