

THE MERITS OF THE MALTESE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE BY PROF. P.P. SAYDON

THE readers of this review are quite familiar with the Maltese translation of the Bible by the Right Rev. Mgr. Prof. P.P. Saydon. The editor was kind enough to give notice of each book as it came out of the press. In this short note we propose to sum up its merits from the literary and scientific aspects.

Prof. Saydon's translation is really a literary monument and we are of opinion that it will surely exercise a deep influence on Maltese prose for many years to come; fortunately it has been completed at a time when our language is undergoing a profound change under the powerful hammering of foreign languages, such as English, which are poles apart from it as to vocabulary, grammar and syntax. Prof. Saydon has set himself firmly against the strong current tending to undermine the Semitic structure of the language with a consequent loss of vitality of expression and beauty.

With respect to vocabulary he did not think it twice to call back to life obsolete words or to give their original Semitic meaning to living words: v.g. *ġebel*, 'mountain', not 'stone'; *leġġ*, 'to insist', not 'to flash'; *għelm* is used in the sense of 'knowledge, science', besides its ordinary meaning of 'sign'. New forms are coined from already existing roots: *siefel* and *saffel*, 'lowly, humble' and 'to humiliate' respectively from *isfel*, 'down'; *qarreb*, 'to bring near, to offer' from *qrib*, 'near'; *xiebed*, 'witness', the plural form *xhud* being used in the spoken language in a singular and plural sense; *waqqat*, 'to fix a date', from *waqt*, 'moment'; from the participle-adjective *imbikkem*, 'made dumb', we have the adjective singular *ibkem* and the plural *bokom* after Arabic patterns; from the noun *għawġ*, 'obstacle', we have the adjective *għawġi*, 'perverse', and others.

Grammar, that is, syntax, is, as far as possible, Semitic avoiding all Romance influence so conspicuous in other writers. The verb generally precedes the subject; the adjective qualifying a determinate noun invariably takes the article; the construct case takes the place of the colloquial *ta'*-construction; the *ġe*-passive construction, a bad Italianism, is constantly and rigorously avoided. This method gives the translation a strong Semitic colour, capturing the beauty, strength and rhythm of the original Hebrew of the Old Testament and the Semiticised Greek of the New.

It is this characteristic that differentiates Prof. Saydon's translation from any other. One notices, for example, that the translator is dead set against paraphrastic renderings of which he makes use only in desperate cases. He avoids the combination of a noun, an adjective or a verb with a paraphrastic expression, such as *'sabiħ u jingħo ġob* or *'sabiħ u ta' min iħobbu*. He is at a loss to render the numerous abstract nouns and negative concepts so common in St. Paul's writings and for which there is no one-word equivalent in Maltese; thus 'invisible' is *dak li ma jidberx*, Rom. 1, 20; 'immortality' is *ħaris mill-mewt*, Rom. 2, 7; 'weakness' is *nuqqas ta' qawwa*, 1 Cor. 2, 3; 'unknown' is *nies ma jaf bihom ħadd*, 2 Cor. 5, 9. These paraphrastic renderings are so well integrated with the context that they are hardly felt at all. It must be acknowledged that Prof. Saydon had to give up his effort for linguistic purity in case of such concepts as *rivelazzjoni*, *profezija*, *ġustifikazzjoni*, *sentenza*, *ġudizzju*, *natura*, *grazzja*, *spiritwali*, *kundanna*, *salvazzjoni*, *persekuzzjoni*, *kuxjenza*; non-Semitic terms are unavoidable in Maltese. A paraphrase would render the style cumbersome and vague.

