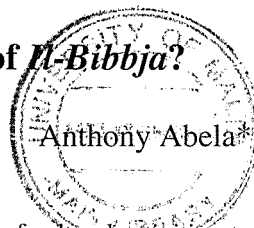


What is 'new' in the New Edition of *Il-Bibbja*?



Now that the Malta Bible Society is holding a number of cultural activities to remind Christians and non-Christians alike of the importance of the Bible within our culture, the writer of this article¹ thought it is the right moment to review, even if in a general manner, the Third Edition of *Il-Bibbja* published by the Society towards the end of 2004. The reviewer of a work that has seen multiple editions is bound to ask whether the latest 'edition' merits the name: 'Was this edition justified vis-à-vis its predecessors?' Was the Malta Bible Society justified in requesting a frequent reader of Scripture or a Bible lover to fork out money to purchase this new edition of the Bible in Maltese? As our readers will remember, what many consider as the official translation of the Bible in Maltese published as *Il-Bibbja*, was first published by the Malta Bible Society, then in conjunction with the Media Centre, in 1984; the Malta Bible Society, this time on its own, published the Second Edition in 1996. In 2004 the Society has just published the Third Edition. What is there in this publication to justify the noun 'edition'? Why not using the phrase 'a new printing'? With some reserve on his part as he had a *manu in pasta* in the formation of the new book, the present reviewer maintains that the *Il-Bibbja* of 2004 merits the title 'new edition' and not simply the more general 'new printing'.

The Permanent Biblical Commission

But before embarking into a short review of the new publication, we have to narrate an important event that took place between this new edition and its predecessor. At the Press Conference during which this edition was launched, the Rt Rev Joseph Mercieca, the Archbishop of the Catholic Church in Malta, announced the foundation within the Malta Bible Society of the *Permanent Biblical Commission* in 2002. This Commission was founded in order that specialists in Scripture Studies

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1. With slight alterations this article appeared for the first time in THE SUNDAY TIMES 23rd October 2005 on p.33

monitor the status of the Biblical text in the light of the continuing developments in biblical research on the local and the international scene, and to respond to requests of change in the text made from time to time by members of the general public coming from different denominational backgrounds. One understands that since the Bible belongs to Maltese society, changes of its text cannot be carried except after serious study by competent people. And this is the task of the Commission and its members.

The Commission members come from a jumble of varied experiences, pastoral life, and professional training as biblical scholars. Some of them participated in the translation proper and were with Mgr Prof Carmel Sant when the first edition was published in 1984²; others never took part in a translation; others still were members of the translation boards on international versions. A few come from the local secular clergy, the great majority belong to religious orders. One member is a layman. One of the translators functioned as a parish priest for a number of years; but all of them take an active part in the life of the Church, especially in the field of biblical pastoral ministry. All of them teach Scripture; a number of them were or are members of the Department of Holy Scripture of the Faculty of Theology at the University of Malta. Most are prolific writers both in professional research as well as of books and articles of a popular character. The Archbishop mentioned the Revs Anthony Abela, Joseph Agius OP, Marcello Ghirlando OFM, Martin Micallef OFM Cap, Egidius Mizzi OFM Conv, Paul Sciberras, Donatus Spiteri OFM Cap, Alexander Vella OC and Peter Paul Zerafa OP. The only non-clerical member of this team is Prof Anthony Frendo who teaches at the Department of Archaeology of the University of Malta. One final note: Prof Joseph Agius OP was one of the latest recruits; he is now the Rector of the Pontifical University of St Thomas in Rome.

This Commission meets more or less regularly every three months. The agenda normally consists of texts in our Bible that have been proposed for revision for some reason or another: linguistic, exegetical, sheer scientific development. One of the members undertakes a short or long study to examine the proposal for change. One example will suffice to explain how the Commission works. There was a proposal by one member to reconsider our translation of Is 53,11b which differs from all current translations of the Hebrew text. This text has been a *crux interpretum* for a long time and scholarship has simply decided to follow tradition notwithstanding

