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Stephen Prickett

Excerpt

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## Introduction

When, in 1809, Baron Wilhelm von Humboldt was given the task by Frederick William III of creating the new University of Berlin, one of his basic principles was to separate theology from the study of the humanities, and to place the latter firmly within the faculty of Arts (*Philosophische Fakultät*).<sup>1</sup> Following the lead given by such eminent academic reformers as Thomasius at Halle and Munchhausen at Göttingen, Humboldt's policy, which aimed at freeing the humanities from the dead hand of the scholastic theology then practised in most German universities, was an essential step in the evolution of the modern idea of the university and of the disciplines of literary studies and philology.<sup>2</sup> For Humboldt, theology (like the natural sciences) was not conducive to the new spirit of *Wissenschaft* that lay at the heart of his conception of what a university should be, and which would find its fullest expression in a faculty of Arts. This notion of the centrality of the humanities to a university was one shared by other contemporary university reformers: Fichte, Schelling, Schleiermacher, and Steffens.<sup>3</sup> It was to have momentous and ultimately unforeseen consequences.

In Germany what Hermann Usener was later in the century to call a 'glacial-moraine' (*gletscherwall*)<sup>4</sup> was created between biblical studies and the study of other literatures, both classical and modern, which (to continue Usener's image) has left today a massive and seemingly natural barrier dividing the cultural landscape. In England, on the other hand, the two disciplines had, if anything, been drawing closer together at the end of the eighteenth century. The work of Robert Lowth had made possible a new aesthetic appreciation of biblical poetry, and the fact that the first generation of English Romantic poets, Blake, Wordsworth, Coleridge and Southey, so far from rejecting Christianity like Humboldt, were devout Christians of one kind or another, helped them to find in the Bible far more powerful sources of inspiration than their German contemporaries or their immediate

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predecessors of the Enlightenment. But though the Bible might be common ground, in the nineteenth century theology itself could be, and sometimes was, construed as a threat to the development of the other humanities. It underlay the Test Acts that until the 1850s excluded Dissenters and Catholics from Oxford and Cambridge, and the imperial claims assigned to it by Newman in his *Idea of a University* were paralleled in practice by Pusey's Oxford campaigns against Jowett and Max Müller for suspected heterodoxy. Given the prestige of the reformed universities of Germany it is hardly surprising that the new English foundations, such as London, and later the major civic universities, or the reforms in Cambridge and Oxford, tended to follow Humboldt's models of curricula.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, the deservedly formidable reputation acquired by the refounded German theology of the nineteenth century brought with it its own assumptions that only served to strengthen the moraine between biblical and literary scholarship. The fact that there were distinguished and honourable exceptions to this general pattern,<sup>6</sup> does not alter the fact that by the end of the century the same wall that divided German scholarship had been successfully transplanted into English institutions and thought.

The result, latent in the nineteenth-century situation, but often delayed in experience until the twentieth, has been a crisis in biblical hermeneutics that theology by itself seems incapable of resolving satisfactorily. It is significant that in the two most powerful and persuasive accounts of the current dilemma, both Hans Frei and Robert W. Funk find themselves turning towards literary models in their search for a solution.<sup>7</sup> Meanwhile, separated from the biblical and prophetic models that gave the Romantics such confidence in their role and relevance, literature, and in particular, poetry, has also suffered a crisis of meaning in the twentieth century.

This book begins from the suspicion that the current problems of biblical hermeneutics are unlikely to be solved without some historical understanding of how the present situation arose, and that its roots cannot be understood simply in terms of development of theology or of literary theory considered as separate disciplines in isolation, but that they must be approached through their interaction and subsequent separation in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. As this history unfolds it should become apparent that problems that first surfaced in biblical studies have been, and in many cases still are, paradigmatic of wider hermeneutic, epistemological, and linguistic

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problems. It is, indeed, hardly an exaggeration to say that the contemporary crises in literary criticism and translation theory also have roots in that same division between biblical scholarship and aesthetics that occurred in the early nineteenth century, and that any lasting attempt to solve these problems must similarly begin with an understanding of how they came into being. It is, for instance, not always recognized that the German Higher Criticism, nineteenth-century English poetic theory, French twentieth-century discussions of the relationship of author to text, and the American Sapir-Whorf hypothesis in linguistics all have common origins in eighteenth-century debates over poetry and hermeneutics. The history of each of these topics would be the subject of a complete study in itself, and this book does no more than indicate, parenthetically, a few of their landmarks; the thread that links them – and my subject here – is the more tenuous but amazingly persistent debate over the past three hundred years on the relationship of poetry to religious language.

