

Bible Sunday is coming...

On Bible Sunday every year, the great work of Bible Societies around the world - to make Bibles, New Testaments and Gospels available to people in their own first language - is celebrated and applauded. But it is not so with everyone! There is one group that would go into hiding as Bible Sunday approaches if they were still around. It is the heavenly court of writers, the writers themselves of the Biblical texts. To celebrate Bible Sunday last year, a columnist at the *Church Times* wrote:

‘We do not know how blest we are to have our modern Bibles presented to us with such beautiful clarity, and with every assistance for wise reading.’

It would not have been well received by the writers. Rather, ever since their works were first translated, their texts have not been read in the ways that they were.

Cally Hammond is the *Church Times*’s Sunday’s Readings columnist. She is also the Dean of Gonville and Caius College and a staff member of the Faculty of Divinity at the University of Cambridge. It is to this Faculty that the Methodist Church sent me in 1981, kicking and screaming, to complete my pre-ordination training. At the end of my time there I did apologise to the then Ministerial Secretary for Probationer Ministers, the Revd Gerald Burt. He had been the one who had insisted I went there. ‘You have degrees as an Architect,’ he said, ‘you need a degree in Theology. If you don’t go this year, you won’t be going at all.’ I understood his threat and left my lay-ministerial appointment behind in Holloway and Camden Town. It was the only work I wanted to do at that time. But I submitted to the discipline of the Methodist Church and, as I left Cambridge I knew that I knew things about the four Gospels and Acts that had never been published. By 1988, I was publishing my own work on these texts *and* The Revelation!

What did I know then that others didn’t? I knew that the biblical writers had done a better job at presenting their texts in their languages than all the translators and editors of their works of the past eighteen-hundred years! Cally Hammond and millions like her may be able to celebrate Bible Sunday, but all the Bibles that have ever been produced, including the ones we have today, fail the writers and their intentions. If they could see their texts now, they would say they are in a hideous state of ambiguity and unhelpfulness. Absolutely no text is presented as its writer intended. No text, therefore, is read as its writer intended. And, because of this, no text is understood as its writer intended.

Does anyone want to know this? Revd Dr Carolyn J.-B. Hammond doesn't. Her article moved me to write to her personally to tell her what she and others like her were doing to the texts. She courteously replied to me quite quickly, but made it clear to me that she did not wish to engage with me further. Was it because I was a Methodist Minister and not an Anglican Priest? Personally, I am glad I am a Methodist Minister. I have the evidence, haven't I, that the Bible's writers were God's first 'Methodists'! Whether of the Old Testament in the Hebrew (or at times in Aramaic) or of the New Testament in the Greek, all the texts are disciplined and have *their own divisions and sub-divisions* which reveal their structure and style. It is these that help disclose the writers' meaning and purpose.

I make my principal point here: rather than give us *the actual divisions* that the writers gave their texts, the editors of the Bibles we read give us two lots of alternative divisions merged in to one. One set goes back to Stephen Langton (who became an Archbishop of Canterbury in the thirteenth century after he had devised his portioning of the two Testaments) and his 'chapters' that were first divided into seven verses each, a-g. The second set attempts to take account of some divisions that recent scholars and commentators have drawn attention to, like Lk 9.51 (the first to leap into my mind). Together, with editors' titling and sub-titling, they add up to nothing more than a jumble (a jungle?) of signs to readers. Yes, using chapter and verse, we can all find the same piece of text as each other anywhere in the world at any time, but what is the point if the starting reference to a piece of text is not that of its writer? The letters of James, 1 Peter and 1 John, for example, are given five chapters each, though they possess just four sections, two outer and two inner! Or consider the reference Lk 9.43b: it cannot be right that the largest section in all the New Testament's texts begins at an obscure reference like this, yet it is here that Luke's 'Central Section' begins (and not at 9.51).

