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# Dr. William Beck's American Translation of the Old Testament

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DURING THE LAST FORTY YEARS at least four translations of the Bible have appeared which had as part of their title the word "American." The University of Chicago Press issued *The Bible: An American Translation*, the effort of a group of Chicago scholars under the editorship of J. M. Powis Smith (who translated the Old Testament with the assistance of others) and Edgar J. Goodspeed (who did the New Testament). This translation reflects liberal influence in many of its renderings. Between 1960 and 1971 the Lockmann Foundation of La Habra, California, published a Bible known as *New American Standard Bible* (utilizing as its basis the American Standard Version of 1901). It appears to be conservative in its approach and reflects this stance in its translation efforts. In 1970 the Bishop's Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine of the American Roman Catholic Church finally published *The New American Bible*, translated from the original languages with critical use of all ancient sources by members of the Catholic Biblical Association of America. It has critical and liberal leanings. The last two months of 1975 witnessed the publishing of the fourth translation of the Bible with "American" in the title, namely Dr. William Beck's *The Holy Bible. An American Translation*. Dr. Beck devoted many years of his adult life to Biblical and exegetical studies and was conversant with the plethora of translations that have been produced in the twentieth century. His New Testament was published in 1963 by Concordia Publishing House and has been sold in over 100,000 copies and is selling at a rate of about a thousand a week. It has been hailed as an excellent rendering of the Greek into readable and clear American English. The Old Testament was completed in 1966, shortly before the translator's death.

## BECK'S ACCOMPLISHMENT AS TRANSLATOR

In this article the remarks are being limited to the Old Testament portion of his American Bible. Professor Brighton of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, a former student of Beck, wrote about his teacher's qualifications as follows:

One cannot help but make a comparison with Luther. No Lutheran since Martin Luther has made a translation from the original languages of the Bible into a language of the people. No Lutheran theologian took the time to do so. . . . Perhaps no Lutheran since Luther had the gifts and the calling from God to do so.<sup>1</sup>

Many individuals in the Lutheran Church-Missouri Synod, as well as Lutherans in other Synods, have argued and felt that there is no need for modern translations of the Bible, for in their opinion we possess an adequate English Bible in the King James (KJV),

also known as the Authorized Version. However, the English of the KJV is from the time of Shakespeare and there are close to a thousand words in it today that have undergone semantic change; sometimes the meaning of a word is nearly the opposite of the word's present meaning.<sup>2</sup> The need for a twentieth century American translation cannot be classified as a luxury or an unnecessary undertaking. Furthermore, better manuscripts have been found and certain advances have been made in the area of textual criticism enabling the Biblical student to come closer to the autographic text of the Old Testament. Because of archaeological discoveries present-day Biblical students know more about the geography, history, religions of the Near East, and the customs and civilizations of Biblical times.<sup>3</sup> Obscure place names and certain *hapax legomena* have had light shed upon them through archaeology. The lexicography and grammar of Biblical Aramaic have had light shed upon them by linguistic materials which have become available because of archaeological discoveries. Newly discovered languages, such as Accadian and Ugaritic, have effected a better understanding of certain words and verses in the Old Testament.<sup>4</sup> Dr. Beck was able to utilize them in his Bible.

#### BECK'S COMPETENCE FOR TRANSLATION OF THE OLD TESTAMENT

Professor Brighton expressed the following opinion about Beck's qualifications for translating the Bible:

That he was equipped for his task is evident to all who have sat at his feet or have received of his personality. His knowledge of the original languages of the Bible was astounding. Not just the Greek and Hebrew grammar and usage and meaning, but in addition and especially the theological sense and usage of these languages. We have met no man in Europe or America who had such a combination of the knowledge of and the theological usage of the Hebrew and the Greek languages of the Old and New Testaments . . . He had such patience that he was known to spend weeks researching one word or phrase, and not being satisfied until he had exhausted every possible source that he could set his mind to. His files of exhaustive notes on lexicography, grammar, meaning and usage, linguistic comparisons in cognate languages, classical and theological backgrounds would form an encyclopedia of many volumes.<sup>5</sup>

In the final analysis, all translations are, in a sense, interpretations, even if they do not purport to be paraphrases like *The Living Bible*, which clearly states that it is such on the fly-page.<sup>6</sup> Translations reflect the theological views of their translators, even if those who make the Bible available in a language different from the original claim they are neutral. A translator's theological convictions somehow affect his renderings from Aramaic and Hebrew into the vernacular. The translator's views about inspiration, revelation, the supernatural, the Christocentric character of the Old Testament do influence the translator's efforts. Today also his views on textual criticism enter the picture.



Beck was convinced that the *Revised Standard Version*, the official Bible of the National Council of Churches, was not to be recommended because of serious deficiencies in its rendering of the Biblical text.<sup>7</sup> The weaknesses and deficiencies were due to the type of textual criticism embraced and practiced and to the theological position of the translators as reflected in a number of important passages, involving especially the area of Christology, a fact true of both Testaments.