Sound biblical scholarship is the basis of Prof. Saydon's translation. Any good translation must necessarily be based on a critically reconstructed text. The Hebrew text contains some errors of transcription which may be corrected with the help of the old versions. Sometimes the text is so corrupt that conjectural emendation is the only way to have any meaning at all. Prof. Saydon does not follow blindly the Hebrew text; sometimes he departs from it to follow the LXX or to propose his own conjecture. Unfortunately such departures are not indicated in the footnotes or in an appendix, perhaps because they are of no use to the average Maltese reader. Thus in Gen. 9, 26 Prof. Saydon accepts the emendation proposed long ago by Graetz and accepted by Kittel in the third edition of the *Biblia Hebraica* and translates 'Bless, O Yahweh, the tents of Sem' instead of the Massoretic reading 'Blessed be Yahweh, the God of Sem'. The emendation was also accepted by A. Vaccari in the first edition of his Italian translation of the Pentateuch (1923), while in the second edition (1942) another emendation is proposed: 'Blessed be Sem by Yahweh my God', already proposed by Budde. Gen. 46, 13 'Jasub' with LXX against 'Job' of Mass. and Vulg.; Ex. 14, 20 'passed' with LXX against MT 'illuminated'; Ex. 23, 2 'justice' LXX is omitted by MT; Num. 21, 24 'Jazer' with LXX against MT 'strength'; Num. 26, 3 'they numbered' according to the context against MT and versions 'and he spoke'; Josh. 3, 12 is out of place and the translator informs us in a note that it had better been omitted; Josh. 15, 32 *Għajñ Rimmon* as one city against MT *Għajñ* and *Rimmon*, two cities; Judges 5, 13 'Israel' for MT 'survivor'; Judges 8, 16 *u tertaq* with LXX and ancient versions

against MT 'and he made known'; I Sam. 1, 5, *ghalkemm* with LXX, Heb. uncertain; I Sam. 8, 16 *baqar taghkom* with LXX against MT 'your young men'; I Sam. 9, 25 *u frxu lil Saul fuq is-setaħ u raqad* with LXX against MT 'and he spoke to Saul on the terrace. And they rose up'; I Sam. 11, 1 *Wara* with LXX against MT 'as dumb' and joining with 10, 27; I Sam. 12, 11 *Baraq* with LXX against MT *Bedan*; I Sam. 13, 5 *tlett elef* with LXX against MT 'thirty thousand'; I Sam. 14, 33 *lil hawn* with LXX against MT 'to-day', confusion between $\square\aleph\aleph$ and $\square\aleph\aleph$; I Sam. 17, 52 'Gatt' with LXX against MT 'valley', confusion between $\aleph\aleph$ and $\aleph\aleph$; I Sam. 18, 28 *Israel kollu kien iħobb* with LXX against MT 'Mikol, Saul's daughter, loved him'; I Sam. 24, 20 *ħajti* with LXX against MT 'a flea'; 2 Sam. 2, 9 *Aserin* with Targum against MT *Assur*; 2 Sam. 2, 24 *wied* with LXX and Vulg. against MT *Gijab*; 2 Sam. 6, 5 *b'kemm għandhom saħħa u bil-ghana* with Chr. 13, 8 against MT 'with all wood instruments of pine'; 2 Sam. 15, 7 *erba' snin* with many mss of LXX and (crit. ed. of) Vulg. against MT 'forty years'.

In other cases the MT is hopelessly corrupt and the LXX itself is based on a corrupt Hebrew text. In these cases Prof. Saydon resorted to conjectural emendations. Thus Is. 53.9b the word $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ 'in his death' is generally taken to refer to Christ condemned to death and therefore buried with guilty men; but in fact his tomb was with the rich, or with the evildoers. Thus P. Auvray and Steinmann translate *On lui dévolut sa sépulture au milieu des impies et à sa mort il est avec les mafaiturs* (Bible de Jérusalem 1951). Prof. Saydon emends $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ into $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ and translates *difna*, 'tomb, burying place, funerary installation': an emendation confirmed by the Dead Sea MS of Is. Saydon's work was finished in 1950; hence his emendation is independent of DIsa. The reading has been subsequently accepted by most translators.

In Is. 4, 5.6 the two words $\aleph\aleph\aleph$ are joined together so as to form one assonant expression. Is. 10, 26 'his rod over the sea and he will lift it' is emended so as to read 'he will lift his rod against his (Assur) multitude'. The emendation involves only a slightly different division of the consonants. Is. 15, 9 'for the escaped of Moab a lion and for the remnant of the land' which makes poor sense, is emended 'I will destroy the escaped of Moab and their remnant I will annihilate'. Is. 17, 5.6 the text is confused and apparently mutilated. There are three similes one of which has disappeared: 'the harvester, the vintager and the olive-gatherer'. Saydon conjecturally supplies the missing simile and translates *U jkun bħal meta l-ħassad... f'tarf ta' fergħa...* Sometimes however the translator seems to lack the courage to introduce into the text an emendation which he considers to be probable. Thus in Apc. 19, 16 he accepts the traditional reading 'on his thigh', but in the note he

makes reference to an alternate reading 'on his banner' which has been suggested by C.C. Torrey in ZAW 1953, p. 235.