Reading to the writers' own divisions and sub-divisions alone leads readers to the intended meaning and purpose of the writers. All the texts have their own structure and style. Mark's Gospel comprises a Title, a Prologue, Four Series (A,B,B',A') each of Seven Days (in the Homeric arrangement of ABB'XABB') and an Epilogue. All these elements are composed to the structure ABB' and the writing style from the beginning to the end is ABB', where A is the introductory piece, B is the first development and B' is the second, paralleling and concluding development. Matthew, Luke and Acts all share the same basic arrangement 1,2,3,4,5,C,5',4',3',2',1'. John's basic arrangement is ABB'XABB' (see Mark above). Meanings and purpose pour out of all these arrangements! In Mark, in the first three days of each series, Jesus is completing the Old Covenant; in the last three days of each series he is establishing

the New Covenant. Consider The Acts of the Apostles. Acts parallels Luke for structure: the life of Jesus is lived over again in the life of the church; it is a life of mission and service that the Spirit brings to birth, directs in the world and sustains through every kind of trial.

In our Bibles, the texts do not give up their meaning as the writers intended because translators and Bible editors choose to use an artificial (and muddled) method for dividing up of the texts. It has been ever so, over all the generations. Essentially, they have been in ignorance of the writers' writing discipline.

The texts are disciplined writings that fulfilled the rules of writing in their day - of oral/aural communication at a time when few people could read or write. These rules were generated from the time of Homer and included: Idea, Structure, Style, Memory and Performance. Without this understanding, Bible editors and translators have, however, seen 'the words', if not 'the works' (in their parts and as wholes). Yet even then, they have not always translated all 'the words', even the important ones. Where, for example, is reference to 'rising up' - *anastas* - in Mark's two 'middle days', at 7.24 and 10.1 in the GNB and the NIV? Consistent translation of 'the words' too, of course, would improve the representation of the texts. But until 'the works' are seen, for their 'words' *and* their syntax, no improvement will be made.

In ignorance, translators have attempted in the past to improve the texts before they knew how they were supposed to be read. See 1 Cor. 13: compare the Greek with the English. This piece of poetry is never allowed to be what it actually is. Translators disrupt the poetic flow of the passage by switching and swapping words. And presenters of the passage invariably include 13.13. But 13.13 begins the following passage! Its inclusion (with 13.1-12) is a distraction which undermines the writer's purpose here. Paul is trying to say that in our lifetimes we must never let differences in our understanding cause division in the church, for we can know or prophecy only 'in part', even with the help of spiritual gifts. The key thought of Paul here is: 'Love - never - fails' (13.8a).

Or consider the King James Version of The Revelation. The translator comes across a repeating phrase in its middle section and instead of presenting 'And I saw...' seven times so that it stands out for the listener as the writer intended, he shows himself to be wanting to improve the text. He actually muddles the first, follows it with 'And I beheld...', then with 'And I looked upon...', and only at the fourth and thereafter with 'And I saw...': this results in the reader being prevented by the 'refined' translator from 'hearing' that the writer is signalling 'Seven Visions'.

Sometimes, we find translators interpreting pronouns badly, thinking themselves to be helpful. At a Methodist Circuit Service I attended I was listening to a reading of John 10, the 'I am the Gate, the Good Shepherd' passage, and I heard the reader read out 'Pharisees', not just once, but twice! I was shocked. I found out later that the reader was reading from Zondervan's New International American Giant Version (produced for people with poor eyesight). It is the only translation in existence, possibly, which interprets this passage as one in which Jesus is speaking to Pharisees. Yes, he is speaking to 'Jews', but in this chapter, in the Greek there is no mention of 'Pharisees'. There is, of course, in Chapter 9 a mention of 'Pharisees', but the literary gap between the ending of Chapter 9 and the beginning of Chapter 10 is huge.

At a Methodist Carol Service I attended this last Christmas, the Christmas reading from John chapter 1 was reduced to 1.1-5. I was astonished! The week before it, I had attended an Anglican Service; it was the traditional 1.1-14 that I was asked to read from their lectern. I confess to reading 1.1-18 instead! It is in 1.15-18 that we read the writer's punch-line to his Prologue. Every year, at Christmas, this writer gets no justice! And it is true also at Easter. The writer's three readings are 20.1-13, 14-29 and 30-31, but it is 20.1-18 that is read. The presentations in our Bibles of passages such as these are to blame for our misuse of the texts.

I allow myself just one more illustration. For this year's Week of Prayer for Christian Unity, we had study notes prepared by Church Leaders in Burkina Faso (in West Africa) which promoted a reading of Luke 10.25-37, when for the writer it should have been 10.25-42. Translations of v.38 frequently mislead because they add more than the Greek provides and make people think vv.38-42 cannot possibly belong with 10.25-37. But they do belong. The disciplined text reveals this.