#### BECK AND THE MASSORETIC TEXT

The major and vitally important question that each translator or group of translators faces is what kind of manuscript text is the best and most reliable one? Dr. Beck asked this question: "When is a translation good or bad?" He answered: "We can answer that question only by comparing the translation with God's Hebrew and Greek Bible. It may, however, take so much knowledge of Hebrew and Greek to answer that question that for many a person it may not be answered at all. And yet our Bible is the truth, and there should be no question mark written over it."<sup>8</sup>

Modern critical scholars have espoused the position that the transmitted Hebrew Massoretic text is corrupt. This was the stance of Moffatt, the American translation of Powis and Goodspeed, the *Revised Standard Version*,<sup>9</sup> the *New English Bible*, and the translation known as *Today's English Version*. Moffatt claimed that the Biblical text was corrupted; in fact, he asserted that it "is often desparately corrupt."<sup>10</sup> Dr. Irwin declared about Job's text, "The text of Job is utterly bad."<sup>11</sup> Muilenberg, formerly a professor at Union Seminary, New York City, speaks of Isaiah's "magnificent strophes, disordered and mutilated as they now are in our text."<sup>12</sup> Dr. Albright of Johns Hopkins fame declared: "The Hebrew text is often in such a hopeless state of preservation that nothing can be made of it without highly subjective emendation."<sup>13</sup> These men were members of the committee which translated the Old Testament of the RSV.

The translators of the RSV and NEB (*New English Bible*) assumed that the transmitted Old Testament Aramaic (in parts of Daniel and Ezra) and Hebrew texts are corrupt and therefore have seen fit to change the text. Dr. Young, taking into consideration 997 pages of the Old Testament, counted more than a thousand changes (perhaps 1032).<sup>14</sup> These alterations are guesses and highly questionable. When the RSV, in a footnote, advises, "Heb. . . , " it bluntly announces that in that place the traditional Massoretic text has been rejected. When the reader comes across this statement, "Heb lacks . . . , " he is informed that some words have been inserted by the translators.

An analysis of these changes will reveal that these changes in the Hebrew text are based on the ancient translations into Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin. The tendency today is to consider the Hebrew Massoretic text, the only Hebrew text we possess, as merely one of many different text types once extant and to place the Peshitta (Syriac) and the Vulgate (Latin) and the Septuagint (Greek) on a

par with the Massoretic text. Beck has correctly pointed out that "when the translators of the ancient versions found a difficulty in the text, they sometimes guessed at its meaning, and now the RSV guesses are built on their guesses. Often the Greek text of the Septuagint differs from the Hebrew, as Orlinsky has shown, because the Septuagint, not the Hebrew, is corrupt. We should note that the RSV cites the versions when they support the RSV guess, but it regularly omits any reference to these versions whenever they are opposed to their guesses."<sup>15</sup>

There are some 334 instances of "Cn" found in the footnotes, which means "correction." Concerning this point Beck asserted: "A 'correction' is the elimination of an error on the basis of more exact information, but these RSV 'corrections' are changes which have no support in the text or in the versions; they are merely guesses without evidence." Conservative scholars have also noticed that the RSV translators have changed the Hebrew text without indicating the change in a footnote. (Consult Gen. 6:3; Num. 22:5; Ruth 3:15; I Kings 10:19; Job 19:26; Ps. 28:8; 36:1; 49:20; 66:4; 73:1; 68:4; 73:1; 108:2; 137:5; Is. 49:5; Dan. 9:24.)

Dr. Allis claimed that people are misled when they are led to believe that the changes made in the RSV are based on new evidence:

Many, perhaps most, of the changes which it has made were known centuries ago, but were introduced into AV or ARV simply because AV and ARV were governed by a radically different conception of the trustworthiness of the Hebrew text and of the way in which it should be dealt with by the translator. The best Hebrew text available to scholars today differs very little from the text which was used by the scholars who prepared the version of 1611. The most important of the "ancient versions" to which RSV constantly refers, the Septuagint and the Vulgate, were known to the revisers of 1901.<sup>16</sup>

An analysis of the Hebrew text used by the translators of the *New English Bible*, as given by Brockington's *The Hebrew Text of the Old Testament*, reveals that over 3700 changes were made and incorporated in the eclectic text for the NEB's Old Testament translation.<sup>17</sup> This fact means that, when the NEB's translation is compared with the 1611 and 1885 British versions, there are many thousands of differences to be found between the latter's text and that of the KJV and the British Revised Version.

When translators treat the text as untrustworthy and unreliable in over a thousand or in over 3700 places, this puts the Bible under a cloud and introduces the element of subjectivity into theology. It makes the message of God uncertain. If the critical approach to textual criticism is correct, the concerned Christian must logically ask: "How can I really know what God has said and what the Holy Spirit caused His inspired penmen to record?"<sup>18</sup> Such a position is to the liking of modernists and liberal theologians who constantly want a subjective and changing theology and who claim that everything in religion is in process, that truth is not static but dynamic in the sense that the church can constantly change its teachings to suit

the *Zeitgeist* and accommodate its message to changing conditions. Retranslation should constantly be practiced. An example of the new views about textual criticism has been well stated by Dr. Ralph Klein:

Textual criticism is only one of the methods necessary for understanding the message of the Bible. In addition, the student must learn the techniques of translation and lexicography, of form, tradition, and redaction criticism, of word study, and of historical reconstruction. Most exegetes do textual criticism as only one of their interests; few have the leisure to devote full time to this enterprise. No exegete, however, dare ignore it.

As all the tools and techniques of biblical exegesis are utilized, tentative textual judgments may require modification. Knowledge of the overall message of a writer, his style, and his other distinctive traits must be considered in any final textual decision.<sup>19</sup> . . . Biblical exegetes must be in dialogue with philosophers, ancient and modern historians, sociologists, anthropologists, systematicians—and with each other.<sup>20</sup>

A primary issue that most Bible readers are unaware of is this matter of whether or not an essentially reliable text has been transmitted or whether our Old Testament text has numerous corruptions. The translations of most critical scholars are made from a text different in thousands of places from the text used by the King James Version, the British Revised, and the American Standard Version of 1901.

