Concordia Theological Monthly

Volume 25 Article 58

10-1-1954

Translating the Gospels - A Discussion Between Dr. E. V. Rieu and the Rev. J.B. Phillips

E. V. Rieu

J. B. Phillips

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm

Part of the Religious Thought, Theology and Philosophy of Religion Commons

Recommended Citation
Rieu, E. V. and Phillips, J. B. (1954) "Translating the Gospels - A Discussion Between Dr. E. V. Rieu and the Rev. J.B. Phillips," *Concordia Theological Monthly*: Vol. 25, Article 58.
Available at: https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol25/iss1/58

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Print Publications at Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. It has been accepted for inclusion in Concordia Theological Monthly by an authorized editor of Scholarly Resources from Concordia Seminary. For more information, please contact seitzw@csl.edu.

Translating the Gospels

A Discussion Between
DR. E. V. RIEU
and the REV. J. B. PHILLIPS

(EDITORIAL NOTE: The appearance of new versions of the Bible in modern languages has again focused attention on the art of translation. We are grateful to the British Broadcasting Company for permission to print this interview of two famous British scholars. It affords us a glimpse into the translator's workshop and touches on some fundamental problems. Just as a difference of opinion on some issues between the two translators comes to the surface in the discussion, so the reader will want to reserve his judgment on some points of view that are expressed. The interview was held on December 3, 1953.)

REV. E. H. ROBERTSON: Among the many modern translations of the Bible, two, which are in fact only translations of the Gospels, have aroused very wide interest; and we have the two translators here in the studio, and I want to ask them some questions about the way they translated the four Gospels. Doctor E. V. Rieu was already well known to us as the editor of the Penguin Classics; more especially as a lucid translator of Homer. He came to the Gospels from the Greek of Homer. And in his introduction he says this of the language of the Gospels: "It has changed much in the thousand years since Homer wrote. If one comes from the study of the earlier classics straight to New Testament Greek, one experiences the sort of shock that Doctor Johnson or Jane Austen might have received had a copy of a modern novel been put in their hands. Diction, grammar and syntax all underwent modification and loosening. But the language is still Greek; still beautiful; simpler than that of Plato and Demosthenes, but still charged with untranslatable subtlety." The other translator is J. B. Phillips, the vicar of St. John's, Redhill; already well known to us from his translation of the Epistles in the New Testament, *Letters to Young Churches,* as he called them. His comment on the language of the Gospels is: "We face a queer paradox; that the earliest and most reliable accounts of the life of the very Son of God himself, were written in a debased language, which had lost its classical beauty." Two very different translators. On the one hand, a layman, a classical scholar, who wishes to put into English something of the character of these Greek documents. On the other hand, a clergyman, a pastor who is anxious to make the New Testament intelligible to his people.

Perhaps we can best begin with a very simple question: Why did you translate the Gospel? Perhaps you would answer that first Doctor Rieu.

Concordia Theological Monthly, Vol. 25 [1954], Art. 58

RIEU: My business or publishing reasons were these. Penguin Books some years ago undertook to make a complete translation of the Bible, and Sir Allen Lane asked me if I would be the general editor, a task which I undertook, not exactly with alacrity, but with a sense of great honour. Unfortunately for us, shortly after that event, we discovered that a Committee of the Protestant Churches in the Kingdom had been appointed to arrange for a complete new translation of the Bible, and so we dropped the Penguin scheme. But in subsequent discussions it was decided that we might rescue at least one chestnut from the fire, and Penguin Books asked me whether I thought I could undertake the translation of the four Gospels, as an independent effort, and directed largely, though not exclusively, to those people who might not be so much impressed as members of the Church by an authoritative version. I said I would have a look and see if I could do it, and after a month or two I decided to undertake the task.

Now, my personal reason for doing this, was my own intense desire to satisfy myself as to the authenticity and the spiritual content of the Gospels and, if I received any new light by an intensive study of the Greek originals, to pass it on to others. I approached them in the same spirit as I would have approached them had they been presented to me as recently discovered Greek manuscripts, rather like the Old Testament manuscripts which a year or two ago were found in that cave in Palestine. That is the spirit in which I undertook my task, to find out new things. May I add one little story? My son, who is a lay reader, when he heard that his father had undertaken this tremendous task, made a rather amusing remark. He said: "It will be very interesting to see what Father makes of the Gospels. It'll be still more interesting to see what the Gospels make of Father."

