

The New Testament in the Language of Today

By Edmund C. Reim

As new translations follow each other with startling frequency in these days of intense commercial competition, this one by William F. Beck, Th. D., calls for our careful and sympathetic attention. Even in these days of intersynodical controversy and separation it means something that in contrast to other translations this is the work of a Lutheran scholar, even as it comes from a Lutheran publishing house, Concordia. One may still look for something different from the usual modern approach. But even so, this dare not be the basis of our evaluation. The work must, of course, be judged solely on the basis of its merits.

It must have been work, indeed, to prepare this one-man translation. Again and again there is evidence of the care with which the text was studied, not only for its meaning but also for the manuscript evidence supporting the text. And this has brought some gratifying results. The Preface introduces two papyrus manuscripts (*p*⁶⁶ and *p*⁷⁵) which are dated about the end of the second or beginning of the third century, roughly about A.D. 200. Only two other manuscripts show that rare "II" with which scholars in their tabulations indicate the probable age of these treasures. Now it is just on the basis of these two manuscripts which are among the very oldest that a number of important readings which had either been dropped, as by Goodspeed and others, or reduced to the level of footnotes (*RSV* and *NEB*) could be restored to the text as read by the translator, Dr. Beck. Yet all that he has done thereby is to restore readings which already Luther and the King James translators had before them in the *Textus Receptus*—the very one which in deference to "the findings of modern scholarship" has in our day been so arbitrarily dismissed as "obsolete."

The passages in question are Luke 22:19-20; 24: 6, 40, 51; and John 1:18 and 8:57. While we are unable to follow the Doctor's conclusions on John 1: 18, since both papyri have *μονογενῆς θεός*, his finding on Luke 22 is most significant. It is here that both *RSV* and *NEB* have, after "This is My body" (v. 19a), dropped the rest of this verse and all of 20: "which is given for you. This do in remembrance of me. Also the cup after supper, saying, This cup is the new testament in my blood, which is shed for you." Thereby they have thrown this part of Luke's account into utter confusion, creating the impression that here the sacramental sequence of bread and cup has been inverted, or (if one notes that the cup of verse 17 was not the cup of the *καινή διαθήκη*, the new testament, but of the Ancient Passover rite) that the Evangelist had apparently completely overlooked what should have been his main point. But now, as Beck shows, we have the assurance that the old familiar reading of these two important verses does indeed rest on solid manuscript evidence, even as it is in full accord with the other accounts of Scripture. And as an extra bonus we have this evidence as well that many of the judgments of modern scholarship concerning the alleged defects of the *Receptus* were decidedly premature.

The translator makes much of the fact that the New Testament was written in the language of that day, the *Koine* Greek, the common language of the many nations which differed so widely in their native speech. So Beck puts his translation into easy conversational form, without any attempt at formal literary style. He keeps his sentences short, sometimes making two or three out of the longer Greek. He uses contractions like "couldn't, didn't, don't," etc. All this makes for easy, fluent, yes, fascinating reading. It makes the sacred story come alive for our modern minds. Yet there is no suggestion of irreverence when he lets Jesus in Gethsemane say to His disciples: "So you couldn't keep awake with Me one hour!" Nor does it seem flippant to quote Jesus assaying: "I taught in the templeand you didn't arrest Me!" In the account of the trial one senses the curt impatience of Caiaphas asking Jesus, "Don't you have anything to say to this?" and later demanding of the Council: "He has blasphemed! What's your verdict?" "One can almost hear his cold, clipped speech.

Nevertheless there are pitfalls. Even our impatient age does not always use the quick, snappy, colloquial manner. There are times when we instinctively adopt a more formal and dignified attitude, simply because the situation calls for it. But it was certainly such a moment when at the close of the Last Supper Jesus spoke his great High-Priestly Prayer. The translation is in the main fully in keeping with the solemnity of the occasion. Yet even here there is an occasional lapse, as when, speaking of His disciples, Jesus is made to say: "I pray for

them. I don't pray for the world... They don't belong to the world... Father, the world didn't know you." We are glad that the usual "etc." has no place here, there being no other instances in this solemn chapter. Yet there are others. To render the Sixth Petition of the Lord's Prayer with "And don't bring us into temptation" has not even the virtue of brevity and certainly is not in character with the general tone of the Prayer. And then there is the passage where a good copy reader might have saved the day by pointing out that words sometimes suggest a thought to the reader that is not even remotely in the mind of the writer or, in this case, the translator. That is certainly true here, where, having just described the reinstatement of a fallen disciple into his apostolic office, the translator quotes Jesus as saying to Peter; "When you were younger, you used to fasten your belt and go where you wanted to." We are sure that when the translator wrote "fasten your belt" he was for the moment completely oblivious of the fact that to modern ears this suggests a mode of transportation quite different from that followed "gird himself."