The Jewish scholar Orlinsky, a member of the RSV Old Testament committee, asserted about the text found in the Hebrew Bible:

The so-called Massoretic text, which we have in our printed Bibles, represents a *textus receptus* which was established by Jewish Biblical scholars of the early Christian centuries and since then has been transmitted with almost incredible accuracy by copyists down to the present day. This explains why the hundreds of Hebrew manuscripts in existence today show practically no variants.<sup>21</sup>

#### BECK'S TRANSLATION OF THE MASSORETIC OLD TESTAMENT TEXT

Not only does Dr. Beck regard the Massoretic text as essentially reliable and trustworthy but when translating the Old Testament he also follows the Biblical principle that Scripture is interpreted by Scripture. That Christ was foretold in many passages in the Old Testament, in all three major divisions of the Hebrew Bible, is accepted by Beck because Jesus Christ during His state of exaltation clearly taught this fact on Easter afternoon and Easter evening (Luke 24:24,45). The fact that Beck translates certain Old Testament passages as Messianic, especially when so defined in the New Testament, alone would make his translation valuable for Christians who really want to know what the Holy Spirit has recorded on the pages of the Old Testament regarding the Messiah's person and work. A comparison of Beck's translation of Old Testament Messianic passages with those in the RSV, NEB, Chicago's American translation, and the Moffatt Bible will reveal that Beck is faithful to the New



Testament's understanding of Old Testament Messianic passages. In Genesis 3:15, for instance, Beck has: "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your descendants and her Descendant. He will crush your head, and you will bruise His heel."<sup>22</sup> Theophile Meek in *An American Translation* (Chicago) rendered this verse:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
And between your posterity and hers;  
They shall attack you in the head,  
And you shall attack them in the heel.<sup>23</sup>

Here the RSV translation is true to the Hebrew text, but the NEB is not, as may be seen from its rendering:

I will put enmity between you and the woman,  
Between your brood and hers.  
They shall strike at your head,  
And you shall strike at their heels.<sup>24</sup>

In Genesis 4:1 Beck has correctly rendered the verse: "She said, I have gotten a man, the LORD."<sup>25</sup> The RSV, the NEB, the Jerusalem Bible, the KJV, and other translations (but not Luther) render: "I have gotten a man with the help of Jehovah," a translation that was influenced by the Septuagint.<sup>26</sup> The simplest rendering represents the use of the double accusative in the second clause: "And Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bare Cain, and said I have gotten a man, (even) the LORD (Yahweh)." The double accusative is found in the sentence which immediately follows: "And again she bore his brother, (even) Abel." If so understood in one sentence, why not in the other? The words "with the help of" are not in the Hebrew text.<sup>27</sup>

In Genesis 9:26 Beck again brings out the correct meaning when he translates this verse: "And he added: Blessed be the LORD, the God of Shem. Canaan will be his slave."<sup>28</sup> The RSV renders the same passage: "Blessed by the LORD my God be Shem; and let Canaan be his slave (footnote has, "or blessed be the LORD," etc.)"<sup>29</sup> The blessing of Shem here takes on the form of religious eminence in the earth. As Professor Mack wrote: "The line of his descendants will hold as their special privilege the preservation and final realization of the Promise."<sup>29a</sup> His part in the blessing of his father would seem odd and inadequate, but for its meaning in Messianic value. Noah does not say, "the blessing be upon Shem," but "blessed be the God of Shem." His pre-eminence is to be the channel through which the Messianic hope will pass to its fulfillment.<sup>30</sup> The RSV, the NEB, Chicago's *American Translation* all interpret away the distinctive Messianic character of this promise to Abraham.

In Genesis 22:18 the RSV renders: "By your descendants shall all the nations of the earth bless themselves."<sup>31</sup> Beck gives: "In your Descendant all the people on earth will be blessed."<sup>32</sup> This is correctly translated because Paul in Galatians 3:16 writes: "He doesn't say: 'and by the descendants,' in the plural, but in the singular: and 'and by your Descendant,' which is Christ."<sup>33</sup> This is the meaning

also in the other passages, 12:3; 18:18; 26:4; 28:14, all rendered in the RSV, Chicago's *American*, and the Jerusalem Bible as reflexive and not passive. The difference between the two renderings is that in one case Christ does the saving, in the other man blesses himself. In Acts 3:25 the RSV mistranslates in a paragraph where Peter is using various Old Testament passages to show that Christ was predicted. Where the apostle quotes Gen. 22:18, the RSV reads: "saying to Abraham, 'And in your posterity shall all families be blessed.'" <sup>34</sup> Beck has: "And in your Descendant all the people on earth will be blessed." <sup>35</sup>

Because of its rejection of Messianic predictive prophecy the RSV has created artificial contradictions between Old Testament passages and their cited equivalents in the New Testament, as may be seen by consulting Psalm 45:6 and Hebrews 1:8, Psalm 104:4 and Hebrews 1:7; Zechariah 11:13 and Matthew 27:10. It is as Beck has written, "If you start with the Biblical fact that both Old and New Testament come from God, you will discover a fine harmony in these passages." <sup>36</sup>