ROBERTSON: Now, what about you, Mr. Phillips? Why did you translate the Gospels?

PHILLIPS: Well, really my story goes back to the days of the blitz when I was in London and in charge of a fairly large youth group. I'd always found the Epistles particularly inspiring and full of spiritual help, but these young people quite plainly couldn't make head or tail of them in the Authorized Version; these were not for the most part church young people at all. And when during the blackout I attempted to while the time away by reading to them from the Authorized Version, quite honestly they — they couldn't make any sense of it at all. So in a very small and amateur sort of way I began to translate them from the Greek, simply in order that they might understand them. I think I began with Colossians. And then I had a bit of luck,

Rieu and Phillips: Translating the Gospels - A Discussion Between Dr. E. V. Rieu and

because something prompted me to send a copy of Colossians to C. S. Lewis, whose works I at that time was greatly admiring. And he wrote back those most encouraging words: "It's like seeing an old picture that's been cleaned. Why don't you go on and do the lot?" Well, I took his advice, and I did eventually translate all the Epistles, and they were published as "Letters to Young Churches." Well, then I began to get letters from people from various parts of the world saying: "Well, why don't you go on and do the Gospels?" But I felt a little diffident about this because, although people wouldn't much mind my paraphrasing Paul and James and John, they might very well object to my paraphrasing what might be the actual words of Christ Himself. People as a rule regard the Gospels as very much more sacred than the Epistles.

However, I pressed on with my task, but with a certain amount of misgiving, and that is really the reason — it was a sort of pressure from people outside who had enjoyed the Epistles and said: "Why don't you do the same for the Gospels?"

I do so agree, if I may put it in here, with what Doctor Rieu has said about making one's — I won't say making one's mind a blank — but disabusing one's mind of the Authorized Version or any other version that one has in mind. I also tried to forget about everything I'd ever read in the way of translation, or indeed of interpretation, and to read the Greek documents on their own merits, let them strike me with their impact, if they had any impact, as something I'd never seen before. Of course, one can't altogether succeed in this, but I did try to do it. Well, that very briefly is how it started with me.

RIEU: I entirely agree that that is the only real way of doing it. One can come back afterwards and read other people and find out one's own mistakes. But, tell me, did you find the change of style from St. Paul to the Gospels very marked? Or do you feel that all are written in the same Greek, but in what I venture to call the Gospel style of Greek?

PHILLIPS: Well, there is — at least I think there is — a very great difference. Paul, who wrote most of the Epistles, is so dynamic, so fiery, so excited, so moving very often. And I don't know, of course, but sometimes I wonder whether he read through his letters again before dispatch. Sometimes I seem to think he didn't. But the Gospels are much more self-conscious. I don't in the least mean that they are stilted or artificial, but they are conscious compositions. Therefore, though I would be very far from saying they are static, there is a dif-

ference; they are much more like very, very impressive still pictures, while St. Paul's Letters are moving, moving very often at a high speed and very much charged with emotion. Emotions in the Gospels are those produced by very beautiful and very moving pictures. That's the sort of difference I think I noticed.

ROBERTSON: Could you tell me what you meant just now when you spoke about a Gospel style?

RIEU: I was thinking of the general similarity of manner in which each of the Evangelists, including John, expressed themselves. But of course each of them has his peculiarities, and in some there are marked changes of style. Luke's Preface, for instance, consists of a single long and well-constructed sentence in formal Greek, after which he at once drops into the Gospel style, with its Semitic flavour. John's Prologue is equally distinct in style and rhythm from his narrative. I've also noticed that the three Synoptists, when recording Christ's prophecies in Passover Week, all adopt a new style, which one might call the apocalyptic style. I wonder if Mr. Phillips felt the same thing.

