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2011 Morpeth Lecture

The Morpeth Lecture was established in 1967 to celebrate the great partnership between the University of Newcastle and the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle.

The 2011 Morpeth Lecture presented by **FATHER NICHOLAS KING SJ.**

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He is a well-respected Scripture scholar who has translated the New Testament from the original Greek and he is currently working on a translation of the Greek version of the Septuagint (Greek version of the Hebrew Bible).

He is very keen on cricket, and promised not to mention the Ashes if no one talked about England Rugby performances.

Topic

What's So Special about Bible Translation?

BY FATHER NICHOLAS KING SJ

1. Introduction

The Morpeth Lecture has, I gather, been a free public lecture presented by the University of Newcastle and the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle since 1967. The list of lecturers is an alarmingly distinguished one, and I feel myself utterly out of place in their train[1]. I hope that you will not mind if I offer you a moderately tedious academic lecture this evening.

In this anniversary year of the King James Version the question of what you are doing when you translate the Bible has been much in the air, and people who go in for the ancient sport of "translator-bashing" have had much to say, while those who are themselves translators are wheeled out to give their views on what it is that they are doing. What I want to do in this paper is to look with you at some fairly obvious difficulties about the act of translating, in the context of recent writings on translation theory. But then I'll really need your help, as I try and face the question whether translating the bible is a different thing from translating a novel or a treatise on nuclear physics; and irritatingly enough, I want to answer "Yes and No" to that important question: bible translation is in many ways the same as translating novels or a treatise on nuclear physics, but it is also different. That is a tricky tight-rope to walk, and, as I say, I shall need your help, perhaps in the form of questions after the paper has been delivered.

Let me start with an obviously non-biblical example of translation problems. Proverbs are a fascinating problem in all languages; they distil the wisdom of generations in brief form, but they belong in their culture of origin. Here I put before you two proverbs in isiZulu, each of just two words. The first is izandla zigezana, which literally means "hands wash one another", and is used very much where we would say "one good turn deserves another" in English, though the meanings do not fully overlap. The second, which I learnt when working at a seminary in South Africa, is ushaywa edongayo. The context was that I had been given a job in addition to those which I was already doing, and was feeling slightly oppressed with the amount that I had to do. The entirely amiable Zulu Rector of the Seminary absolutely won me over by saying "ushaywa edongayo", which literally means "the one that is pulling gets beaten". The context is that of oxen, and the implication is that when you are driving an ox-cart, your task is to get more effort out of the leader of your oxen, then the cart will travel most rapidly. How do you translate this? We are no longer at home in a culture of that kind in the United Kingdom, nor, I suspect, in Australia, so there is nothing ready to hand, except

[1] I am enormously grateful to my colleague Dr Philip Endean SJ for agreeing to read this paper, and making many illuminating and helpful comments on it.

the rather less interesting cliché that "if you want to get something done, ask a busy person". Let that question stand as an icon for the problems of translation.

2. Theories of translation

It seems right and proper to offer at least a glance at modern theories of translation[2]; but I do not wish to spend too much time on the undeniably important, and decidedly topical, question of what you are trying to do when you translate, as it can be an extraordinarily dull procedure to lay out the rival theories; and, as we shall see, it may not get you very much further[3]. Indeed it is a major difficulty of reading translation theory that if you read too much of the stuff, you despair of ever managing a translation for yourself. You might compare the experience of going to a coach to improve your cricket or your golf and then thinking frantically about every shot that you play, so that in the end you are overcome with a paralysed inability to hit the ball at all. One of the conclusions of modern translation theory is that your approach to translation all depends on what audience you think you are writing for, and the nature of the text that you are dealing with. Now you might say that is not precisely an earth-shattering observation; but there is these days a degree of fanaticism around the question of translation, especially, as you may have noticed, the issue of liturgical translation, and it is perhaps important to remember that how you translate depends on who the translation is for. It depends partly on what the aim of your translation is: do you, for example, want to make the text attractive to contemporary youngsters, or is it your intention to produce a scholarly version? Or does a deconstructionist, post-modernist view of translation mean that simply "anything goes" since all texts operate in very different ways, and can be interpreted in a number of different fashions? Then there is the question of the "target language". If it is English, then we are talking of a language that operates today rather as Latin did in the Middle Ages, a lingua franca, or common language, which took on an increasingly simple form as it was required to communicate more widely. So one of the questions a translator has to ask is: "What kind of English?". You must also consider the "source language". To what extent do you want your translation to carry echoes of it? And when you are translating the Bible, should you remember that it is a "sacred text", and that many people think that any translation should respect that fact. Are they right to do so?

