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Gerald O'Collins, SJ

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The passage from one language to another always involves interpretation. Those producing the new translation look for words in the receptor language that will best interpret and convey the meaning of the original text. At times, however, they can be tempted to go beyond the wording of the text to add interpretative *interpolations*, for which there is no basis in that original text. Several translations of 1 Timothy 5:22a ('do not be over-hasty in laying hands on anyone') serve to illustrate this persistent defect. They show the misplaced technique of interpolation at work.

This example opens the way to examine the rendering of two important passages from Romans (5:9b and 11:28a). In those cases the English Standard Version (ESV) joins other translations by lapsing into interpolation.

1 Timothy

The New English Bible (NEB) of 1961 succumbed to the temptation to interpolate when translating the verse from 1 Timothy: 'do not be over-hasty in laying hands *in ordination*' (italics mine). Paul's instruction to Timothy could refer to (a) what we would today call ordination to the ministry (see 1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6). But the apostle may be referring to (b) an imposition of hands involved in reconciling sinful Christians – specifically installing or re-installing in the preaching office a presbyter who is suspected of sin – or to (c) an imposition practised at admittance to church membership. Instead of leaving things open and translating precisely what is found in the Greek ('do not be over-hasty in laying hands on anyone (*mēdeni*))', the NEB preferred to clarify what it took to be the meaning by interpolating 'in ordination'.

The NEB was not alone in doing so. In the New Testament in Modern English (1958; rev. 1973), J. B. Phillips had already indulged in a similar interpretative interpolation: 'never be in a

Gerald O'Collins, SJ, is Professor Emeritus at the Gregorian University, Rome. For further reflections on the ESV see his article in the December 2020 issue of the *Furrow* [71:681-683].

hurry to ordain a man by laying your hands on him' (italics mine). A few years later the 1971 Living Bible, which admittedly proposed itself as 'Scripture paraphrases', offered the translation: 'never be in a hurry about choosing a pastor'. 'Choosing a pastor', like the 1996 New Living Translation ('never be in a hurry about appointing a church leader'), suggests, anachronistically, advice for protestant and other churches in the United States and elsewhere, in their practice of choosing and appointing their pastors. It changes the focus from a ceremony involving the imposition of hands to the prior activity of choosing someone from a group of candidates and appointing that person as a church leader.

In this case, recent translations have resisted the temptation to interpolate. The 1989 Revised English Bible (REB) renders 1 Timothy 5:22a: 'do not be over-hasty in the laying on of hands'. The 1989 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) introduces 'ordain' in translating: 'do not ordain anyone hastily'. This is, however, no interpolation, but the result of judging 'ordain' as the clearest or at least the closest equivalent of what was indicated by the Greek 'lay on of hands'. The 2001 ESV, to its credit, avoids any interpolation: 'do not be hasty in the laying on of hands'.

Romans

The example of interpolation that I have chosen from 1 Timothy does not affect or challenge central doctrines of Christianity. But other such interpolations can do so. Take Romans 5:9b: 'much more shall we be saved from the anger (*orgēs*)'. The Greek text does not end by saying 'the anger of God'. But this does not stop the English Standard Version (ESV) from rendering those final words: 'from the wrath of God' (italics added). The ESV is not alone in doing so. Such translations as the 1966 Jerusalem Bible (JB), the Living Bible, the NRSV, the Phillips Modern English, and the RSV also gratuitously add 'of God' to 'the anger'.¹

Supporters of the ESV (and these other translations) will doubtless scramble to justify the interpolation added to Romans 5:9b, 'of God'. But they need to contend with the firm statement coming from Brendan Byrne: 'the explicit designation of the wrath as "God's wrath" on the part of many translators...has no warrant in the Greek text which simply has *'apo tēs orgēs'*'.²

Beyond question the Bible speaks, anthropologically, of the divine anger, which blazes out when God's loving will is thwarted by human sin.³ This anger, still often translated by the old-fashioned term 'wrath', frequently points to imminent judgment:

- 1 The REB followed the NEB by translating '*'apo tēs orgēs'*' 'from the final retribution', and did not interpolate by adding 'of God'. The translators considered '*orgē'*' in this context to mean, not so much 'anger', but final judgment or retribution.
- 2 B. Byrne, *Romans* (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 1996), 171–72.
- 3 *Ibid.*, 72–73.