PHILLIPS: Yes, I certainly did feel it. There's a strange sense in all the Synoptics when you come to the apocalyptic passages, of entering an entirely different world. I think myself it is less marked in Matthew because he is writing all the time with one eye on the Hebrew Prophets. But take St. Luke, for example — the passages struck me as a sudden change of key. The warmth and spaciousness and humanity are suddenly overwritten by this urgent and, in a way, rather frightening element. I don't mean that they sound false to the ear, but simply that it is like another man talking. I don't know how to account for it, but I would agree with Doctor Rieu that there is a definite apocalyptic style. And while I don't deny the truth of the apocalyptic passages, I must say that this change of key or colour, or whatever it is, is so marked and so sudden that it is a real embarrassment to the translator.

RIEU: The odd thing is that John in his Gospel does not use this style, perhaps for the simple reason that he does not give us these prophecies. But this I think constitutes no reason for thinking that he did not write the Apocalypse itself. In my view the apocalyptic style grew side by side with the Gospel style and was ready made for any Christian writer who had an apocalyptic message to deliver.

ROBERTSON: One question: when you were translating the Gospels, had you, Doctor Rieu, already worked out careful principles of translation?

RIEU: Yes. When I came to the translation of the Gospels, I had already, through a good deal of practice in translating, equipped myself with at least one very general principle, the lodestar of the translator's art, I call it, and that is the principle of equivalent effect; the idea being, that that translation is the best which comes nearest to giving its modern audience the same effect as the original had on its first audiences. Just to illustrate that, may I use a rather crude example from modern French? French novelists often represent married couples as calling each other *mon chou*, which I don't think would strike a Frenchman as funny at all. If you translate that into English by the words "my cabbage," you're going as far as possible as you can from the principle of equivalent effect. In fact, you're making the English reader think the Frenchmen are silly, which is the last thing that you should do. Well, when I came to examine the history of Biblical translation, I found that no such principle had been followed through the ages. Take first the great Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, which we call the Septuagint. That was translated into highly Semitic Greek. Then take the Vulgate. When the Gospels and the rest of the Bible came to be translated into Latin, we find St. Jerome practically inventing a Latin for the purpose, a Latin which is very charming, but differs enormously, even from the standard Latin of his day; still more, of course, from the Latin of Cicero. It comes to this: the translators of the Bible have been influenced, almost to the present day, by religious rather than literary considerations. And the result is that, even in the Authorized Version, we have very often too literal a translation to produce equivalent effect. I can best bring that home to you by one or two examples. Take Luke 17:8. The Authorized Version represents our Lord as telling a parable in which a master says to his slave: "Make ready wherewith I may sup." Now, I am quite sure that nobody in 1611, or in any other period of English, would have used those words. The Greek is colloquial and abrupt; it's perfectly easy to translate. I render it by: "Get something ready for my supper." And I see that Mr. Phillips says: "Get my supper ready." The only point I have against him is that he's left out the word "something," which is in the Greek. Another example, from Luke 21:13. This is really a better one because it comes in a more important passage. The Authorized Version has: "And it shall turn to you for the testimony." Now, I defy anyone who doesn't know his Gospels very well to understand this immediately, on the first reading. But it isn't really very difficult. What it means, if I may again quote my translation, is: "That is your opportunity. Then you can declare

your faith." Mr. Phillips, if I may quote him, says: "This will be your chance to witness for Me." His rendering is shorter than mine; there I give him best, though again I can point out that the words "for Me" are a little addition of his own. One more example, from Luke 21:15. In the Authorized Version our Lord says: "With desire I have desired to eat this Passover with you." Now, the words "with desire I have desired" are not English and never have been. The idiom is not even Greek. It is one of Luke's bits of Semitic Greek, going straight back to the Hebrew. And here we're all justified in abandoning the phrase, however hallowed it may seem. I render it: "With all my heart I had desired. . . ." Mr. Phillips says: "You do not know how I have longed. . . ." There's not much to choose between these two renderings.

If you're going to apply the principle of equivalent effect, you've got to examine very carefully the style, the spirit, and the meaning of your original. And I soon came to the conclusion that people are wrong who tell you that the Greek of the Gospels is a debased language. It's different from classical Greek, but "debased" is the wrong word. In the first place, it was the best language available to the Gospel writers, and they use it to the best possible effect. Secondly, though it was loosened in syntax and grammar, I should talk of natural development rather than debasement. But diction alone is not all that counts; and when I talk of the Gospels as "supreme works of literary art," I'm thinking rather of the skill with which their very miscellaneous contents were put together that I think is a work of consummate art. Then again we have to consider whom they were written for. I came to the conclusion very soon that they were writen, not for the man in the street, whose existence I do not really believe in, but for the man in the congregation, and that we must not write down to him, that he will not thank us for writing down to him. There is good reason for thinking that the original audience of the Gospels found them just as difficult as we do; and if therefore we paraphrase or lower our standard of English in order to make things crystal clear to the so-called man in the street, we're going beyond our job as translators.