Let me give an example of a difficulty that can occur in Bible translation. When Christian missionaries set out to translate the Bible into Zulu, they came up with three words for God. First there was "Jehovah", which went into Zulu as *uJehovah*. That, of course, represents a mistake, combining the consonants of the Hebrew sacred name for God, YHWH, which is never to be spoken, except by the High Priest in the Holy of Holies on Yom Kippur, with the vowels of the word for "Lord" ("Adonai") as a sign that the consonants were not to be pronounced. A second attempt consisted of asking the Zulus how they referred to the one God, as understood by Christians; the answer was *uMvelinqangi*, which is something like "the first unmoved mover", and that, in my view, was not a bad attempt, but in the end was rejected because it was thought to be "too pagan". Finally, therefore, they came to the present word for God in the language, namely *uNkulunkulu*, which means something like "Mr Big", or "Biggest". Like Hebrew, Zulu does not really have a superlative, but manages the

[2] See the very helpful book by Anthony Pym, *Exploring Translation Theories* (Routledge 2010)
[3] http://www.praytellblog.com/index.php/2011/06/06/academic-justification-for-liturgiam-authenticam/ for a brief but illuminating account.

concept by repetition of the required phoneme, *nkulu*, which means “big”. Is that a “correct” translation? And we should notice that there is a further complication here; when you are translating the bible, there is an inseparable question about what you are doing when you preach the gospel. When Zulus (or English or Australian people, for that matter) become Christian, they learn Christian ideas and terminology, and the words that they use take on a new range of meaning. But do you see how difficult it is, and how uncertain a translator has to be?

Here is another example: some years ago I had the privilege of assisting briefly in a project to translate the New Testament into Patamona, a language spoken by the Carib people in the rain-forests of Guyana. They had no word for “world”, which is an important idea in the NT, especially in the Fourth Gospel, so they transliterated the English word, as they heard it: “wolá”. Subsequently I discovered that a neighbouring language, Ahawaio, had done the same thing; they also wrote down what they heard as “oru”. This, it seems to me, is an example of one of the things that can happen through translation, namely that the target-language gets enriched[4]. So (back to Zulu) the words for apostle, bishop and angel are *umpostoli, umbishopi,* and *ingelosi*, with the admirably Zulu-sounding plurals: *abapostoli*, *ababishopi*, *izingelosi*. Are those Zulu words? Well they are now, and in the process something has happened to the language. And if you find yourself sneering at this process, just ask yourself where the English words “apostle”, “bishop” and “angel” came from. They have all gone on a journey through Greek, Latin, and the Teutonic languages; but they are now unmistakably English, even though it was not our tongue that brought them to birth.

There is a very important point here: the gospel that we are to preach, and the work of translating it into another language, both have to do with what happens to cultures of various kinds as they move out of isolation; and that is what the gospel does. From this it seems to me to follow that we cannot afford to be too preoccupied with ethnic or doctrinal purity, or we may risk threatening the entire enterprise. Something very important happened when, through the work of people like St Paul, the gospel moved out of the dialect of Galilean Aramaic spoken by Jesus and into the international lingua franca that was Greek[5].

3. Bible translation is always more than “just” translation - and it starts early

Bible translation does not happen because translators wake up one morning asking, “Whom can I annoy today?” It happens because the community has forgotten the language of the sacred texts. Notice that there is a temptation here to keep the ancient and half-understood language, on the grounds that it is “mysterious”, and that religion requires a penumbra of mystery. This is not altogether a foolish argument, and it surfaces from time to time with regard to the texts of the Catholic mass, although there the language should, in all honesty, go back beyond Latin, through Greek, the language of the New Testament, to the tongue that was the common tool of Jesus and his first disciples.   But very few Christians nowadays, and indeed not all that many Jews, can manage the Hebrew of the Old

[4] Lynne Long, in her very important work, “Translating the Bible” (Ashgate, 2001, chapters 1-4), has some extremely illuminating reflections, form the point of view of polysystems theory on the Anglo-Saxon glosses on the Latin text of the Bible, and how they helped to turn English into a language that could “accommodate the written Scriptures” (p.53).