2. One should consult the introduction written by Prof Sant in that edition.

serious mistakes in the parsing of the various members of the line concerned. We have just to compare our text to a couple of modern versions: Our text runs as follows: *Il-ġust jiġġustifika lill-qaddej tiegħu quddiem il-kotra, u l-ħażen tiegħu jitgħabba bih hu. The New Revised Standard Version* (1989) renders the same text in the way: "The righteous one, my servant, shall make many righteous, and he shall bear their iniquities". Another authoritative version is that of *La Bible. Traduction Oecumenique* (1995): "...sitôt connu, juste, il dispensera la justice, lui au profit des fous, du fait que lui même supporte leurs perversities". Just the last example, the *Nova Vulgata* (1998): "Iustificabit iustus servus meus multos et iniquitates eorum ipse portabit". The text is indeed complex, even its division into lines is problematic as this short list shows. The whole issue revolves around who is the subject and the object of the verb 'justifies'. Our text makes the Servant the object with the Just One (a divine epithet) being he who justifies him in front of the general public notwithstanding his many sufferings. The member of the Permanent Biblical Commission who promoted a reconsideration of our text based his argument on our isolation concerning our rendering. The Commission entrusted the examination of our text to the current reviewer and his work resulted in a paper that he read at the Congress of the International Organization for the Study of the Old Testament (IOSOT) held at the University of Leiden in Holland, and was then published first in *Melita Theologica*³ and will soon feature in one of the two volumes of the IOSOT congress proceedings.

The Commission works with the default proviso that unless the current text is proven to be mistaken or strongly revisable, the text prevails and no revision takes place. But if the text proves less than perfect (if ever a translation of an original can reach utter perfection) and hence may be improved either in exegetical precision or 'understandability'⁴, the Commission may sanction revision of the current text. One may object that in this way the text of *Il-Bibbja* will be in continuous flux. On the other hand, developments in the receptacle language as well as improvements in understanding the original texts render minor changes in accepted translations or replacement of by newer ones continuously necessarily. Whoever believes that

3. Anthony Abela, "When Tradition Prevails over Good Parsing. Reconsidering the Translation of Is 53,11b," *Melita Theologica* 55/2(2004)157-174.
4. By 'understandability' we normally mean that the target audience can effectively and affectively understand the text and its message. On these issues one may recommend Jan de Waard & Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, United Bible Societies, New York 1986; Timothy Wilt (ed.), *Bible Translation. Terms of Reference*, St Jerome Publishing, Manchester 2003.

his/her translation of the Bible is *ad aeternum* without revision and without need for replacement after a reasonable lapse of time, is living in a dream.

The decisions as well as the documentation leading to the decisions are dutifully minuted by the secretary of the Commission, and sent to the General Secretary of the Malta Bible Society for action in due time, and to the representatives of the Archbishop in Malta and the Bishop of the Gozo Diocese for information. Anyone may apply for these minutes from the undersigned. In the short time of its existence the *Permanent Bible Commission* has treated about a hundred text change proposals.

A more user-friendly editing

But having an accurate Bible text is only one element for a 'good' Bible. The text needs to be user-friendly otherwise that Bible will remain a 'dead letter' in the sense that it will not encourage the readers to use it on a regular basis. A quick look at any page of this Bible, and a comparison with its relative page in the previous edition, will suffice to show the thorough editing work carried out by the staff of the Malta Bible Society.

All in all, page setting has been superb and the reader will find much easier the Bible in the format one meets in this Third Edition than in any of its predecessors. The page is divided into two columns except for the section where the Psalter is printed; there one finds the psalms printed as poetry in the middle of the page. The page headings are meant to help new Bible users to identify the book and its place in the canon, that is the official list of inspired book. Suppose we move to page 357: there the running heading reads: 'The Old Testament: The Historical Books • 2Samuel'. The reader would glean the information that on that page he/she is reading the Second Book of Samuel which is a one of the historical books of the Old Testament. Of course this hints to the reader a return to the *Werrej* on page v where the various divisions of the book are identified and marked (One evident mistake by the printer has been the paging of the title and front pages!).

The bottom lines of the page are full of useful information for the reader. The edition advises the reader by an asterisk in the text that a note is being offered. This is a new service not given in the previous editions of *Il-Bibbja*. Besides, the chapter and verse numbers are given in bold to help locating it quickly. A further change touches the references which many Bible users find so useful for reading

the books within the context of the Bible as an anthology. The whole reference to chapter and verse numbers is given while only essential references are included to make proper use of these references possible (cf. page vii). These improvements alone already justify the honourable title of 'Edition' for this publication.