‘the revelation of God’s wrath means that the final reckoning is underway and human beings are being found wanting in God’s sight’.⁴

But divine anthropomorphism run the risk of being interpreted *au pied de la lettre*, especially by biblically uneducated readers or hearers. Scholars may not find ‘the anger of God’ too difficult to grasp and explain. But those who lack adequate scriptural training can lapse into an unwarranted and even monstrous view of a vindictive, punishing God, who delights in venting anger on sinners. In the case of Romans 5:9b, there is no call to overload the problem which other verses in the same letter raise (for instance, ‘God’s anger from heaven is revealed against all ungodliness’—Rom 1:18), by interpolating ‘of God’. Why should we so explain the ‘anger’ in question, especially when the context refers to sinners being saved? There is much to be said for the translation offered by the NEB and REB: ‘we shall all the more certainly be saved through him [Christ] from final retribution’.

Later in Romans the ESV, also like some other translations, adds a similar interpolation ‘of God’ (not found in the original text) when it renders Romans 11:28a: ‘as regards the gospel, they [the partially hardened Israel] are enemies *of God* for your sake’ (italics mine). Once again the ESV does not stand alone. A similar interpolation ‘of God’ comes from the JB, NEB, NRSV, REB, and RSV.

Distancing himself from this faulty tradition of translation, Byrne refrains from any interpolation ‘of God’ and translates Romans 11:28–29: ‘as regards the gospel they [the bulk of Israel] are enemies, for your sake, but as regards election they are beloved, because of the fathers. For the gifts and call of God are irrevocable’.⁵ The ‘present behaviour’ of many Israelites blatantly puts them in hostile opposition to the gospel. But their election by God overrides this ‘present hostility’; they remain ‘loved by God because of the fathers’.⁶ Their ‘enmity’ affects ‘the spread of the gospel to the Gentiles’. But, irrevocably, God regards them as beloved and never as enemies.⁷

By interpolating ‘of God’ into Romans 5:9b and 11:28a, the ESV and some other translations *fail* the test as translators. The pastoral insensitivity involved in this interpretation could consistently mislead non-scholarly readers and encourage them into fashioning a deep and lasting false image of God. I remain astonished that translators have declined to notice and deal with the problem. As a Catholic Christian, I remain equally astonished that some bishops’

4 Ibid., 65.

5 Ibid., 348.

6 Ibid., 351.

7 Ibid., 355–56.

THE FURROW

conferences have voted to approve of the ESV, which proposes that I speak of the bulk of the Jewish people as ‘enemies of God’.

The ESV and other versions, while creating further problems for their readers by twice interpolating ‘of God’ in Romans, left behind the positive wording of the 1611 King James Version (also called the Authorized Version or AV). It rendered Romans 5:9b: ‘we shall be saved from wrath through him [Christ]’.⁸

Likewise, the AV did not gloss ‘enemies’ with ‘of God’ when it came to Romans 11:28a: ‘as concerning the gospel they are enemies’—a statement patently justified by the way many Israelites rejected the gospel. Their present, hostile behaviour when faced with the Christian proclamation allowed Paul to call them ‘enemies of the gospel’. But they remained ‘beloved’ by God, who called and blessed them in their ‘fathers’ (Rom 11:28b). Paul insists: ‘the gifts and call of God are irrevocable’ (Rom 11:29). The AV translation remains *exemplary* by avoiding any interpolation and expressing accurately the meaning of two relevant verses: ‘as concerning the gospel, they are enemies for your sakes, but as touching the election [by God], they are beloved for the fathers’ sake. For the gifts and calling of God are without repentance’ (Rom 11:28–29).⁹ If, or when, their choice of the ESV returns to the agenda, may the bishops’ conferences that have opted for it no longer view this translation as a gift of God. With repentance, they should *revoke* their approval.

8 Here the 1582 Douai-Reims New Testament provided the translation: ‘shall we be saved from wrath through him [Christ]’. Although King James strictly forbade his translators to take any notice of this Douai-Reims translation, here they may have done so.

9 Once again the AV hints at dependence on the Douai-Reims rendering of Rom 11:28–29: ‘as concerning the gospel, indeed, they are enemies for your sake, but as touching the election [by God] they are most dear for the sake of the fathers. For the gifts and the calling of God are without repentance’. But, as always, we need to acknowledge the pervasive influence of William Tyndale’s earlier translation (spelling modernized): ‘as concerning the gospel they are enemies for your sake, but as touching the election they are loved for ye fathers’ sakes. For verily the gifts and calling of God are such that it cannot repent him of them’.