Our Lord used a terse literary and often paradoxical style; and to show you what a bad thing it is to lower our standard in the desire to make everything even clearer than He did, I take an example from Mark 8:35: "The man who chooses to save his life will lose it." I have seen an attempt to translate that by the banal expression: "Whoever plays for his own safety is lost," which incidentally is not

only a very — what shall I say — street-corner piece of English, but breaks all the rules of translation.

To sum up, the Greek Gospels are unique, both in their spiritual content and as works of a literary art. They are majestic, and I think we must strive to convey this effect in the best contemporary English at our command, and never to write down. Nor must we forget one thing, which I've not yet mentioned, and that is the rhythm that runs through all of them. I was deeply impressed by that, and in my attempts to reproduce it, I found the best way was to read my translation aloud, and, when I'd read it aloud once, to read it aloud again, to competent critics sitting by me with pencils and notebooks in their hands, ready to shoot at me when I'd finished.

PHILLIPS: Yes, I find myself very largely in agreement with your principles, of course, particularly with that last one about reading it aloud. I think my long-suffering family and friends put up with a great deal in hearing it read again and again. Perhaps I might outline some of my own principles, many of which will be found, I think, in agreement with yours. I do so agree with this principle of producing equivalent effect. I think I'd only like to comment this, that in a sense I look upon a translator as a kind of liaison officer between what was written long ago and the people of today. On the one hand he's got to try and understand the Greek that was written in the first place, but it's just as important that he should understand the thoughts, and the thought forms, of people for whom he is writing today. Now, I know that some people think, because they've written to me and told me so, that I have thereby lowered the level of the literary quality of the Gospels; I don't really honestly think that's so. The examples they credit to me I think are very unconvincing, but I think it is very important to understand the way people are thinking. However, I agree with you, Doctor Rieu, there's no such person as the man in the street. When you've been, as I have, a parson for over twenty years, you form a sort of composite portrait, as it were — I suppose the result of very many interviews with people, conversations, and so on — a sort of composite portrait of what many people are thinking. There's no such person as the man in the street, I agree: but there is a manner of thought, a sort of shape of thinking which does exist among the majority of people for whom I at least was writing.

Now, there is of course, one very great principle in my writing, which I dare say is in yours, too, and that is the avoidance of what we commonly call "translators' English." This is unfortunately not the place perhaps to quote these examples, but I have a most beautiful

bunch, which I use sometimes in lecturing, from various people's translations, of translators' English, the sort of English that nobody ever spoke in any century at all. The meaning is invariably perfectly clear, but nobody ever spoke like that, except perhaps in some of the worst type of religious plays. And one of the things my critics have looked for is this false note of translators' English, because the moment you strike that note, the game is up; everybody knows this is a translation I'm reading. Which brings me onto another point. To me it is very important to avoid — what shall I call it — not a holy style exactly, but the style of legend. It's a temptation for those of us who have been parsons for years to impart a sort of holy reverent flavour to the whole thing. And that we just mustn't do, at least I don't think so. It's not there in the original in my judgment. And we have to translate in a matter-of-fact style because these are matters of fact. Otherwise you get that sense that this is a beautiful story, and how lovely it sounds! An effect produced very beautifully by the Authorized Version; but that's not what I'm after. These men were writing down things which were actual facts within living memory of people, of their contemporaries, and it is important then to get across to the men and women of today that these were facts.

And that brings me to this question of the Greek in which they were written, and here I find myself not altogether in agreement, but somewhat in disagreement, with you. I did find, when I first came to read New Testament Greek after reading the classics, a frightful sense of — I was going to say — of being let down. As I said to Mr. Robertson here, it was like having read Shakespeare and then suddenly reading the Vicar's Letter in the parish magazine. I think it's perfectly intelligible, but it is of course on a lower level. Now, you would claim that within the limits of their small vocabulary — it is small — they do a brilliant piece of work. Yes, I admit that. I think that is as far as I would go in agreeing with you.