The last major Messianic passage in Genesis is found in 49:10. In the RSV this statement of Jacob is rendered: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples." <sup>37</sup> The *Jerusalem Bible* translates similarly: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the mace from between his feet, until he comes to whom it belongs, to whom the people shall render obedience." <sup>38</sup> The University of Chicago Press' *American Translation* gives something similar: "The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the staff from between his feet, until his ruler comes, to whom the peoples shall be obedient." <sup>39</sup> "Until he comes to whom it belongs," as the RSV footnote states, is taken from the Syriac in preference to the Hebrew text. Beck renders the Hebrew text faithfully; "The scepter will not pass from Judah or a ruler's staff from between his feet till the Man of Peace comes, whom the people will obey." <sup>40</sup> "Shilo" means "One who is peace" (Is. 9:6; Micah 5:5; Eph. 2:14). To this Prince of Peace universal dominion is ascribed in the latter part of verse 10.

Modern versions have generally removed the Messianic content from Numbers 24:17. Chicago's *American Translation* has given the following rendition of the Hebrew text: "I see them, but not as they are now, I behold them, but not as they are at present; a star shall come forth from Jacob, a comet has arisen from Israel." <sup>41</sup> But Beck has given the true meaning: "I see Him who is not here now; I behold Him who will come later. A Star will come from Jacob, a Scepter will rise from Israel." <sup>42</sup>

In the famous Davidic covenant (II Sam. 7:12-17) the modern versions have not been faithful to the Hebrew, thereby removing its true Messianic message. The RSV reads: "When your days are fulfilled and you lie down with your fathers, I will raise up your offspring after you, who shall come forth from your body." Then in verse 14: "I will be his father, and he shall be my son." <sup>43</sup> Beck renders "When your time is up, and you lie down with your ancestors, I will give you



a Descendant, who will come from you."<sup>44</sup> The word "seed" is in the singular (cf. Gen. 3:15; 22:18; 26:4; 28:14) and in God's announcement refers to a descendant in the future. When David and Solomon are dead and their kingdom brought to an end in 587 B.C., David's kingdom will go on as a spiritual kingdom forever (v. 13, 16). That God has His Son in mind can be seen from Luke 1:32-33 and from Hebrews 1:5, where the words of II Samuel 7:14 are said to speak about Jesus. Since Nathan's prophecy speaks of Jesus Christ and His kingdom, verse 14 most likely refers to the vicarious atonement to be effected by Jesus Christ.<sup>45</sup> "If He sins, I will punish Him with the rod of men and with blows inflicted by men."<sup>45a</sup> The RSV rendering, "When he commits iniquity," is too strong for the Hebrew. In King David's response to God's message through Nathan, the Jerusalem king says, according to the RSV translation: "And hast shown me and future generations, O Lord God."<sup>46</sup> In the parallel account in I Chronicles 17:17 the RSV does the same. However, since Nathan's oracle to David speaks about Jesus Christ, the RSV and other translations are inadequate. Beck has correctly rendered II Samuel 7:19: "And this is what you teach me about the Man, Lord God."<sup>47</sup>

Portions of Psalm 2 are quoted several times in the New Testament as Messianic. Yet critical scholars do not consider the psalm to be Messianic, contending that it was used at the coronation of a Judean or Israelite king. Some have even held that it was used yearly at the New Year Festival (*enkitu*, in Babylonian), a festival borrowed from the Babylonians. The RSV translates the Hebrew of verse 11: "Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet,"<sup>48</sup> while Beck gives: "Kiss the Son or He'll get angry and you'll perish on your way."<sup>49</sup>

In the New Testament Psalm 8 is interpreted as a Messianic psalm. Modern critical scholarship considers it non-Messianic, as a psalm speaking about the dignity of man. According to the RSV, man has been made a little less than God. "Thou hast made him a little less than God" (8:5).<sup>50</sup> In the Jerusalem Bible Psalm 8:5 reads: "Yet you have made him little less than a god."<sup>51</sup> J. M. Powis Smith in the Chicago translation has: "Yet thou hast made him but little lower than God." Beck, who accepts the New Testament's interpretation of Psalm 8 has rendered verse 5: "You made Him do without God for a little while."<sup>52</sup>

In Psalm 45:6, the verse is used in the New Testament as a prophecy about Jesus Christ. The RSV translates this verse: "Your divine throne endures forever."<sup>53</sup> In the New Testament the RSV renders the passage correctly: "Thy throne, O God, is forever and ever." In Psalm 45:6 Beck translates: "Your throne, God, is forever and ever,"<sup>54</sup> as do other critical versions against the RSV.

According to Matthew 1:24 the virginal conception and virgin birth of Mary's son, called Jesus, happened in fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14. Matthew cites the Septuagint text to the effect that a *parthenos* should conceive and give birth to a son.<sup>55</sup> The RSV has: "All this took place to fulfill what the Lord had spoken by the prophet: 'Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and his