One should also note that the staff of the Malta Bible Society offers a short 'manual' as how new readers should use the volume (page x) and a pastoral presentation of the value of Bible reading (pp. xi-xiii) addressed mainly to Catholic readers, but which would be profitable for readers from all cultural backgrounds. The Bible tries to attract reading and use by younger readers by the colourful cover (contrary to traditional usage where the covers are usually of sombre colours, and by a glossy and multicolour insert about virtues and vices as well as the reproduction of some artistic expressions in Malta of Bible texts and themes, which expressions do not feature so often in the media.

An Inter-confessional Edition

But a major change in this edition, over its predecessors, touches the order of the individual biblical books. On pages vii-ix of the introduction we find a note which explains what an inter-confessional Bible means. This note was written by the Permanent Biblical Commission and attempts to explain some of the mysteries of the biblical canon. Why do Protestants not accept as 'canonical' some of the books that Catholics do? How has this division grown? Who initiated 'inter-confessional' editions of the Bible, and why?⁵

This note by the Commission clarifies the concept of inter-confessionality, and recognizes that her source for this idea was the document marking the agreement between the Holy See and the United Bible Societies, published first in 1968 and then renewed with slight changes in 1987. This document has as its title *Guidelines for Inter-confessional Cooperation in Translating the Bible*. This document covers a more radical situation than was the case of our Bible, since the scholars who penned the original translation were all Catholic (one may read the Introduction to the 1984

5. There is at present a very serious and highly professional debate going on regarding the issue of the canon. The present reviewer is entering only two collections of contributions written by some of the foremost biblical scholars: Lee Martin McDonald & James A. Sanders (eds.), *The Canon Debate*, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody, Massachusetts 2002; J. -M. Auwers & H.J. De Jonge, *The Biblical Canons*, BETL CLXIII, Leuven University Press & Uitgeverij Peeters, Leuven 2003.

edition written by Mgr Sant). The social phenomenon of Maltese Protestantism is more recent; at the time the translation was carried out there were no Maltese with Protestant background who had received professional training in biblical studies, and who could be co-opted to work with the translation team.

Hence inter-confessionality in the case of this Bible could concern only the division of the books into three distinct groupings: the *Old Testament* (meaning, those books of the OT accepted by all Christian denominations as being inspired literature from the theological point of view), the *Deutero-canonical Books* (meaning, those books of the OT which Catholics accept as canonical while Protestants refuse), and, of course, the *New Testament* which is common with all denominations. While the previous editions of *Il-Bibbja* can be called 'confessional' in the sense that the Deutero-canonicals were distributed among the canonicals without any distinction, in the new edition they are gathered together in one place, exactly between the Old and the New Testaments. In some foreign editions these are placed at the very end of the book.

What is the significance of the new arrangement? This arrangement may be given a political, a social, and a theological significance. This new arrangement of the members of the 'canon' reflects first of all the realisation that Maltese society is no longer monolithic regarding its spiritual orientation. It is not completely Catholic anymore, *Malta Cattolicissima*. A sizable representation of Maltese citizens have swerved away from the Catholic source of its spirituality and sought it from elsewhere, from other Christian Church traditions. It is not the intention of this reviewer to indulge into a research for the meaning of this phenomenon. That should be the work of someone who is expert in sociology and social spirituality.

But the Permanent Biblical Commission and the Board of the Malta Bible Society felt that they could no longer ignore the fact that Protestant readers, sometimes with anti-Catholic feelings for particular experiences in the past, would not appreciate that what is currently considered as the best translation of the Bible in Maltese, is actually a confessional edition, a 'Catholic' Bible. Many of these Protestant readers stick to a translation of the *King James Version* which some authorities do not judge it to have been a happy attempt: it was rendered from English by a non-professional. Others negotiated with the Malta Bible Society to publish its version without the Deutero-canonicals; but this costs money. The only solution that presented itself for the time being is this 'inter-confessional' edition, where the Deutero-canonicals would be gathered altogether in between the OT and the

NT's. In this way the Catholic user of the Bible has all the books he venerates as Holy Books, while his Protestant colleague may skip from the OT collection on to the NT without reading the collection of the Deutero-canonicals which he/she would not consider as inspired.