Then one little point perhaps I would like to make, and that is that sometimes you have to give a little bit of a paraphrase because of the extraordinary economy of phrase by the Gospel writers. You remember after the temptation of our Lord in the wilderness for forty days — I think it's in St. Mark's Gospel — we read: "And He hungered," or "He was an hungered," as I think the Authorized Version says. Well, if you put that into contemporary English: "He was without food for forty days and forty nights, and afterwards He was hungry." It sounds funny; it sounds like one of these masterpieces of understatement for

which English people are supposed to be renowned. And so I had to alter that to: "He felt very hungry," which doesn't produce that sense of semihumorous anticlimax. And then again we're so accustomed to exaggerations in our ordinary speech. I have sometimes, for instance, said: "Vast crowds followed Him" when the Greek only says: "Crowds followed Him," because I'm afraid by our modern usage we have debased words; we need to have things somewhat exaggerated and somewhat underlined in order to make this equivalent effect of which I speak. But I think, on the whole, I would agree with you very much, and particularly over this matter of producing the same effect on the modern reader as was produced in the first case in the minds of those for whom the Gospels were first written.

RIEU: I liked your exposition of your principles. I found it very sympathetic. In fact, if you don't mind my being quite frank, it reconciled me to a good deal that I had not at first liked in your work. As to what you say about the Gospel style, I think you've rather conceded the position to me when you say that the Evangelists using such Greek as was at their disposal, that is, the written and spoken language of the day, made a brilliant job of it; that is really all that I meant to say. But even if I agree, which I don't — that the Greek they used was debased — but even if it were — if they made a brilliant job of it, the result is a work of the highest literary art.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

RIEU: As for paraphrase, may I take you up on that point?

PHILLIPS: Yes, do. Yes.

RIEU: I think I have got something more to say about that. The word is much misused, by the way; it's often used as a term of abuse for very good translation. I should put it in this way, that it's permissible only where literal translation is liable to obscure the original meaning. I'd go further and say that on such occasions it's not only permissible, but it is imperative, and therefore it becomes good translation, and the word "paraphrase" should disappear.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

RIEU: Now in the magnificent Prologue of St. John's Gospel I see that whereas I threw up my hands over the Greek word *logos* in the first line and simply translated it "word," you have permitted yourself a paraphrase, and you've said — am I right? — "At the beginning God expressed Himself." The worst of paraphrase, particularly in this case, is that you are rather committing yourself to it, and much as

I was struck with that first line of yours, I didn't think you'd be so happy when later on you say: "So the expression of God became a human being." Perhaps you'd like to say something about that.

PHILLIPS: Yes. First of all, just a word about paraphrase in general. I'm always amused by people who imagine the Authorized Version is most literal and sticks very closely to the Greek. There's a wonderful example — I think it's in St. Matthew, in the description of the crucifixion of our Lord — where the Authorized Version says — and it's a very good sentence — "Even those who were crucified with Him cast the same in His teeth." Well, of course, as you know, there isn't a word about "cast" or "teeth" in the Greek at all. But presumably it was a vivid and current expression at the time, and it is indeed paraphrase, and there are others. But as you've pinned me down to one particular paraphrase in my own version, I would like to justify that if I can. The unfortunate thing for us is that "word" is also used with a capital "W," to mean "the Bible" or a message coming from God. I always remember asking a girl why she believed in the Bible as being inspired by God at all, to which she made the rather naive reply: "Well, it says, 'In the beginning was the Word,'" and I think that sort of confusion exists in hymns and in prayers, in the Church of England anyway, and in people's minds. I was very anxious to get away from that, and so I made this rather bold experiment. I do feel today when we talk about "expression" and "self-expression" and "expressing oneself," people do know what you mean; and although I would concede you the point that it isn't quite so happy when you come to the words: "So the expression of God" — which has a capital "E," by the way — "So the Expression of God became a human being," yet, in fact, from what people have said to me since the Gospels came out, it does mean something. I agree it's not one hundred per cent accurate. I suppose to do that you'd have to stick to the word *logos,* which I shouldn't like, and I imagine neither would you.

RIEU: Oh, no! I don't think we want Greek words.