[5] For a very interesting angle on this question, see the article by Ludovic Lado SJ in The Way: http://www.theway.org.uk/back/453Lado.pdf

Testament, or the Greek of the New; therefore if they are to participate intelligently in their worship, the “sacred text” has to be put into a language with which they can cope. We may distinguish four important stages in this process:

i) It is already under way in the Old Testament period, in Nehemiah 8:7, where Ezra reads the Law, and the Levites “make the people understand”. Scholars are divided, it must be said, about whether this is a matter of doing *exegesis*, that is to say talking in Hebrew about the meaning and relevance of a Hebrew text, or doing *translation*, that is to say putting into comprehensible Aramaic the obscurities of their ancient language. At the very least we can say that the text did not make itself immediately plain to Ezra’s hearers; and the translator’s job is to cross the gap between speaker and hearer. It does not matter, for that purpose, whether the language of the text is a foreign one (Latin for many Roman Catholics), or a different dialect of a shared language (the King James Version or the Book of Common Prayer for Anglicans): there is a chasm to be bridged.

ii) The “Septuagint” is the name loosely given to the whole translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek. Strictly speaking it refers to the legend that seventy-two (reduced for convenience to LXX) Jewish scholars, after being locked away in prayer and fasting, came up with seventy-two identical translations of the Pentateuch, but the name loosely expands to cover the whole Greek translation of the Bible, even when there is more than one such translation available in manuscript, and even where we do not have (complete) original texts in Hebrew or Aramaic (such as Wisdom, Tobit and ben Sira’). The first attempts, in the course of the 3rd Century BC, seem to originate from the lively Greek-speaking community in Alexandria; and you can feel the translators learning the job as they go, sometimes opting for very literal renderings, and sometimes aiming for what sounded better in Greek, but was more of a paraphrase. In the history of Bible translation there has been a constant wobbling between these two extremes.

iii) Then there are the targumim. These are translations into Aramaic, for gatherings of Jews who were no longer at home in the Hebrew of their Tanakh. One of the difficulties that they evidently encountered was that it was not sufficient for the Scripture to find a voice in the new language and culture; it also had to be explained and interpreted. So in many of the targumim (the word could mean either “translation” or “interpretation”) you find “God” substituted by “the Memra [‘word’] of God”, as a way of avoiding anthropomorphism. And occasionally there are quite substantial interpolations into the Targumim; for example in the story of the binding of Isaac in Genesis 22, where the targumist has inserted what he clearly feels the author has failed to include (Isaac’s ready acquiescence in his own death, strikingly enough), so that the reader can understand what is going on in that chilling and baffling episode.

iv) For various reasons, many Jews reacted against the LXX (and perhaps also against the use that Christians were making of it); so in the early 2nd century AD Aquila came up with a very literal translation. It is quite unreadable, but, because it is so literal, it is useful for enabling scholars to reconstruct the Hebrew text from which he was working. In the other direction, the Vetus Latina, the Latin translation used mainly in North Africa, was found to be too literal for liturgical

use, so Pope Damasus commissioned Jerome, at the end of the 4th Century AD, to produce a new translation into Latin, based on the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. Jerome was unusual among contemporary Christians in having learnt Hebrew from a Rabbi, and that, as well as his gifts as a Latinist, gives the Vulgate a good "feel", though it is far from perfect as a translation.

Translators always fall between representing the historical and cultural context of the original text, and offering something intelligible to contemporary "receptors" (to use the horrible jargon of the experts). This is not simply a matter of being readily understood; there are also questions about pitch of discourse (solemn or colloquial, for example), style, format, and even what you do with the margins, which is a very fruitful area for translators to employ[6]: one of the motives for the King James Version was that the monarch detested the polemical tone of the marginal annotations, opposed to bishops and kings[7]. Sometimes translation is tendentious: it can be quite telling how a translator renders the Greek word *ekklesia*, for example, which can refer to the gathering of Israel in the desert, and could sensibly be translated as "assembly" or "congregation", certainly by Protestant scholars, whereas Catholic scholars instinctively reach for "church". An interesting example of this occurred in our attempts to translate the NT into Patamona, where at one stage *ekklesia* was represented by a phrase that means "the followers of Jesus that believed in him and obeyed his commandments". Some felt that this was too "Protestant", suggesting an invisible church known to God alone, so that the Catholics wanted to emphasise more the Church as visible community[8].