But if there are such pitfalls even in the narrative part of the New Testament, how much greater the care that must be exercised in the Epistles—where because of their substantial doctrinal content the subject matter is so much more demanding. Yet also here we may speak of the real merits of the work, of successes achieved without surrender either of dignity or the translator's principle of using the language of today. Whoever has struggled through the labored Authorized Version of Romans 5:12-17, or with the complexity of chapter 8:3-4, will rejoice at the ease with which one is led through the involved sentence construction by this new translation. Or take Romans 7:7, where Paul asks, "Is the Law sin?" and answers, "Certainly not! But only by the Law did I learn to know what sin is. For example, only when the Law said, *Don't lust*, did I know how wrong it is to lust." For particularly the last sentence states the thought with such vigor and clarity that one is reminded of a new coin, fresh from the mint. Another instance is Romans 4: 14 where, speaking of the promise to Abraham and his descendants that the world should be their heritage, Paul then continues: "If the Law is the way to get it, then faith can't get anything and the promise can't give anything," And continuing in 16: "God promises to those who believe, in order to bring them a gift of His love." Or chapter 4:4. Where AV has "Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace but of debt" Beck translates: "If you work, your pay isn't considered a gift but a debt." Very good!

But—(Why must there always be a "But"? Supposing there are a few places where things may not be quite right, must one strike at every fly?—Well, let's see.) *But*: there are indeed some places where things are not quite right. Take the passages just quoted, where the careful reader may twice have noted the absence of the word "grace." They are still good translations. But when one finds *χάρις* translated as "love" in such key passages as John 1: 14, 17, II Cor. 8:9, Eph. 1:7f; II Tim. 1: 19; Tit. 2:11 -or when the simple but so very rich word "grace" is replaced by "gift of love" (John 1: 16; Romans 3:24; 4: 16; 5:20; Eph. 2:5, 8), "unearned love" (Rom. 11:6), "benefit" (Eph. 4:29), "undeserved kindness" (I Tim. 1:14), and finally "blessing" (James 4:6), one does become disturbed. While these phrases may help to bring out the meaning of the Greek word, they should certainly not crowd out the simple word "grace," nor the wealth of thought that has come to be associated with it in the minds of Christians everywhere. And then, when a hurried check reveals that this translation seems to have used the word "grace" *only once* in the entire New Testament (II Cor. 13: 13) one begins to wonder just why there should be such a wholesale elimination of this beautiful and meaningful word. Just one example to show what we mean. The Apostolic greeting from Romans 1:7 (Grace to you and peace from God our Father, and the Lord Jesus Christ) becomes: "May God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ continue to love you and give you peace!"

Even more disturbing is the rendering of *δικαιον*, to justify. Romans 3:20 is furnished with a foot note which by cross reference is then used for at least sixteen other passages where this same term occurs. The footnote reads:

"'Righteous' is a court term. God, who gives us the righteousness of Christ (3:23-24; 4:5; Phil. 3:9), as a judge declares us righteous and by His creative verdict *makes us righteous.*"

The words we have italicized reveal a grave confusing of justification and sanctification, of the imputed righteousness of Christ and the personal righteousness of the believer. They in effect assign a dual role to faith in passages which speak of salvation. The first would correctly attribute to faith the function of accepting imputed righteousness of Christ (the *aliena justitia*). The other would, however, make of faith the basis for the attainment of a personal righteousness (the *propria justitia*), thereby bringing works into the very area from which they are vigorously excluded by Paul in the same passage to which this confusing footnote is attached, and which is so well translated in this new version: “What anyone does to keep the Law *will not make him righteous before God.*” (Emphasis added). But the force of this negative statement is gradually lost as later translations speak in terms of *becoming* righteous (v. 24), *being* righteous (v. 28) being *made* righteous (vv. 26 and 30), *getting to be* righteous (4:1), *made* holy and righteous (I Cor. 6:11), once more, *becoming* righteous (Gal. 2:15f), and even Gal. 3:11, “because *if* you believe you *are* righteous and you *will* live.” What then has become of the “court term,” of the footnote, of the declaration of a verdict, of “the forensic use” of this basic term of Scripture?

We say this with keenest regret. There is much one can learn from this work. But let the user be careful lest he unlearn some very precious truths.