PHILLIPS: I sometimes wonder, Doctor Rieu, whether our critics realize what a very difficult task we set ourselves. They criticize this, that, and the other — but it means a good deal of headache for us, doesn't it? What I don't think some of them realize, you know, is that we have to come down on one side or the other. A critic or commentator may say this may mean A or B, or even C or D, but you and I have to come down one side or the other.

RIEU: Yes.

PHILLIPS: Unless we're going to overload it with footnotes. I notice you make your quotations — I think all quotations from the Old Testament — in the form of footnotes?

RIEU: All that I can, yes.

PHILLIPS: Yes. Could you perhaps explain why you've done that, and then give me a chance to say why I haven't.

RIEU: Well, the idea came to me when I was arranging for a translation of Herodotus. Now, Herodotus is full of passages breaking the narrative, which a modern historian would inevitably have put at the bottom of the page as a footnote. Well, as you know, the ancient Greeks wrote on scrolls, not in volume form, and the footnote was really denied to them. It was a device that hadn't occurred to them. Therefore I advised my translator of Herodotus to take advantage of that fact and make his narrative consecutive and readable by putting quite a number of little passages from Herodotus as footnotes. Now, when I came to Matthew and saw the number of occasions in which he in particular — though the others do it, too — breaks his narrative, sometimes in a very awkward way, by putting in a reference to Old Testament prophesy, I thought I'd try the same device. And I've done it. But I don't mean to imply — I think I say so in my Introduction — that Matthew's footnotes as I've given them are unimportant, still less to imply that they were unimportant to Matthew. Nor do I think that placing them as footnotes leaves them with less importance, though I dare say there are some people who skip footnotes. I don't, and I hope our readers won't do so.

PHILLIPS: I always do at a first reading, which may be one reason which put me against your footnotes. I always do skip them. I would feel quite happy in the other Evangelists, but not in Matthew, because I feel to him they're sort of part of the fabric of his style, like the modern novelists' characters who quote poetry. I've never met people in actual life — or very, very rarely — who quote poetry, but some novelists have characters who quote poetry. You couldn't put those poems as footnotes without destroying the character created. I felt much the same about Matthew, and so, although I didn't like them and I thought he would have been tidier, quite frankly, without them, I thought I mustn't do this; I must put them in; they're part of the stuff of Matthew. And then, being ridden by the bogey of consistency, I thought I must do that all through.

RIEU: You've left out the whole of the genealogy of Matthew and Luke.

Concordia Theological Monthly, Vol. 25 [1954], Art. 58

PHILLIPS: Yes — well, now, I have got a reason for that, because — now I'm going to have a shot at you — because you talked originally, and I do so agree, about equivalent effect. And I feel one's got to consider here what is the effect going to be on the modern reader, to whom we're trying to bring this very precious writing, what's it going to be if he sees a string of possibly unknown Jewish names? I can quote an instance. We have in the Anglican Marriage Service — the old version of 1662 — a phrase which says: "As Isaac and Rebecca lived faithfully together." Well, the average modern couple is probably querying in their minds: "Who on earth are Isaac and Rebecca, and what have they got to do with us anyway?" You see? So I felt that though it was important for the modern reader to realize that the genealogy of Jesus went back right through Jewish history, the actual list of names as such was not important to them. You see — the whole idea of equivalent effect, do you see? I mean I'm prepared to admit that I may be wrong, but that was my reason for it.

Did you get the effect (I think I mentioned it in the Preface to *Letters to Young Churches*) that the whole material is extraordinarily alive? I think I used there the illustration that it was like trying to rewire an ancient house without being able to switch off the mains, which was quite a vivid and modern metaphor, I hope. I got that feeling, the whole thing was alive, even while I was translating. Even though one did a dozen versions of a particular passage, it was still living. Did you get that feeling?

RIEU: I won't say I got a deeper feeling . . .

PHILLIPS: Yes?

RIEU: . . . But I got the deepest that I possibly could have expected.

PHILLIPS: Yes?

RIEU: It — changed me. My work changed me. And I came to the conclusion, as I said, I think, in my Introduction, that these works bear the seal of the — the Son of Man and God. And they're the Magna Carta of the human spirit.

PHILLIPS: Yes.

London, England