What follows is an attempt to tease out certain problems that have lain at the back of my mind for more than fifteen years. They were present when I first wrote on Coleridge and Wordsworth<sup>8</sup> and by the time I came to write on the Victorian Church<sup>9</sup> I was able to refer in the Introduction to a possible further study of religious language on a broader front than that of nineteenth-century England. The result is this book. My earlier work had suggested that many of the assumptions and attitudes of the Victorians towards the Bible and religious language in general could not be satisfactorily explained without reference to the critical controversies of the previous century, and though the eighteenth century was, in many ways, a critical watershed, it, in turn, had inherited a whole complex of ideas and models from earlier centuries – from the Church Fathers, Augustine, Dante and the sixteenth-century Reformers, for instance. Any starting-point is arbitrary. What is contained in the following chapters is, of necessity, a part of the story.

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## Ways of reading the Bible

*The problem of the transparent text*

*Belinda:* Ay, but you know we must return  
good for evil.

*Lady Brute:* That may be a mistake in the  
translation. (Vanbrugh, *The Provok'd Wife*, 1697, I.i.)

We start with two quotations – both about the Bible. First Coleridge:

I take up this work with the purpose to read it for the first time as I should any other work, – as far at least as I can or dare. For I neither can, not dare, throw off a strong and awful prepossession in its favour – certain as I am that a large part of the light and life, in which and by which I see, love, and embrace the truths and the strengths co-organised into a living body of faith and knowledge . . . has been directly or indirectly derived to me from this sacred volume, – and unable to determine what I do not owe to its influences.<sup>1</sup>

Our second quotation is from a far more respectable source in its own time than was Coleridge's *Confessions of an Inquiring Spirit* in 1849: the Preface to the *Good News Bible* of 1976:

The primary concern of the translators has been to provide a faithful translation of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. Their first task was to understand correctly the meaning of the original . . . the translators' next task was to express that meaning in a manner and form easily understood by the readers . . . Every effort has been made to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous.

Now an observer from another culture – let us say, the man on the Peking omnibus – might be forgiven for assuming that the tone of breezy confidence exuded by the translators of the *Good News* in 1976 came from their having understood and resolved the problem that concerned Coleridge. Where he found himself hesitant, tentative, and uncertain, they, carried forward by the progress of scholarship in the intervening 150 years, could be knowledgeable and precise. The fruits of the modern sciences of archeology, anthropology, and linguistics, together with a more sophisticated notion of history than the early

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nineteenth century, had, he might suppose, at last given an authoritative biblical text. Yet, of course, our baffled Peking everyman would once again have been deceived by the inscrutable Occident.

The thrust of Coleridge's *Confessions* becomes clearer if we recall that the work was originally entitled 'Letters on the Inspiration of the Scriptures', and that it was his nephew and editor Henry Nelson Coleridge who substituted the personal and subjective title of the published version. Coleridge's hesitancy was in the face of a particular and very complex dilemma: that of cultural relativity in perhaps its most extreme form. His difficulty lay not merely in the enormous problems inherent in translation from one cultural world to another, separated by at least two thousand years, but also in the fact that this cultural relationship was apparently asymmetric. He was uncomfortably aware how many of his basic cultural assumptions might be derived from the Bible in ways that, by definition, were inaccessible to impartial investigation. He had come to consciousness within a society which, while it was clearly very different from anything to be found in the Old or New Testaments, had taken many of its most basic presuppositions from them. The very system of criteria by which he might try to read the Bible as he would 'any other work' was already enmeshed by an almost unravellable tangle of likeness and unlikeness extending from the simplest equivalents down to the most complex unconscious premises. The dual metaphors of the passage, organically connected by a striking Coleridgean ellipsis: 'The light . . . by which I see', the 'life by which I . . . love', suggest the scope of his problem. 'Light' and 'life' are not objects of consciousness or perception, they are their *conditions*. We do not 'see' light, we see other things by it; we are not 'conscious' of life; it is the ground of consciousness – a ground peculiarly resistant to analysis by autopsy – as Wordsworth had succinctly put it, 'we murder to dissect'.

