

The English Versions at Second Peter Chapter I

by Frederic E. Blume

There is an unavoidable corollary of this first purpose, one to which some attention also will have to be given. In the latter the several translations, both corporate and private, will be queried as to how well they have utilized the insights now gained into the syntax of the Greek of the New Testament, the Hellenistic Greek, of which the language of the New Testament is a part. The point is whether they have put to use the insights we now have into the nature of the *koine*, the Greek of the New Testament, where this differs from the recognized procedures of the older “classical” Greek.

When we quote Luther’s principles of translation we refer to several writings of the Reformer in which he clearly set these forth: *Ein Sendbrief vom Dolmetschen*, published at Wittenberg, 1520; his *Von Ursachen des Dolmetschens*, Wittenberg, 1533, published in connection with his Summaries of the Psalms of that date; and finally, Luther’s preface to the Old Testament as this appears in the various editions of his German Old Testament. The final one that knew the work of his hand came in 1545.

In these writings Luther sets forth in clear and forceful language his principles of translation, procedures that at first seem to be so self-evident that one may well wonder why they were not always simply taken for granted by everyone. On reading Luther, however, we soon realize that they were not always so taken. In fact, Luther had been attacked simply because in his German New and Old Testaments he had followed the principles here set forth.

In these writings on translation method Luther makes three demands of the translator of Holy Writ:

The first is that the translator must have a clear understanding of the meaning of the original text. The second, that he must express that meaning in the kind of language that is customarily used by the people for whom the translation is intended. The third is a modification of the second. Here Luther stresses the point, in passages where a great deal for the understanding of that Scripture depends on the emphasis contained in a single word and where the receptor language (the one being translated into) would not have an adequate equivalent, that there he, Luther, and his colleagues regularly followed the procedure of letting that word stand in its literal form. Luther felt that the use of a contemporary parallel that might be a partial translation, though it might be readily understandable, simply could not meet his demands of what a good translation ought to be. Luther here quotes the Greek word for “seal,” a word which in modern speech does not have at all the connotations of the original but which Luther nevertheless let stand because he could not find a word that would adequately represent the thought of the original word “seal.”

We shall give attention to a number of English versions that owe their origin to corporate effort. These are:

King James Version, 1611 (KJV)

American Standard Edition of the Revised Version, 1901 (ASV)

Revised Standard Version, 1946 (RSV)

Berkeley Version in Modern English, 1959 (Berkeley)

New American Standard Bible: New Testament, 1960 (NASB)

New English Bible: The New Testament, second edition 1970 (NEB)

Jerusalem Bible, 1966 (JB)

Today’s English Version, 1966 (TEV)

We shall also have occasion to refer to a number of the outstanding private versions of the present century:

Twentieth Century, 1898–1901 (XX Century)

Weymouth, 1903

Moffatt, 1913
 Goodspeed, 1923
 Williams, 1952
 Phillips, 1958
 Beck, 1963

Our comparisons are made on the basis of *The Greek Text of the United Bible Societies* (1966), the latest available edition of *Novum Testamentum Graece* by Nestle-Aland, and *The Greek New Testament*, edited by R. V. G. Tasker (The Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, 1964), being the text translated in The New English Bible, 1961.

For this comparison of translations we have selected the Second Epistle of Peter and shall in the present study treat passages from only the first chapter. Because of its brief compass, the Epistle lends itself handily to the purpose we have in mind. But there is a more profound reason why Second Peter is being given special attention. We are fully aware that in this day of modern unbelieving scholarship most writers would agree with the Jerusalem Bible, which declares Second Peter to be “forgery.” The entire statement, altogether in the spirit of modern critical scholarship, reads: “This is what we should call forgery, but what in those days literary convention found admissible” (p. 395). The reference here is to the consideration, that though the letter could not be accepted as the Apostle’s, it perhaps came into being in this way that someone who belonged to a group of Peter’s disciples “perhaps filled out one of Peter’s writings with ideas from the letter of Jude” (p. 394).

To us this Epistle is a genuine apostolic gem and contains a number of passages on the nature of Scripture and on the position and problems of the Christian Church in its life here in the world that all of us treasure especially because in our youth we learned them as proof passages in our catechism.

A recent commentary on Second Peter and Jude that defends the apostolicity of both is that by Michael Green in the Tyndale New Testament Commentaries series (Grand Rapids: Eerdmanns, 1968). Pastor Frederic Soil lists six pericopes from this Epistle (Frederic H. K. Soll, *Pericopes and Selections*, Yakima, 1920, p. 71). Those who have selected the pericopes mentioned in Soll’s book have accordingly turned as often to II Peter as they have, for instance, to the Second Epistle of Paul to the Thessalonians, taking into account the relative length of the two letters.