name shall be called Emmanuel."<sup>56</sup> Yet in the Book of Isaiah from which this text is cited the RSV, the Chicago's *American Translation*, *The New English Bible*, and Moffatt translate the Hebrew *almah* as a young woman who may or may not be married.<sup>57</sup> Critical lexicographers cannot and do not accept the fact that such a birth was predicted over seven hundred years before the time when it occurred, nor will they accept the possibility and feasibility of its having occurred. Beck has rendered Isaiah 7:14: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: 'Look, the virgin will conceive and have a Son, and His name will be Immanuel.'" <sup>58</sup> The LXX, which Orlinsky has called "an authorized translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, the work of Jewish scholars," has the word *parthenos* (virgin) as the translation of Hebrew *almah*. About A.D. 128, when the separation between the Christian church and the synagogue was final, Aquila, a Jew, substituted *neanis* (young woman) for *parthenos*. As Beck has pointed out in his essay on *almah*, the latter word always implies a virgin and never in Old Testament usage means a married woman.<sup>59</sup> The context of Isaiah 7:10-14 speaks about something miraculous that is to occur. God Himself offered Ahaz "a sign," which in the Old Testament often means a miracle, such as the fire consuming a sacrifice (Judges 6:17-21). Isaiah, as God's spokesman, tells Ahaz that he may choose a sign "from the depths below or from the heights above," which points to an act beyond the laws of nature. God became impatient with Ahaz when he does not accept the Lord's offer and claims he does not want to tempt God. So God gives him the prophecy of a remarkable future event to happen: "Therefore the Lord Himself will give you a sign: 'Behold' (here is preparation for something of great importance to be announced) 'the virgin shall conceive.'" The RSV has the indefinite "a" in the text, in the footnote, and in Matthew 1:23. The Hebrew and the Greek have "the" virgin, an article which is like the demonstrative "this" and points to the future mother of Immanuel, "God-with-us." She is the mother of Him whom the prophet Isaiah calls "Wonderful, Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace" (Is. 9:6).

Another Messianic passage is found in Jeremiah 23:5-6, which reads as follows in the RSV: "Behold, the days are coming, says the Lord, when I will raise up for David a righteous Branch, and he shall reign as king and deal wisely, and shall execute justice and righteousness in the land. In his days Judah will be saved, and Israel will dwell securely. And this is the name by which he will be called: 'The Lord is our righteousness.'" <sup>60</sup> Beck believes that the latter part of verse 6 should be translated, "This is the name that He will be called, The LORD-our-righteousness."<sup>61</sup>

Another well-known Messianic passage of the prophetic literature is the prophecy of Micah relative to the Messiah's birth place. The Sanhedrin at Christ's time believed that the Messiah was to be born in Bethlehem of Judaea (Matt. 2:5). The RSV translates Micah 5:2: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose origin is from of old, from ancient days."<sup>62</sup> And in verse 5: "And this shall be peace, etc." This rendering does not



bring out the eternity of the Messiah whose birth is predicted here. *The American Translation* of Chicago also removes the truth of the eternity of the Messiah in its rendition: "And you O Bethlehem Ephrathah, too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you, one shall come forth for me, who shall rule over Israel, whose origins are from of old, from ancient days."<sup>63</sup> Beck correctly rendered the last part of verse 2: "One Who is to Rule Israel but He really comes from the eternal past." The beginning of verse 5 reads: "He will be a man of peace."<sup>64</sup> The Berkeley Version of 1959 agrees with Beck, because it also translates the latter part of verse 5: "His goings forth are from of old, from days of eternity."<sup>65</sup>

Psalms 110 is the most frequently quoted Messianic psalm in the New Testament. Critical scholarship has questioned the New Testament interpretation, inspired by the Holy Spirit, that David was speaking about Jesus Christ and His Melchizedekian priesthood. The RSV renders verse 1 of Psalm 110 as follows: "The LORD says to my lord, 'Sit at my right hand, till I make your enemies your footstool.'"<sup>66</sup> Beck indicates his view by the way he capitalizes the word used of the Messiah, namely the Hebrew word *adon*, "Lord." Thus in Beck's Bible Psalm 110:1 reads: "The LORD said to my Lord, 'Sit at My right till I make Your enemies Your footstool.'"<sup>67</sup> *The New American Standard Bible* by its capitalization also indicates that it accepts the Messianic character of the psalm. In this version the text reads: "The LORD said to my Lord: 'Sit at My right hand, until I make Thine enemies a footstool for Thy feet.'"<sup>68</sup>

The New Testament quotes from Zechariah 9:9; 11:12; 12:10; 13:6-7; and states that these prophecies were fulfilled in connection with the suffering and death of Jesus.<sup>69</sup> Critical New Testament scholarship does not accept this manner of understanding of the Evangelist Zechariah, who has been called "The Prophet of Holy Week." In view of the passages appearing in the latter part of Zechariah, conservative scholars have also regarded 3:8-9; 6:12; and 6:13 as prophetic of the Messiah's ministry. Relative to Zechariah 6:13 where there is a prediction of a future man who will be both priest and king, a prophecy fulfilled in the person of Christ, the RSV reads, beginning with verse 12: "Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'Behold, the man whose name is the Branch: for he shall grow up in his place, and he shall build the temple of the Lord. It is he who shall build the temple of the LORD, and shall bear royal honor, and shall sit and rule upon his throne. And there shall be a priest by his throne, and peaceful understanding shall be between them both.'"<sup>70</sup> Beck renders the same verses: "Tell him: The LORD of armies says, 'There will be a man whose name is Descendant. He will sprout up from where He is planted, and will build the LORD's temple and have royal majesty. He will sit and rule on His throne and be a priest on His throne. Both will be planning peace.'"<sup>71</sup> Beck brings out clearly that the Messiah would be king and priest simultaneously.