In short, Coleridge perceives the problem of cultural relativity in terms as much existential as analytic: the totality of a cultural world is one that can only be experienced as a participator, from the inside. 'In the Bible,' he admits a few pages later in the *Confessions*, 'there is more that *finds* me than in all other books put together'.<sup>2</sup> There is, and can be, no impartial observer. Hence his final inability to 'determine' what he did 'not owe to its influences' is not so much a disarming admission of failure, perhaps to be solved in due course by the advance of scholarship, as a staking-out of the limits of human enquiry.

By contrast, the translators of the Bible Society's *Good News Bible*

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appear to be afflicted by no such inhibiting doubts. Their appointed task 'to understand correctly the meaning of the original', though undoubtedly difficult in places, is in their estimation by no means impossible – given the aids of the various sciences hypothesized by our mythical observer, and given also, they would probably feel, the aid of the Holy Spirit, which had providentially ensured that the Bible *was* fully translatable into all languages: a process that could only enhance rather than diminish our understanding of the treasures encoded in the original Hebrew and Greek. Such confidence is, it would seem, rooted in a belief in the text itself as an objective entity over and above any debilitating niceties of cultural relativity and academic debate. Hence their commitment to conveying the 'correct meaning' of the original in 'language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous'. As a gloss on this approach a member of the Bible Society has described the *Good News Bible* as being for 'the unsophisticated' or 'average reader' who 'is likely to be grateful rather than offended at being delivered from theological subtleties', arguing that since God 'stooped to the level of human language to communicate with his people' it was the translators' task to set forth the 'truth of the biblical revelation in language that is as clear and simple as possible'.<sup>3</sup> The *text* has a 'meaning' that is finally independent of our cultural presuppositions.

Yet Coleridge's problem has a way of persisting. Take for example, a well-known story from the Elijah cycle. I quote from the *Authorized Version* of 1611:

And he arose, and did eat and drink and went in the strength of that meat forty days and forty nights unto Horeb the mount of God. And he came thither unto a cave, and lodged there; and, behold, the word of the Lord came to him, and he said unto him What doest thou here, Elijah? And he said, I have been very jealous for the Lord, the God of hosts; for the children of Israel have forsaken thy covenant, thrown down thine altars, and slain thy prophets with the sword: and I, even I only, am left; and they seek my life, to take it away. And he said, Go forth, and stand upon the mount before the Lord. And, behold, the Lord passed by, and a great and strong wind rent the mountains, and brake in pieces the rocks before the Lord; but the Lord was not in the wind: and after the wind an earthquake; and after the earthquake a fire; but the Lord was not in the fire: and after the fire a still small voice.  
I Kings xix, 8-12

This is such a well-known story that it is easy to miss how enigmatic and puzzling it becomes once we start looking beyond the bare and stark biblical narrative. We are simply not given any answers to the 'obvious' circumstantial and naturalistic questions. What, for instance,

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was this 'fire'? Was it some kind of electrical storm, or was it a bush fire? Was it connected with the earthquake? What did it burn? Similarly, what was this 'voice'? What is the status of this third-person narrative, anyway? Since Elijah was alone, do we conclude that this is his own account? There is no answer to these and a host of related questions. Stripped of what Erich Auerbach calls 'foreground' detail<sup>4</sup> the story concentrates exclusively on its central theme: that of Elijah's encounter with God.<sup>5</sup> And it is here that we begin to suspect this bare account of extreme complexity. Elijah's long-delayed meeting with God turns out to be not at all what we are told he had expected. Instead, his original assumptions are disconfirmed by a revelation so ambiguous as to resist any modern attempt to reduce it to a direct simple statement. Herein lies the translator's problem.