The writer has a declared interest in the construction at 1:4 (“The Apodosis at I Timothy 1:3 and II Peter 1:4,” *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, vol. 65, 1968, pp. 258–272). He has contended that the clause 1:4 rendered KJV as “that by these ye may be partakers of the divine nature,” is really the main clause of the long complex sentence that begins at verse 3. The older corporate versions (ASV, NASV, RSV) apparently accept the anacoluthon presupposed by KJV and translate: “that through these you may become partakers of the divine nature,” or something resembling that rendering. The private versions (XX Century, Moffatt, Goodspeed, Weymouth, Beck, Phillips) generally rearrange the clauses so that in their translations there is complete sentence structure, though most of them are apparently satisfied to read the “that by these ye might” as either a purpose or a result clause.

Two of the newer corporate versions come close to what is the only possible view of the syntax at this point. NEB co-ordinates the clauses and makes of the one in question a simple future: “And through them you may ... come to share in the very being of God.” Closest of all is apparently JB with its rendering: “Through them you will be able to share the divine nature and to escape corruption in a world that is sunk in vice.”—The writer finds no version, either corporate or private, that is willing to go along with his contention that the solution to the perplexing syntactical problem in II Peter 1:3 and 4 lies in recognizing the words rendered in KJV as “that by these ye might be ...” as a form of the imperative and seeing in it the main clause of the complex sentence.

The passage 1:10 has apparently been a real challenge to the translator and his art. The several renderings here are so extremely interesting and instructive from the translation point of view that we shall quote a number of them in full:

KJV has the familiar: “Wherefore the rather, brethren, give diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never fail.”

ASV alters but little: “Wherefore, brethren, give the more diligence to make your calling and election sure: for if ye do these things, ye shall never stumble.”

NASV shows considerable improvement: “Therefore, brethren, be all the more diligent to make certain about his calling and choosing you; for as long as you practice these things you will never stumble.”

RSV has it: “Therefore, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election, for if you do this you will never fail.”

NEB impresses the writer as being almost breezy; in the best Anglican tradition it admits of almost any interpretation: “All the more, then, my friends, exert yourself to clinch God’s choice and calling of you. If you behave so, you will never come to grief.”

The TEV effort is, to say the least, of questionable validity in the matter of the doctrine of the election of grace: “So then, my brothers, try even harder to make God’s call and his choice of you a permanent experience: for if you do so you will never fall away.”

XX Century smacks of Calvinism: “Therefore, Brothers, spare no effort to put God’s Call and Choice of you beyond all doubt; for if you do this, there is no fear of your ever falling.”

The Beck rendering, we fear, takes too much from the content of the passage by paraphrasing the nouns “calling” and “election.” It has: “Be all the more eager then, fellow Christians, to make sure you are God’s called and chosen ones. If you do this you will never fail.” Here it would seem that ease of reading and understandability of the translation has detracted something from the precious content of the passage.

The rendering of Phillips, likewise, makes for ready comprehension of the English, but the question remains as to what Peter is telling his readers when he says, “Set your minds, then, on endorsing by your conduct the fact that God has called and chosen you. If you go along the lines I have indicated above, there is no reason why you should stumble.”

The Berkeley version has much to be said for it: “Exert yourselves the more then, brothers, to confirm your calling and election, for if you practice these things you will never stumble at all.”

It will not be necessary for us to be aware of the *Imprimatur* on the back of the title page to surmise the source of the JB rendering: “Brothers, you have been called and chosen; work all the harder to justify it. If you do all these things there is no danger that you will ever fall away.” There is a footnote at “justify it”: “Addition (Vulg.), ‘by good deeds.’ ” The addition in the Vulgate rests upon a spate of manuscripts of the Old Latin, three versions of the Syriac, the Sahidic, the Bohairic, the Armenian version, a considerable number of minuscule manuscripts, the Ethiopic version, Codex Alexandrinus, Codex Sinaiticus, and other less weighty witnesses to the text.

What shall we then say to these things?

The recorded words of Dr. Martin Luther cast significant light on the problem. In his “Sermons on the Second Epistle of Saint Peter,” translated by Martin H. Bertram (*Luther’s Works*, vol. 30, “The Catholic Epistles,” Jaroslav Pelikan, editor, Walter A. Hansen, associate editor, St. Louis: Concordia, 1967), pages 158–9 Luther said:

10. *Therefore now, brethren, be the more zealous to confirm your call and election.*

Indeed the election and God’s eternal foreordination is firm enough in itself and requires no confirmation. The call is also strong and firm. For he who hears the Gospel, believes in it, and is baptized, is called and will be saved. Now since we, too, are called, we must be zealous, says Peter, to confirm this call and election for ourselves, not only for God.