Zechariah 9:9, which, according to the four Evangelists, predicted the royal entry of Christ into Jerusalem, the RSV translates; "Your king comes to you triumphant and victorious."<sup>72</sup> Chicago's



*American Translation* renders 9:9: "Lo, your king comes to you; vindicated and victorious is he."<sup>73</sup> The Hebrew has the word *Tzadik*, which means "righteous." Beck therefore has rendered this verse: "Your King will come to you righteous and victorious."<sup>74</sup>

Zechariah 12:10 predicts the fact that the enemies of Christ would look upon him whom they have pierced. This is the interpretation given by the Evangelist John in 19:37 of his gospel. The Hebrew text, followed by Beck, reads: "They will look at Me whom they have pierced."<sup>75</sup> In the RSV Zechariah 12:10-12 reads: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of compassion and supplication, so that, when they look on him whom they have pierced, they shall mourn for him, as one mourns for an only child," etc.<sup>76</sup>

In one of the last Messianic passages in the Old Testament, the RSV in Malachi 3:1 says: "The Lord whom you will seek will suddenly come to His temple; the messenger of the covenant in whom you delight, behold, he is coming."<sup>77</sup> Beck makes clear the Messianic emphasis in his rendering, which is as follows: "And the LORD whom you are looking for will suddenly come to His temple, yes, the Angel of the covenant whom you delight in—He will come."<sup>78</sup>

In the Book of Proverbs chapter 8:21-32 is one of the three passages in which "Wisdom" is personified. In the ancient church and in the Reformation and post-Reformation periods "wisdom" as here praised by Solomon was considered to be Jesus Christ. According to the RSV, NEB, Moffatt, Chicago's *American Translation*, and *The Jerusalem Bible*, 8:22 is translated: "The Lord created me at the beginning." These versions have adopted a rendering which in the early days of Christianity was employed as a standard argument against the pre-existence of the Son of God by the Arians.<sup>79</sup> The word employed in the Hebrew, *qanah*, is not the same as the *barah* used in Gen. 1:1. *Qanah*, as Beck has pointed out, occurs thirteen times in Proverbs in such phrases as "get wisdom" and the RSV translated it as "get" eight times, with "acquire" twice, and with "gain" once. Eve used the same word when she asserted: "I have gotten by birth" (Gen. 4:1). The words in verse 8:22 do not mean "The Lord created me," but "The Lord has begotten Me," and thus express the eternal Sonship of the Messiah.<sup>80</sup> If one were to adopt the rendering that God created "Wisdom," it would raise the difficulty that God created his own wisdom with which he supposedly created the universe. God did not create His own wisdom. The KJV and Beck translations agree with what Paul said that in Jesus "are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge" (Col. 2:2-3), and Paul calls Jesus "the wisdom of God." The comparison of Proverbs 8:22-31 with John 1:1-18 shows a number of important similarities. God is distinguished from Wisdom and the Logos respectively. Yet both Wisdom and the Logos existed before the world's beginning, both created the world (Prov. 8:22-26; John 1:3, 10), both Wisdom and the Logos love people (Prov. 8:31; John 1:4-5, 9, 11-12, 14, 16).

#### BECK AND PSALM TITLES

In distinction from *The New English Bible* and the Psalms in

*Today's English Version* Beck does not omit the superscriptions that are found over many of the psalms. They have been omitted in certain modern translations because they are supposedly not a part of the original text but are allegedly the first attempt of pre-Christian Jewish scholars to date the Psalms and indicate authorship. In the Hebrew manuscripts the superscriptions whenever found are treated as the first verse of the psalm. The reason the superscriptions have been rejected as inauthentic is the ascription to David of psalms that contain theological concepts which, according to the critics' reconstruction of the evolution of religious ideas in Old Testament times, are later developments. For example, the belief in an after-life supposedly could not have been known in David's time, and consequently a psalm referring to it would need to be late.<sup>81</sup>

#### BECK AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

Beck has denominated his translation *An American Translation*, stressing that it is meant for the American public; American readers were to have a translation that would reproduce the Bible in an idiom that the man on the street and in the home spoke. Beck's aim was to make available a translation that would communicate the thoughts and teachings of God's Word. In his early pastoral years at Clayton, Illinois, Dr. Beck wanted his confirmation class students to have their memory-work Bible passages in up-to-date English that was simple and yet faithful to the original languages. The translation which he undertook for the children of his parish saw him embark on a life-long project of making the Bible available in simple and clear American English. Beck spent years in studying what kind of English language would be suitable for the American reader. Professor Brighton claims that Beck

knew the English language and knew into what kind of English the Bible should be translated. He spent years in researching on the street with people, in the university with books so as to know what kind of English people mostly used in every day language both in speech and written form. He studied the language of the popular magazines and newspapers. He researched the various dialects spoken in North America so as to discover the idiom which was common to all. He tested at length the results of his research and studies in giving out samples of his translations. Not so much to professional theologians, for he knew that they did not know of or use that English which was common to broad America. But to the average layman with an average education he turned for testing of his grasp of the *Lingua franca Americana*.<sup>82</sup>

It was Beck's conviction that the RSV was not a new translation in the language of the people, that most modern versions did not fill the bill of having made the Word of God understandable in the common language of the American people.

Many people have expressed their appreciation of Beck's New Testament which by December 1975 had sold over 100,000 copies and is selling at the rate of one thousand per week. Before its publi-

cation the Old Testament was carefully read through by Dr. Schmick of Gordon-Conwell Divinity School and Dr. Erich Kiehl of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis. The Old Testament translation was examined and approved by the LCMS's Commission on Church Literature.