Of course, this was not a matter of collocating books somewhere else in the volume called the Bible. Some deutero-canonical books like Tobit, Judith, Wisdom of Solomon, the Book of Ben Sirach, Baruch, and the two books of the Maccabees are literary units in themselves, and it is not difficult to take them out of one place in the Bible and to put them in another place. The books of Daniel and Esther create some problems, though. Their canonical history is much more complex. Both are found in different formats within sections of the OT and with the Deutero-canonicals. In this article we shall limit ourselves to narrating how the different forms of the Book of Esther came about, and hence the different collocations of the two editions.

The Book of Esther was originally written in Hebrew, somewhere within the Persian Empire. The book was organically linked to a feast that existed before within the society where a sizable Jewish Diaspora community lived, a feast that the Jews adopted and called *Purim* (see Esther 9, 20-32). It would seem that the feast had the connotations of our Carnival, at least as it used to be celebrated some years ago in Malta. This feast became immediately popular among the Jews of the east; they adopted it just as the Christians of the early centuries adopted a pagan Roman feast of the birth of light which Christians changed by giving new contents, and thus the feast of Christmas was born which celebrates the birth of the True Light. The Book of Esther, which took its name from its heroine, was written in the fourth or third century BCE within the context of this feast of the *Purim*.

When the Jews of the west (Palestine and Alexandria) tried to import the feast, they met with huge opposition, for both feast and book. The feast was not included in the liturgical calendars offered by the Torah (see for instance Leviticus 23), and the book could not have been written before the death of the 'last' prophet according to Jewish computation. Hence it would appear that for these reasons the Book of Esther is one of the few books of the Jewish canon which was not included in the 'canon of the community of Qumran'⁶. We do not know why both feast and book

6. Cfr. Eugene Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls and the Origins of the Bible*, William B. Eerdmans, Grand Rapids & Brill Academic Publishers, Leiden 1999.

made it and became part of Jewish way of life. One explanation for the canonization of the book was that once a Greek translation was embarked upon, the first edition in Hebrew was re-edited by the addition of some six clarifying notes that by time became part of the text in the Greek edition. The additions, which are currently designated by letters of the alphabet, turned the more neutral and less theological Hebrew version into a markedly Jewish story. It suffices to study the transformation of the main character Esther in the addendum C⁷.

The Greek version of this book was included within the canon of the Scriptures normally read by the Jews in the Diaspora. And it was this version that entered the Church's canon, though Pharisaic Judaism stuck to the Hebrew edition. With the Reform in the Sixteenth Century, the Christian traditions that owe their existence to this important event in Western history, read as canonical only the Hebrew text; Catholic and Orthodox traditions followed the Septuagint version of the Bible and read as inspired literature the Addenda also.

Given this complex canonical history, the Book of Esther had to be reproduced twice in the new edition of the Bible in Maltese: first within the section of the OT historical books (pp. 567-577), and then in the section with the Deutero-canonicals (pp. 1250-1265). The redaction history of the Book of Daniel has been less complex but we had to reproduce it in two sections just like the Book of Esther.

Changes in the text

But in the new publication of the Bible we encounter a number of textual changes; most of these changes are hardly visible to the untrained reader; others constitute substantial reformulation of the Biblical text as it is found in the 1996 edition. In this review we have to limit ourselves to simply exposing the alterations: for a full explanation of each alteration one has to visit the minutes of the Permanent Biblical Commission. In the review we shall follow the order of the canonical books as found in the edition of 1996.

In **2 Mac 4,29** we read *halla lill-Krateti kmandant* (1996) which is clearly a

7. On the Book of Esther and its heroine one may read Michael V. Fox, *The Redaction of the Books of Esther*, Scholars Press, Atlanta, Georgia 1991; Linda Day, *Three Faces of a Queen. Characterization in the Books of Esther*, JSOT Supplement Series 186; Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1995; Charles V. Dorothy, *The Books of Esther. Structure, Genre, and Textual Integrity*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield 1997.