Editors' breaks in the texts, their titles and their subtitles also add to the unhelpful nature of the presentations. They very rarely aid understanding of the whole text and how to read it. As for titling going astray, several examples are found in the GNB and the NIV. In Luke 15, the first title, 'The Lost Sheep', precedes Jesus talking and eating with 'tax collectors and other outcasts'. The three-part (dactylic, ABB'?) writing of the writer is totally unexpressed in all the breaks and sub-titles of this chapter. The clear parallel piece to 'The Lost Sheep' is, of course, 'The Lost Coin': these are the B and B' pieces which follow the introductory piece A. Following this, we get 'A Man and His Two Sons', in a similar construction: the introductory A piece which introduces the father and his two sons is followed by the first development, the B piece, with its focus on the 'Adventurous Son' and the second development, the B' piece, on the 'Stay-at-

home Son'. Inconsistent translation becomes clear, rather amusingly, in the openings of 'The Lost Sheep' and 'The Lost Coin'. They should have begun as follows: the first, '*What man* of you, having a hundred sheep...', and the second, 'Or *what woman* having ten drachma...'. Instead, the first reads, 'Suppose one of you has a hundred sheep...' and the second, 'Or suppose a woman who has ten silver coins...' How are we to interpret the translator here? Did not Jesus tell some stories appropriate to men and others appropriate to women? Or was it that the translator had pressure put on him/her to create a text free of the word, 'man'?

The modernising of texts by translators and editors is additionally problematic. Translators and editors may try to justify developments, say, when representing 'brothers' in the Greek by 'brothers and sisters' in the English, or by substituting 'mob' for 'legion', but they rob the texts of their authenticity and rob teachers and preachers also of their responsibility to explain such things. Further, 'legion' and 'centurion' are Roman army terms. 'Mob' is not! In translating Mark's Gospel, it is necessary to preserve the many dualities: they are the writers' aids to its reading. (Compare the different translations of Mk. 5.1-20 and 15.1-47.)

Bible editors could do better also when they wish to deny the authenticity of a part of a text like the longer ending of Mark's Gospel. They appeal to one lot of evidence but not to another. In most Bibles, there is a reference to 'the earliest manuscripts' which do not include it, but no reference at all to still 'earlier manuscripts' which did reference the longer ending that was known to the Early Fathers in AD 155, 165 and 180 (without verses 17-18 until AD 200 or so), long before 331 when Codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus (the Bible editors' 'earliest manuscripts') were written.

Bible editors need to know the texts. They would do well also to reflect on the dates they were written. Most scholars know that Paul's Early Letters pre-date the Gospels by at least twenty years. Editors should be bold enough to open the New Testament with them, surely? The Gospels literally 'build' on them!

Translators and editors have never known what the writers actually achieved, or that it was professional writers who worked with the named writers (at the top of each text) to produce texts that could be copied easily, memorised securely and interpreted accurately to listeners distanced in space and in time. Because of scholarly short-comings, no one gets to read and understand any text in the way that the 'two writers' themselves intended twenty centuries ago!

The quote of Cally Hammond with which this paper opens gives expression to the scale of the problem facing the church and academia today. It is a massive job that lies before us to make good past and present damage. It is as daunting as it is exciting. No reader will want to know that their Bibles are deficient in their presentations and that, rather than being helpful, they are the total opposite of helpful when it comes to reading the texts in the ways that the writers intended. Who believes today, even, that the texts were meant to be read by everyone in exactly the same way, or that they were created for just such a purpose? The writers themselves deserve justice in our generation. They have waited long enough! They have been cheated in their endeavour. I think on next year's Bible Sunday. It could be different. With the heavenly court of writers, we could be celebrating a breakthrough and all that will flow from it. But I won't be holding my breath.

A Postscript:

As I concluded this paper, I saw an advert in the Facebook pages of the British New Testament Society for yet another Zondervan Commentary. Downloadable access to the author's notes on Acts 2.1-31 is offered to anyone who signs up to purchasing the book which will be out soon. It will be the first of two volumes and it will cover Acts 1.1-9.42. It reminds me of earlier publications of Luke's Gospel in two volumes where the second volume begins at 9.51. The Bible's writers would not be at all encouraged to see any of these charted breaks!

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