

BOOK REVIEW

Roger Omanson (ed), *Discover the Bible. A Manual for Biblical Studies*, United Bible Societies, New York 2001, ISBN 1-931471-73-8, 567pp.

I finished reading this volume with mixed feelings. On the one hand it offers its prospective readers enormous amount of useful information about various aspects of Bible studies; on the other hand, it includes material which may appear irrelevant to many prospective users of this manual.

The book's title may appear misleading. The first part of the title may lead to believe that this is a study into the Bible and its world, and actually this is what is offered in the first two parts (out of six); there we find (after an introductory essay on what the Bible is, pp.15-36) four essays dealing with the 'context' of both the Old and New Testament, the geography of the biblical world, and its archaeology (pp. 39-117), and four essays dedicated to the text and canon of both parts of the Christian Bible (pp. 121-189). The second part of the volume's title reminds one of John H. Hayes's *Introduction to Old Testament Study* (1979) where the writer concentrates on the approach to the various parts of the Old Testament. Instead, the next parts of the book focus on exegesis and the translation of the Bible.

Part Three clusters together five essays: a general introduction on 'Biblical Exegesis', then four contributions which somehow touch issues of Bible translation: "Taking Theology Seriously in the Translation Task," "Special Problems in Translating the Old Testament," "Translating Biblical Poetry," and "Special Problems in Translating the New Testament" (pp. 193-352).

The next three parts are completely taken by Bible translation, its theory, especially as developed and practiced by the specialists of the United Bible Societies, and its history. In some more detail: part four concentrates on linguistics and the methods of translating, on how modern language studies influenced the theorising on Bible translation, on the approach called 'functional (or dynamic) equivalence translation', on the distinction between form and meaning in translation, and on Bible translation and the indigenous peoples in Latin America (pp. 355-444). Even though the last mentioned essay deals with historical issues, its concern is still the method of translation, and its effects on the targeted audiences. This explains the editorial

choice to leave this interesting essay with Part Four rather than moving it to the next part which discusses 'the Bible in English and Spanish' (pp. 447-517). The final part consists of three contributions on Bible translation in other parts of the world, Africa, Asia, and Europe (pp. 519-567).

The reader of this review may understand what has been said at the beginning that the title given to the volume is rather misleading. This volume is not about studying Scripture pure and simple, but mainly about how to translate the Bible, what the translator should know about the Bible itself before he/she undertakes to render into his/her language a book, or rather a library of shorter books grouped together into a 'canon' that come from a culture which often differs completely from the one of the translator. And no one would quarrel with the publisher, the United Bible Societies, for publishing such a book, though this volume could have a wider readership if it focused less on translation and more on background information necessary to understand the Bible. There is little for instance on the contribution of sociology to understanding Scripture. There is little on crafts mentioned in the Bible, family life, even on important institutions like the temple, the liturgy, the monarchy, and so on. It is true that the book has prefigured not to replace previous reference works that specialise in these areas (read the Preface); it is also true that the present volume grew out of another smaller volume in Spanish written by the specialists of the United Bible Societies operating in the Americas: the original work was widened especially by the part on translation theory and the history of Bible translation in parts of the world other than Latin America: "This book is a translation, revision, and adaptation of *Descubre la Biblia*", also published by the United Bible Societies in 1998.

But as a manual addressed to translators this is an excellent tool. Its various contributions are well written in a style most translators who speak English as a second or third language would understand without difficulty (with the possible exception of Robert Bascom's very good essay, 'Special Problems in Translating the Old Testament', pp. 247-260). Sensitive issues like that of the canon (pp. 154-189), or that of the NT text (pp.135-152) are treated with care and equity. Would be translators or theology students with interest in Bible translation will find this volume a very good introduction to the translation ministry. Some of the contributions were not *ad hoc* writings but were reused from other contexts. This is understandable. But one may question the wisdom of incorporating a substantial junk from Lynell Zogbo & Ernst R. Wendland, *Hebrew Poetry in the Bible: A Guide for Understanding and for Translating*, Helps for Translators, United Bible

Societies, New York 2000[reviewed in *Melita Theologica* LI/1(2000)187-191] in chapter 13 of this book (pp. 261-324), when this volume should have been made available to all practitioners in UBS. This however would not lessen the merit of Zogbo's and Wendland's contribution, especially for its pedagogic capacity.

One may also find it difficult to understand the inclusion of the cluster of contributions under the rubric 'Part Six' except as plea for offering a complete picture of the history of Bible translation; one would easily see the motivation for including an evaluation of English and Spanish Bible translations, since these often serve as Base Texts for other translations in various parts of the world(In this context I would have included the section on the French Bibles perhaps with Part Five as they too often play the role of Base Text to vast francophone areas in Africa). But the description of Bible translation work in the various continents does not seem to fit properly within the general purpose of the volume since this volume is not meant to be a history of Bible translation, notwithstanding the fact that the material therein contained offers interesting reading.

One comment on contribution number 24 by Rev Prof Paul Ellingworth (pp. 549-567). Prof Ellingworth writes a brief history of Bible translation in Europe. On p.562 he includes a paragraph on Bible Translation in Maltese which on the whole is accurate; one mistake deals with G. Mercieca as a translator publishing a translation together with others in 1984. G. Mercieca is the name of His Excellency the Archbishop of Malta who kindly wrote a letter of introduction to the First Edition of *Il-Bibbja*, the Bible translation published in 1984 by the Malta Bible Society; this translation was the same one prepared by Rev Prof Carmel Sant and his team. Sant published his edition of the Bible in Maltese over a number of years: Mark (1971), the Psalms(1973), the Gospels and the Acts of the Apostles (1974), the New Testament (1975.1977), and then the whole Bible in 1984. One should remember that while this work of translation was going on the team was asked to translate the texts of the liturgy to be used by the Catholic Church in her services; these texts were published between 1967-1978). We are here in the post Vatican II period. The team was conscious that translating the Bible for public reading was a different pair of shoes than translating it for private reading. The reviewer would recommend *Bible Translation and Language*, Melita Theologica Supplementary Series 2; Malta 1992 for a good history of Bible Translation in Maltese; this collection of essays was written by Prof Carmel Sant himself and brings this history to the publication of *Il-Bibbja* in 1984.

One may also say that the last twenty five years have been very active where Bible translation in Malta is concerned. The translation prepared by Rev Prof Peter Paul Saydon during 1929-1959 was finally published by the Society for Christian Doctrine first in three elegant volumes (1977.1982.1990), with the title *Bibbja Saydon*, and then in one volume (1995); this last may be considered as the translation's second edition [Cf. Anthony Abela, "Two Professional Translations of the Bible in Maltese in the 20th Century", *Melita Theologica*, XLVIII/2 (1996) 15-36]. The Bible prepared by Sant and colleagues saw a second edition in 1996 and a third edition in 2004. In the meantime, the Malta Bible Society has founded the Permanent Bible Commission in order to monitor the text of her Bible translation. MBS is preparing a Study Bible on the basis of the Third Edition which one hopes to see published in two to three years. A new translation appeared on scene in 2004; this has been prepared by Rev Prof Guido Schembri OFM and includes only the NT. This has appeared only as pro manuscripto and has been presented to the public by the TAU Publishing House.

Where a lively Christian community exists one cannot fail to find an active translation ministry that does not stop with the publication of a good translation. Within the Malta Bible Society one already hears talk of a new translation which takes into account the developments of Maltese now recognized as a European language.

Anthony Abela
Department of Holy Scripture
University of Malta
Msida, Malta