mistake as *Krateti* is a personal name; hence in 2004 we read *ħalla lil Krateti kmandant*. The **Book of Job** saw a number of slight and not so slight alterations. In **3,9** there is a change in the order of the first two lines of the verse while in **3,14** the singular *ħerba* (1996) becomes the plural *ħerbiet* in 2004. *Idem ftakru 7,7* of 1996 becomes *ftakar* in the 2004 edition. In **9,9** we find the name of a constellation *Ors* altered to *Orsa* as it should have been; it was clearly a proofreading blunder. A more substantial alteration takes place in **10,12** where from the 1996 *Mbagħad fi tjubitek il-ħajja tajtni, u bi ħrara kbira ħaristni* we now read in 2004 *ħajja tajtni u favuri għamilt miegħi, u l-providenza tiegħek ħarsitli ruħi*. One final text from Job: the dramatic assertion of how the well to do look at the poor in **12,5**. In the 1996 edition we read “*Agħar għalih il-magħkus,*” *jgħid min xortih tajba,* “*tigriġ għal min jogħtor riġlu*”; in 2004 we now read “*Agħar għalih il-magħkus,*” *jgħid għalih il-paxxut,* “*gambetta għal min riġlu mriegħed.*”

The Book of Job was not the only biblical book which was retouched by the Biblical Commission. From the Old Testament and the Deuterocanonical books we shall quote only three texts. The verb *nonsbulu* in the **Wisdom of Solomon 2,12** has its object identified more clearly in the 2004 version. It is *lill-gust* that the wicked wanted to trap. The number of the verse is now put at the right place; this happens also at **Book of Sirach 20,15**. In **Wis 19,18b-19** parts of the verse has been restored after that in 1996 the proofreading has inadvertently left a small part out. In the 2004 edition, the text reads: *Dan jidher ċar jekk wieħed iħares lejn li ġara. Bhejjem ta' l-art inbidlu f' bhejjem tal-baħar u dawk li jgħixu fl-ilma qabżu fuq l-art.*

Probably the more substantial alterations in the text involved New Testament books. Sometimes changes had to do with subtitles. The subtitle before **Mt 5,17** was changed from *Il-liġi ta' Mosè u l-liġi l-ġdida* to *Tagħlim ta' Ġesù fuq il-Liġi*. Capitalization of the letter 'l' would mean that 'law' refers to the 'Law of Moses'. Of course subtitles carry exegetical relevance. The same happened to the subtitle before **Lk 16,14**. Some alterations simply constituted rendering the text more perfect from the point of view of exegesis and/or of style. In **Mt 5,17** for instance we now read *biex inwassalhom għall-milja tagħhom* instead of *biex inwassalhom għall-perfezzjoni*. In **Lk 23,13** we are told by the evangelist that *Pilatu sejjah flimkien il-qassisin il-kbar, il-kapijiet, u l-poplu* over against the 1996 version which for improper proofreading left *u l-poplu* out. **Rom 3,25** is a difficult text both in the Greek original and in its Maltese rendering, because it is very dense. In the 1996 version we read *Lilu Alla kkostitwiegħ vittma ta' espjazzjoni b' demmu permezz tal-fidi* which in the language of modern linguistics may need some 'unpacking' for any

modern reader who is not a New Testament theologian to grasp. The 2004 version may just be offering an attempt at this unpacking: *Lilu Alla qiegħdu sagrafiċċju ta' tpattija għall-maħfra tad-dnubiet għal dawk li jemmnu bih. U dan bis-saħħa ta' demmu.* We shall end this short list of alterations by putting side by side parts of Rom **6,13**. In the 1996 text we find this reading: *anqas ma għandkom tħallu l-membri ta' ġisimkom isiru għodda ta' ingustizzja għas-servizz tad-dnub; imma offru ruħkom lil Alla bħala nies li reġgħu mill-mewt għall-ħajja halli l-membri ta' ġisimkom isiru għodda tal-ġustizzja għas-servizz ta' Alla għall-ġustizzja tagħkom.* In 2004 this became: *anqas ma għandkom tħallu l-membri ta' ġisimkom isiru għodda biex tagħmlu l-ħażen għas-servizz tad-dnub; imma offru ruħkom lil Alla bħala nies li reġgħu mill-mewt għall-ħajja halli l-membri ta' ġisimkom isiru għodda biex tagħmlu t-tajjeb għas-servizz ta' Alla għall-ġustizzja tagħkom.*

It is to be hoped that the text's 'understandability' has thus been improved upon. But these attempts at improvement not merely of the services offered in this publication but also in the text proper make this version of *Il-Bibbja* of 2004 a new 'edition', the third one.

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