The Old Testament of Beck's *The Holy Bible* occupies 1106 pages out of the total of 1433 pages (the New Testament occupies 327 pages). Beck required many years, of course, to render the Hebrew Old Testament into modern English. It was completed shortly before his death.

#### TIME NEEDED TO MAKE A THOROUGH EVALUATION

To make a thorough evaluation of Beck's Bible would require reading the whole translation and comparing it assiduously with the Hebrew and Aramaic original texts. Such a thorough comparison would take many months. Obviously, there is no such thing as a perfect translation. As *Affirm* has asserted about Beck's translation:

There will always be honest differences among scholars as to which English word or phrase best reflects the intent of the Greek and Hebrew. However, all translations into modern English, though varying in accuracy, serve the good purpose of conveying the Word of God to 20th century readers. Beck's Bible is a valuable addition to that growing list of modern English translations.<sup>87</sup>

Many will appreciate and value Beck's Old Testament translation because he was a Christian and Lutheran scholar. He endeavored to be scholarly and at the same time faithful to the text. He was well versed in the area of Old Testament and Semitic studies (including Ugaritic and Dead Sea Scrolls) and endeavored to give English-speaking Christians a translation that avoided and rejected the anti-supernaturalistic bias that has been reflected in some of the modern translations.

One of the criticisms that may be made against Beck's Old Testament translation is that it is not always literal but seems to be paraphrase. It might be profitable for the users of the Beck Old Testament to read and digest his articles entitled: "A Literal Translation"<sup>88</sup> and "The Translation of Meaning."<sup>89</sup> Relative to this matter Beck wrote, "Some men with a fine loyalty to God's Word insist that we must translate literally, substituting English words and structures for the Hebrew and Greek originals." There are passages where the number of words in the Hebrew can be rendered with less in English. In Ezekiel 5:9 there are ten words in Hebrew that can be rendered with two English words, "something unique." In Ezekiel 8:5 there are five Hebrew words which the RSV translates with eleven English words, "Lift your eyes now in the direction of the north," which can be rendered, "Look north," and nothing will be lost by such a translation. According to Beck a translation has been successful only when it produces the thought the author wished to convey. A word for word rendering sometimes is meaningless. For example, in Genesis 21:5,



if the verse were rendered literally, it would read, "Abraham, a son of a hundred years." Beck translated, "And Abraham was a hundred when his son Isaac was born."

In translation from one language to another there is sometimes a loss of meaning because there are no absolute equivalents in any two languages. "Many words have a great variety of meanings, and some of them pass from one shade of meaning to another in a baffling way." For example, the Hebrew word *shalom* can mean "peace," "welfare," "friendship." A good Hebrew dictionary gives long columns of different meanings depending on the context. Those who insist on literal translation are guilty of two faults according to Beck. While it may look accurate, it often fails to give the meaning and it may give even a wrong meaning. A mere substitution of words produces less than the Word of God and even falsifies it. It betrays meaning. A literal rendering of Gen. 6:13 would be: "The end of all flesh is come up before me." This is the way *The New American Standard Bible* has it.<sup>86</sup> Just what does that mean? Beck rendered: "I have decided that everybody must die." Or take another example from Genesis; a phrase in 35:7 is rendered as "the God of Bethel" by the KJV and RSV. But the true meaning is: "the God who appeared at Bethel." The ordinary reader, when he comes across the expression "water of impurity," a literal rendering of the Hebrew text, would think Moses was describing muddy or dirty water. But the context shows it means "water used to cleanse impurity." In Ezekiel 3:7 the KJV describes the house of Israel as "impudent and hard-hearted." In today's English hard-hearted is the equivalent of being cruel, but the Hebrew describes the Jews as stubborn and Beck appropriately translates "All people of Israel are very determined and stubborn." In Hosea 14:2 the KJV states: "Receive us graciously and we will render the calves of our lips." For the modern reader that is a strange rendering to encounter. "We will render the calves of our lips!" What does it mean? What it means is, "we will praise him with our lips."

#### BECK'S PRINCIPLES OF TRANSLATION

In setting forth the principles that must be followed by a translator Beck correctly claims that "the function of words is meaning. When a literal interpreter fails to convey the meaning, he robs the text of function." To the extent that a translator fails to give the true meaning, to that degree he has not given the meaning of God's Word.<sup>87</sup>

It was Beck's contention that a study of Luther as translator reveals that in edition after edition the Reformer moved away from the literal reproduction to the production of the meaning. He was opposed to a slavish literalism. Structure cannot be transferred. Only the function of Hebrew and Greek words can be transferred. He asserted: "We must melt down the original structure in order to get the total meaning and reproduce that in the English structure."<sup>88</sup> Beck explained this process by this analogy:

We can have no honey without wax cells, but to transfer the honey we must melt the wax, separate the wax from the honey,

and leave the wax behind. Or to use another picture, the original text is the cup into which God has poured His truth. God does not expect us to drink the cup, but only the wine in the cup. For English we cannot use the cup of the original text, but we must pour the truth from the gold cup of the original text into the silver cup held by the hands of our people.<sup>89</sup>

Beck claims that he is imitating Luther's methodology, who declared that when translating the Old Testament he endeavored to make it so German that the German reader would not believe a Jew was speaking to him. So an American translator must make the Old Testament so American that the American reader would not suspect that he is reading a translation.