Translation, especially from one period of time to another, is not just a matter of finding the nearest equivalents for words or syntactic structures. In addition it involves altering the fine network of unconscious or half-conscious presuppositions that underlie the actual words or phrases, and which differentiate so characteristically the climate of thought and feeling of one age from that of another. Thus according to G. B. Caird, the biblical translator always 'runs the double risk either of modernising or of archaizing: to modernise is to ignore the culture gap of many centuries and to read the Bible as though its were contemporary literature; and to archaize is to exaggerate the culture gap and to ignore the similarities between the biblical world and our own'.<sup>6</sup> Caird's dilemma, we may suppose, is one common to many modern translators – and our story from the Elijah cycle is apparently a case in point.

What the prophet hears after the earthquake, the wind, and the fire may be literally translated from the Hebrew into English as 'a voice of thin silence'.<sup>7</sup> As we have seen, the King James *Authorized Version* of 1611 renders this curious oxymoron into English as the well-known 'still small voice'. Bearing in mind that in Elizabethan English 'small' could still mean 'thin' (as in Wyatt's 'her arms long and small' or the Shakespearean 'small beer') this is a remarkably accurate translation. In so far as it is obscure and ambiguous, it is an obscurity and ambiguity that is at least faithful to the original. Something very odd had apparently happened to Elijah.

The modern English translations, however, seem to be quite unanimous in *rejecting* any ambiguity or oddity perceived in the original. In the *Good News Bible* what Elijah hears is no more than 'the soft

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whisper of a voice'. The *New English Bible* hopefully tries reducing the 'voice' to a metaphor, translating it as 'a low murmuring sound', while the Catholic *Jerusalem Bible* outdoes the nascent naturalism of its Protestant rivals by eliminating all suggestion of speech with its 'sound of a gentle breeze' – which is a fair translation of the Vulgate's '*Et post ignem sibilis aurae tenuis*' ('and after the fire, a thin whistling sound of the air'). *Aura* refers literally to motion of the air – either wind or breath according to context. For an age with a typological cast of mind, the associations of the 'breeze' with the Holy Spirit would have been irresistible. The Hebrew word for 'wind' in this passage corresponds to the Greek word for 'spirit' in the Septuagint and the New Testament<sup>8</sup> and so what Elijah hears is made conveniently to prefigure its antitype of the Holy Spirit in the Gospels and the rushing wind of Pentecost. Yet such a chain of associative thinking, almost second-nature until the early nineteenth century, is lost in the modern context. It is interesting to speculate, therefore, why both the translators of the *New English Bible* and the Bible Society, supposedly unhampered by the mistranslation of the Latin tradition, should have been almost as eager as their Catholic peers to produce an implicitly naturalistic reading rather than follow the mysteriously suggestive Hebrew – an impressively accurate translation of which already existed in English.

Part of the answer clearly lies in the cultural milieu of the new translations. A noticeable feature of modern English that increasingly separates it from the critical sensibility of its past is an intolerance of ambiguity. We have come to expect that narrative will convey its own frame of reference so that we know, almost at once, for instance, whether we are reading what purports to be 'fact' or 'fiction' and adjust our mental sets accordingly. Writers who mix their genres are apt to leave us uneasy. Explanations may only operate at one level of our experience. We need to know whether Elijah's theophany was visionary or miraculous – whether the 'voice' is to be understood as 'internal', an event presumed to be *within* Elijah's own mind, or 'external', producing a phenomenon in nature to be detected by the presence of a witness. These distinctions between 'outer' and 'inner', or 'natural' and 'supernatural', are not, of course, biblical categories and the *Authorized Version's* 'still small voice' should prevent us from applying them to Elijah's mysterious experience. Yet the *New English Bible* offers us no choice: we are given the 'low murmuring sound' as an apparently *natural* if not immediately identifiable phenomenon. There is nothing peculiar or odd about low murmuring