Now this is a way of speaking employed in Scripture, just as St. Paul says in Ephesians 2:12: “You were strangers to the covenant of promise, having no hope and without God in the world.” Although there is no man, whether good or evil, over whom God is not lord, since all creatures are His, yet Paul declares that he who does not know God, does not love him, and does not trust in Him, has no God, even though God remains God as far as He Himself is concerned. Thus

here, too, although the call and election is firm enough in itself, yet it is not strong and firm enough for you, since you are not yet certain that it pertains to you. Therefore Peter wants us to confirm this call and election for ourselves with good works.

Thus we see what this Apostle attributes to the fruits of faith. Although they apply to our neighbor in order that he may be served with them, yet the fruit does not fail to strengthen faith and to cause it constantly to do more and more good works ... this spiritual strength increases the more one makes use of and applies it. It decreases when one does not apply it... Now St. Peter means that one should not let faith rest and lie still, for it is so constituted that through application and practice it becomes stronger and stronger until it is sure of the call and election and cannot be wanting.

For if you do this you will never fall.

That is, you will stand firm and not stumble or sin; but you will proceed properly and confidently and everything will turn out well. Otherwise, if you undertake to accomplish this with your own notions, the devil will soon cast you into despair and into hatred of God.

It would, therefore, seem that among the more recent corporate versions ASV, RSV, NASV, and Berkeley have given us a useable rendering. We would have considerable reservations about that of NEB and XX Century.

The addition to the text of the words translated "by your good works" found in the Old Latin and the Vulgate, the Syriac and other versions, and some notable uncial manuscripts, would seem worthy of more consideration than is indicated by the fact that our critical texts have not adopted it as a text reading. The commentary of Luther presupposes the thought. Luther does not translate the phrase since it was obviously not in the printed Greek text before him (Erasmus' second edition), since the latter was based upon the currently accepted Byzantine text, and the phrase has seemingly been dropped from the Byzantine manuscripts that Erasmus used. The writer believes that the phrase is original and should be read as part of the text. He bases this judgment upon both the internal and the external evidence.

The first chapter of Second Peter contains likewise that passage, vv. 20 and 21, which has much to tell us concerning the origin of Scripture and its interpretation. We are naturally interested in what the newer versions do with the familiar (v. 21): "Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost" and in how the several translations interpret the meaning of v. 20, rendered in KJV by: "no prophecy of scripture is of any private interpretation."

In verse 20 the translations generally follow either one of two distinct lines; some make the passage speak of the process of interpretation and stress the point that this is not possible by one's own mental powers; so NASV says: "No prophecy was ever made by an act of human will." NEB: "No one can interpret any prophecy of Scripture by himself." Berkeley: "No prophetic Scripture can be explained by one's unaided mental powers." TEV: "No one can explain, by himself, a prophecy in the Scriptures." XX Century: "There is no prophetic teaching in Scripture that can be interpreted by man's unaided reason." Goodspeed: "No prophecy in scripture can be understood through one's own powers." The rendering of Weymouth seems rather ambivalent: "No prophecy in Scripture can be found to have come from the prophet's own prompting."

Other renderings refer the "private interpretation" here spoken of not to the manner of its interpretation but rather to its content. RSV, for instance, has: "No prophecy of Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." (This rendering could also be understood as referring to the method of interpretation.) Phillips is very explicit: "No prophecy of Scripture arose from any individual's interpretation of the truth." Beck's rendering looks, likewise, not at the interpreter but at the matter he is reading: "No one can explain any written word of God as he likes." The rendering of the Catholic JB, as is to be expected, stands in a class by itself and states very strongly the claim of pontifical supremacy in the interpretation of Scripture. We quote from it the entire verse 20: "At the same time, we must be most careful to remember that the interpretation of scriptural prophecy is never matter for the individual."

Once more, we turn to Martin Luther for reliable guidance. We quote our English rendering of verses 20 and 21 of Luther's German text as this appeared in his sermons on Second Peter that were delivered during the year 1523/24 (WA XIV 30):

20. *And you are to realize this first of all, that no prophecy in the Scripture comes about by one's own interpretation.* 21. *For never yet has any prophecy been brought forth because men wanted it, but the holy men of God have spoken, driven by the Holy Ghost.*

Luther's comment reads (op. cit. p. 166/7):

Here St. Peter attacks false doctrine. Since we know that we have God's Word, he says, cling to this knowledge and do not be misled by other fake teachers, even though they come with the allegation that they, too, have the Holy Spirit. For "first of all you must understand this ... that no prophecy of scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation." Be governed by this, and do not think that you can interpret Scripture with your own reason and wisdom.