But what is the relationship of a freer translation and verbal inspiration? While the Bible teaches verbal inspiration, it implies at the same time an inspiration of sense and meaning. Beck contends, "Verbal inspiration means the inspiration of the words plus the contextual relations of these words one to another. The whole context is as inspired as the words that carry it. And a violation of this contextual meaning is as much a violation of verbal inspiration as the misrepresentation of a word."<sup>90</sup> In Ezekiel 18:7 the KJV translates the Hebrew literally: "That hath taken off his hand from the poor . . ." In modern English "to take the hand off the poor" would mean refuse further help. But Beck has, "keeps his hand from hurting the poor," giving the intended meaning of the verse. In the same chapter Ezekiel speaks about Israelites, according to the KJV, as not "eating on the hills" (vv. 6, 11, 15). "Eating on the hills" does not refer to what the words seem to say, but means offering up sacrifices at the shrines of the pagan idols located on the hills. Beck, therefore, translated: "If a man is righteous he will do what is right, he will not feast at the hill-shrines and honor Israel's idols" (18:5). In Ezekiel 2:5 the phrase "I raised my hand" means "I swore."

It was Luther who once said: "The meaning does not serve the words, but the words serve the meaning" (Walch, XX1b:2212-2213). Translation does not merely involve the substitution of English words for the Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek of the Bible. By not producing a slavish literal translation of the original, the translator is not guilty of paraphrasing the Bible as *The Living Bible* does. In a good translation the true meaning is reproduced; nothing is added to the intended meaning of the text. But in a paraphrase interpretation is added to the intended meaning. Beck claims there is a difference between a free translation that accurately reproduces what the author intended to convey and the amplification of the translation. To illustrate, a literal translation might be: "The love of God is upon you." A faithful and good translation would be: "God loves you." To render the same as "The Holy God loves you" would be a paraphrase, because "holy" is not in the original assertion.

Many readers and users of Dr. Beck's New Testament translation were displeased with it because he departed from the classical style of the KJV, which for many seems to be a necessity for a Bible in English. This criticism was answered by Dr. Beck in his article,

"The Living Word."<sup>91</sup> The power of God's Word is not found in its outward form but in its meaning. That is why we can change its form from Hebrew and Greek into English; as long as we have the exact meaning, we have its living power. "If we don't get that meaning, the power is lost. If the Word of God comes in Hebrew, Greek, or Latin to people who talk English, it loses its power."<sup>92</sup> When children, young people, and adults read a version of Scripture that does not adequately communicate, they cannot experience the power of God's Word. In his first Corinthian epistle Paul declares: "When I came to you fellow Christians, I didn't come to tell you God's truth with any extra-fine speech or wisdom. While I was with you, I was determined to know only Jesus Christ and Him nailed on the cross . . . When I spoke and preached, I didn't use clever talk to persuade you, but I let the Spirit and His power prove the truth to you, so that your faith will not depend on men's wisdom but on God's power."<sup>93</sup>

The Bible speaks of the Word as a hammer breaking a rock in pieces (Jer. 23:29), or as "the Spirit's sword" (Eph. 6:17). The author of Hebrews asserts: "God's Word lives and is active. It cuts better than any two-edged sword. It pierces till it divides soul and spirit, joints and marrow. And it can judge thoughts and purposes of the heart."<sup>94</sup> Beck claims that God's Word has no need to be decorated and quotes Augustine to this effect: "It is one of the distinctive features of good intellects not to love words but the truth in words." One is inclined to agree with this judgment of Beck:

Now the scabbard may be decorated with gold and glittering with jewels but it is the drawn sword that is in the hands of the Spirit. When we lay aside artificialities, we may think we're losing something, but we gain by letting the truth act, not in any borrowed form, but by itself. We don't want people to say, "How lovely!" but to feel the sharp edge and then be healed.<sup>95</sup>

#### NEW EMPHASIS ON USE OF OLD TESTAMENT IN CHURCHES

In the three-year lectionary prepared by the Inter-Lutheran Commission on Worship, there is usually a selection for each Sunday and holy day from the Old Testament. The selections are from the RSV. Before reading them the pastor ought to compare them with such conservative translations as *The Holy Bible: The New Berkeley Version*, *The New American Standard Bible*, and Beck's *An American Translation*. With the appearance of a number of recent translations of the Bible which all translate the Bible from the original languages, a problem arises. To choose between the various renderings when they differ necessitates that pastors use the Bible in the original languages. All seminary graduates have been required to take Greek. Unfortunately, not all pastors have been required to take Hebrew. Those who had the opportunity ought to consult the original and those who could not or chose not to take Hebrew will possibly be inspired to study Hebrew so that they also can go to the *fontes*. While one may disagree with Beck on some of his renderings, it would be regrettable not to avail oneself of this translation, which Pastor Otten is making available in two editions, a paperback and a



hardbound edition at practically cost price. May the Beck translation help many people to experience the power of God's inspired Word!

We must agree with the conclusion of the report of the Bible Version Committee entitled *Comparative Study of Bible Translations and Paraphrases*: "1. No version is perfect. 2. No version is inadequate in every passage. 3. Some versions need to be used with greater caution than others. 4. Competence in the Biblical languages is indispensable in judging a version."<sup>96</sup>

## FOOTNOTES

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30. *Ibid.*, pp. 48-49.
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33. *Ibid.*, *New Testament*, p. 237.
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