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sounds, after all. They are as 'natural' as earthquakes, winds, and fires, if somewhat less noisy. If any ambiguity remains, it is only whether that 'murmuring' is a metaphor (as in 'murmuring breeze') or a literal voice – an altogether arbitrary ambiguity which, as we have seen, is quite foreign to the original. (So *that's* what the sound was: it was just a gentle breeze: no problems with miracles now; no theophany either!) After these, the *Good News Bible* seems positively pietistic in suggesting that what Elijah heard might, after all, have been speech, but its 'soft whisper' is as naturalistic as the other two, and to the secular ear has a conspiratorial or even sexy flavour. Not one of these three major modern translations manages to suggest an inherent peculiarity about the event that might indicate a quite *new* kind of experience. Indeed, it is precisely that oddity or paradox in the original text that the modern translators, themselves responding to the unstated assumptions of the scientific revolution, found either untranslatable, or, more probably, unacceptable. Since our distinctions between 'inner' and 'outer' are un-biblical categories (so the argument appears to run) we can only be 'modern' by treating the whole story at one level: it must be made *either* miraculous *or* natural. The modern mind cannot have an event that does not fit snugly into one of the two categories. Yet such rationalism would seem to strike right at the heart of the original story. Though no record survives of the seventeenth-century translators' attitude to this particular passage, we know from the notes of John Bois, who was both a translator and a member of the final revision committee for part of the New Testament, that he and his committee were careful in general to preserve textual ambiguity. Of the word 'praise', which might refer either to Jesus or the church members, in I Peter i, 7, he comments, 'We have not thought that the indefinite sense ought to be defined.'<sup>9</sup> In this, the King James translators may well have had an eye on the rival Catholic translators of the English *Rheims* and *Douai* Bibles (New and Old Testaments respectively) who had attacked the Protestants for mollifying hard places, whereas they themselves, they claimed, 'religiously keep them word for word, and point for point, for fear of missing or restraining the sense of the holy Ghost to our phantasie . . .'<sup>10</sup> Protestant and Catholic translators alike in the seventeenth century were under no doubt that oddities in the Hebrew or Greek texts were there for a divinely ordained purpose.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Professor Kenneth Grayston, one of the translators of the *New English Bible*, has described their brief in terms very similar to those set forth by the *Good News* panel:

We have conceived our task to be that of understanding the original as precisely as

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we could (using all available aids) and then saying again in our native idiom what we believed the author to be saying in his.

'And so,' he continues, 'in equivocal passages, the translators had to come off the fence and say "we think it means this". In ambiguous passages they had to write out the meaning plainly, and in obscure passages, to refrain from reproducing nonsense in translation.'<sup>12</sup> Interestingly, the possibility that something original and altogether new in human experience might be emerging into words in this (or similar) 'ambiguous' passages is not one that Grayston is altogether blind to. Rather, he firmly shuts his eyes to it. That the language of 'Spenser, Sidney, Hooker, Marlowe and Shakespeare' was a richer denser thing than his own he freely admits – but the poetic density of the *Authorized Version* is attributable not to a greater richness of *content*, but to an altogether different and apparently separable thing he calls 'style':

The *New English Bible* does not compete with the *Authorized Version*, certainly not in language and style: this is not a period of great writers equal to Spenser, Sidney, Hooker, Marlowe and Shakespeare. Modern English, it seems to me, is slack instead of taut, verbose and not concise, infested with this month's cliché, no longer the language of a proud and energetic English people, but an international means of communication. And 'means of communication' gives the game away: it seems to me a repository for the bad habits of foreigners speaking English. This is how we must speak if people are to listen and grasp what we say.<sup>13</sup>

This belief that religious experience, and the historic record of mankind's deepest questionings and insights, can only be adequately described today in the slack, verbose and cliché-ridden language of international communication would be disconcerting if it were not – by Grayston's own admission – so evidently self-defeating. How far it is possible, in the words of the *Good News Bible*'s Preface, 'to use language that is natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous', when the Bible is *not about* things that are natural, clear, simple, and unambiguous? or for the linguistically-enfeebled modern theologians struggling on the *New English Bible* to 'write out the meaning plainly' of what to the taut and concise translators of the seventeenth century was essentially ambiguous and obscure? The answer – in so far as Grayston seems to perceive that this question exists – appears to be 'that the *Authorized Version* was a translation made by men who knew far less than we know'<sup>14</sup>: in short, a matter of the textual and archeological progress correctly supposed by our mythical but puzzled observer