With these words all the fathers who interpret Scripture in their own way are refuted, and their interpretation is invalidated. It is forbidden to rely on such interpretation. If Jerome or Augustine or anyone of the fathers has given his own interpretation, we want none of it. Peter has stated the prohibition: You shall not give your own interpretation. The Holy Spirit Himself must expound Scripture. Otherwise it must remain unexpounded. Now if anyone of the saintly fathers can show that his interpretation is based on Scripture, and if Scripture proves that this is the way it should be interpreted, then the interpretation is right. If this is not the case, I must not believe him.

... Therefore we dare not believe any one who presents his own explanation and interpretation of Scripture... Here all teachers and fathers, as many as there are who have interpreted Scripture, have stumbled, as when they refer Christ's statement in Matt. 16:18—"You are Peter, and on this rock will I build My church"—to the pope. This is a human, self-invented interpretation. Therefore one should not believe it, for they cannot prove from Scripture that Peter is ever called the pope. But we can prove that Christ and faith are the Rock, as St. Paul declares. This explanation is correct, for we are sure that it has not been devised by man but has been drawn from God's Word. Now what is written and proclaimed in the prophets, says Peter, has not been invented or devised by man; but the pious and holy men have said it as the Holy Spirit moved them.

It should be noted that it was pointedly Luther's attitude toward the doctrines of the Word and Verbal Inspiration that has been woven into the fabric of our Wauwatosia-Mequon theology by the theological leaders who gave that theology its direction: there can be no question that the very words of the Bible are God's words, who provided the *impulsus scribendi*, the *suggestio rerum*, and the *suggestio verborum*; however, these words will never be approached in isolation from the inspired holy men of God who wrote them or from the situation out of which they grew or to which they addressed themselves.

It is very obvious that Luther in II Peter 1:20 refers the "private interpretation" not to the exegete's methods but rather to the content of the inspired prophetic word. This content, says Luther, as the interpreter arrives at it, must be in agreement with the rest of the Scriptures; it must, as our teachers would have said, agree with the *analogy of faith*, the sum of the content of all the passages of Holy Writ that speak of this matter.

"Holy men of God" of verse 21 in KJV is rendered in the same way in Luther's translation of the Bible: "the holy men of God." Only a few of the modern renderings read thus; for instance, Moffatt has: "the holy men of God". Phillips: "men of God spoke." The matter here seems to be largely a question of the Greek text that is read at 1:21. The reading: "holy men of God" as opposed to: "men spoke from God," according to the textual evidence, would seem to demand as much consideration as the other. The facts are these: the reading "men

spoke from God” has very ancient support in a notable papyrus manuscript, Codex Vaticanus, another uncial, a number of minuscule manuscripts, at least one manuscript of the Old Latin, some of the versions, and one church father. The other reading, “(the) holy men of God” is read by Alexandrinus, Sinaiticus, two other very important uncials, a large number of minuscules, six manuscripts of the Old Latin, the Vulgate, a Syriac version, and at least two church fathers.

So far as manuscript attestation goes, the reading “(the) holy men of God” is of equal authority with the other, “men spoke from God.” It would be extremely difficult to establish that the one is the apostolic text as opposed to the other. It should be noted in this connection that there are apparently some very basic considerations that would have application here which the discipline of New Testament textual criticism has not adequately taken into account. They are worthy of study and could be very revealing. But in this passage, if the writer were to publish a translation today, he would retain the wording and reading of KJV: “Holy men of God spoke as they were moved by the Holy Ghost.”

Before there can be anything like a statistical analysis of the usefulness of the several versions, we shall need much more extensive coverage of the material. For the present, the only conclusion one could come to is that the utilization of the English versions, both corporate and private, must be on an eclectic basis. Versions that in one passage may have a strong appeal will be found critically wanting in another, where they may betray the theological bias of the translator, an inadequate control of the principles of New Testament Greek syntax, or some short-sighted view of the complicated problem that has to do with deciding precisely which Greek word is to be read and translated at a particular point.

It is only fair to say, so long as we are using versions whose source is not within our confessional fellowship, that eclecticism is the only answer. We know that this was Luther’s procedure.