Excellent readings exist in those books of the OT, which, though existing in Greek, were originally written in Hebrew, as Tobit and 1 Macchabees. In these books Prof. Saydon goes back to the underlying Hebrew text and produces a translation which is by far superior to the existing Greek. Thus Tob. 5, 16 and 7, 11 the $\epsilon\tau\iota$ is not translated as it corresponds to the asseverative Heb. particle וְ . In 3, 6 and 6, 5 the preposition $\mu\epsilon\tau\alpha$, with, is translated *ghand* according to Heb. בְּ . In 7, 13 the particle $\omega\varsigma$ corresponds to Heb. כִּי and is translated *u bekk* not *kif*. 7, 16 the Greek reads 'and she wept for her' where it does not appear who wept and for whom he or she wept. Pautrel translates equivocally *elle pleure sur elle* (Bible de Jérusalem). But the Greek preposition $\pi\epsilon\rho\iota$ sometimes reproduces the Heb. prep. עַל which means 'upon' and therefore Saydon translates *U bdiet tibki (mixhuta) fuqha, u qabdet (ommba) twaqqaqha mill-biki*. 12, 6 is confused. Saydon translates it into Hebrew and then re-translates into Maltese *Bierku 'l Allau fahhrub quddiem il-hajjin kollha ghal kull ma ghamel maghkom. Tajjed li wiehed ibierek.* . . (See P.P. Saydon, 'Some Mistranslations in the Codex Sinaiticus of the Book of Tobit', *Biblica* 33 [1952] 363-5). 1 Macc. 1, 1 offers an awkward construction in Greek and Latin, but the Maltese translation based on the underlying Hebrew text is smooth and clear. 1 Macc. 1, 16 the Greek $\text{\text{ἡτοιμασθη}$, 'was prepared', is rendered *u twettqet* according to Heb. כִּי to prepare and to 'consolidate'. 8, 30 Greek 'these and these' corresponds to Heb. וְאֵלֶּם וְאֵלֶּם where the conjunction וְ has the meaning of 'or not' and hence Saydon translates *wiehed jew l-iehor* not *les uns et les autres* (Abel).

Another feature showing how Prof. Saydon's translation keeps abreast of modern linguistic studies is its conformity with modern translations and Hebrew lexical studies. Modern tendency, represented by G.R. Driver, is to avoid as much as possible any arbitrary manipulation of the text on grounds of a difficult translation of hapaxlegomena. The text should be preserved and studied in the light of cognate languages especially Accadian and Arabic. In this way many new meanings have come to light, the sense has become clearer and the correctness of the traditional text vindicated. Just a few examples: The Hebrew word נֶפֶשׁ is generally translated 'soul', which is its ordinary meaning; but in certain occurrences this meaning is utterly unsuitable. Thus Ps. 68(69) 'the waters are come in even unto my soul' and Is. 5, 14 'hell hath enlarged her soul' make no sense whatever. But it has now been established that in Accadian the word meant also 'neck, throat' and it is very likely that this meaning was known also in Hebrew. The sense would

be 'the waters have reached up to my neck' and 'hell has opened wide its throat'. Is. 5, 28 the word רָעַח which is generally translated 'scent', is here rendered *xrar*, 'flash' (G.R. Driver, 'Difficult word in the Hebrew Prophets', p. 55 in *Studies in Old Testament Prophecy*, T & T Clark, 1950). In Is. 18, 1 $\text{סְפִינֵי בִלְגִיעֵנָה}$ is *šfen bil-güenāh*, 'winged ships' with LXX supported by Accadian, Arabic and Ethiopic meanings (G.R. Driver, o.c. p. 56) against the usual rendering *cymbalo alarum* (Vulg.), *où susurrent des ailes* (Bible de Jer.). Is. 44, 9 עֲדָוָתָם 'their witnesses', makes no sense. The Bible de Jer. reads 'their servants' by the addition of one consonant. Here again Prof. Saydon adopts the meaning proposed by Driver (o.c. p. 57) 'they that resort to them': *dawk li jmorru għandhom*. A. Vaccari in *La Sacra Bibbia* translates *loro devoti*, which makes very good sense. Is. 41, 14 $\text{יְיָ יִשְׂרָאֵל הַמֵּתִים מִיִּשְׂרָאֵל}$ apparently means 'the dead ones of Israel', *qui mortui estis ex Israel*. But this meaning has no parallelism with 'worm' in the same verse. Hence the word is linked up with Accadian *mutu*, 'louse', a good parallel with worm. Translators and commentators generally read חֲמִיל insect. Prof. Saydon translates *dwejda* diminutive of *duda*, 'a worm', seemingly not accepting the emendation חֲמִיל , which is not the case for he himself informs the present writer that he used *dwejda* to avoid the Maltese word, *qamla*, 'lice', which does not belong to the polite language. In Hos. 5, 12 the word עָרָב is regularly translated 'moth, tineæ' (Vulg.) not a good parallel with rotteness of the same stich. Prof. Saydon accepts Driver's rendering 'pus' (o.c. p. 56) and translates *tidnija*, 'infection'. Is. 57, 13 the word קְבֻצָּה is translated *congregati* (Vulg.), *collection of idols* (Revised St. Version, where the word *idols* has been added to make sense), *idoles abominabiles* (Bible de Jer.). But קְבֻצָּה is obviously an Aramaism meaning 'statue'. Hence Prof. Saydon translates *statwi*. King Jareb in Hos. 5, 13 is simply *is-sultān il-kbir*, the great king. Hos. 7, 15 the words *erudivi ... confortavi* (Vulg.) are rendered by one verb *qawwejt*, the one being a Hebrew gloss of an Aramaic verb. Is. 47, 15 the word סַחֲרָא is not 'thy traffickers' as generally understood, but 'thy sorcerers', *is-sahhāra tiegħek*. Is. 51, 14 לֶחֶם הָאֱלֹהִים 'his bread' is read קֹחַ הָאֱלֹהִים 'his force', *sahhtu* (G.R. Driver in *Jour. Th. St.* 36[1935]402). Is. 53, 8 the difficult *generationem eius quis enarrabit* is translated with some paraphrasis *min qagħad jahseb x'kien?* where the Heb. דֹּר 'generation' is referred to Accadian *duru* 'state, condition'.

The N.T. provides us with no less important examples of the same procedure. The difficult word πορνεία in Mt. 5, 32; 19, 19 generally translated 'fornication' is *rabta ħażina*, that is, 'unlawful marriage' which gives right to dissolution or separation. Mt. 1, 25 'and he knew her not

till she brought forth her first born son' is rendered *u mingħajr ma għaraf-ba, wildet iben*, a rendering which is adopted by all modern translators. In Matthew 6, 27 ἡλικία is 'age' rather than 'stature' (Vulg.). Mt. 8, 26 the verb ἐπιτιμᾶν is not 'to rebuke', (Vulg.) but 'to command with force', hence *amar bil-qawwa*. Mt. 10, 41 εἰς ὄνομα is not 'in the name', (Vulg.) but 'for the reason of' as in Hebrew and Aramaic. The same rendering should have been adopted in Mt. 18, 20. Mt. 20, 11 the verb ποιεῖω 'to do' is translated *ħadmu*, 'they worked', as the Hebrew עָבַד, 'to do, to work'. Lk. 18, 14 some modern translators render 'he went home more justified than the other' while the real sense is that given by Prof. Saydon: 'he went home justified, not the other'.

In Acts the translator declares that he does not follow blindly either form of text but in point of fact he almost always stands with the text represented by the great uncials. The letters of St. Paul are the most difficult parts of the Bible to translate into any language, and still more into Maltese, which is very deficient in words expressing abstract and negative ideas occurring frequently in these writings. Still the translation maintains its high scholarly standard with a smooth and dignified style as the rendering of Rom. 5, 1-6 amply shows: *Wara li qlajna l-ħus-ti fħazzjoni bil-fidi, għandna s-sliem ma' Alla permezz ta' Ġesù Kristu, Sidna, li tana d-dħul bil-fidi għal din il-grazzja li fha qegħdin u nišťabru bit-tama fis-sebħ ta' Alla*. The same is applicable to the translation of the Catholic Epistles and the Apocalypse, which both have a strong Semitic colour full as it is with Old Testament reminiscences.

These are the merits of this monumental translation of the whole Bible by one man into an idiom that is still in its formative stage as a literary language. It is a landmark in the history of Maltese literature and linguistic studies; it is of an immense help for the Church's pastoral work, especially to-day that there is a strong current — due in no small degree to the work of Prof. Saydon at the University and of his one time students — towards biblical spirituality; it is a remarkable monument to biblical scholarship in Malta, worthily represented by Prof. Saydon, a man exclusively dedicated to research. We who have attended his lectures, followed his advice and worked with him know well enough with what care and diligence he went about his work to give a translation worthy of the Island of St. Paul, himself a great biblical scholar and writer.

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