Unlike other kinds of translation, biblical translation comes very close to home. Let me give a very trivial example, from my own experience. In Acts 3:6, we read ei=pen de. Pe,troj\ avrgu,rion kai. crusi,on ouvc u`pa,rcei moi(o] de. e;cw tou/to, soi di,dwmi\ evn tw/| ovno,mati VIhsou/ Cristou/ tou/ Nazwrai,ou Îe;geire kai.Ð peripa,teiÅ This was translated in the Douay Version with which I grew up as 'But Peter said: Silver and gold have I none; but what I have, I give thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, arise and walk'. At some point in my childhood we started to have English readings from the version of Ronald Knox, which I now regard very highly indeed; and he translates that as 'Then Peter said to him, Silver and gold are not mine to give; I give thee what I can.' This is very civilised English, but does not have the lovely rhythms of that creative period of our language that was unfolding at the end of 16th Century; the KJV has 'Then Peter said, Silver and gold have I none; but such as I have give I thee: In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk'. For completeness I have to confess that my own translation of this verse runs, "But Peter said, 'Silver and gold are not at my disposal; but what I have, that I give you. In the name of Jesus Messiah the Nazarene, rise up and walk'," which is fine as far as it goes, but does not have quite the sonority of 16th Century English. We must, however, beware of thinking, as some people do, with regard to the King James Version, that "if it was good enough for God, then it's good enough for me" The KJV, admirable though it undoubtedly is, is *not* "what God wrote". Or, to take an example closer to home, what do you do with the Beatitudes? Those who are "poor in spirit", are often translated as "blessed", translating the

[6] In my own attempt at translating the Bible, I have made heavy use of footnotes to let the reader know that there are many different ways of reading a particular passage.
[7] This paragraph owes a good deal to the very helpful article by the distinguished translation theorist Eugene C. Nida in the Anchor Bible Dictionary vol. VI, pp. 512-515, Theories of Translation.
[8] I observe that the N. King translation has "Church", with a capital letter, in the only passages in the gospels where the word is used (Matthew 16:18; 18:17). I am not sure that I would do that now.

Latin *beati*, and yrEv.(a;î the Hebrew term that underlies it; but if you are going for the Greek word in which Matthew couched that extraordinary passage, it is maka,rioi , which you would most naturally translate as 'happy'. My own translation has lost me a good many friends, since, for reasons that I can explain, I translated the word as 'congratulations'; and I notice that in Bishop Tom Wright's forthcoming translation he has given it as 'blessings upon'. How do you decide between these options, all of which I think are defensible? It is, surely, a matter of the register of the target language, and a respect for the source language: who are you writing for? Where is the document coming from?

4. What makes bible translation different?

One of the features of the library of documents that make up the Bible is that they can induce powerful emotions; in this, of course, they are not alone: good poetry has that effect. Nevertheless, the Bible is somehow different. People encounter (am I permitted to say this?) the voice of God when they open its pages, and it has an effect on the way they live their lives. Let me give a not especially original example: 10 males pour out of a house in one of the less reputable areas of Newcastle as you are walking alone, late at night, down that street; do you feel better if you happen to know that they are coming from a Bible study-group? If so, does that say something about what the Bible does?

And there is something else here: as in my examples from Acts or the beatitudes, we need perhaps to take seriously this ability to cause pain as a feature that makes bible translation different. The NK[9] version has aroused serious criticism, not just because of the use of "congratulations". There have also been objections because I translated the word for "eat", as in "eat the flesh of the Son of Man" as "munch", because the Fourth Evangelist has used a very crude word, probably, as scholars have noted[10], to avoid any Docetic understanding of the Eucharist[11]. Both these words have caused pain and bewilderment in readers. We have already mentioned the Ezra episode, which seems to be datable to some time in the late 5th Century. That also points, of course, to a feature of Bible-reading which sets "The Bible" apart from other works of translation. For we read in Nehemiah 8:10 that the people were reduced to tears by what they heard, and had to be told not to weep on the Lord's Day; the Bible can be a thoroughly uncomfortable mirror[12]. And if that is the case should the act of translating the bible be regarded as different from other kinds of translation? To return to Eugene Nida, the answer is clearly "Yes": "... Bible translating has a longer tradition (it began in the 3rd century B.C.), involves far more languages ..., is concerned with a greater variety of cultures (Bible translators have worked in all areas of the world), and includes a wider range of literary types (from lyric poetry to theological discourse) than any comparable kind of translating."[13] Something that is going on in the process is the generous movement of one culture towards another. For, in the end, that is what the Bible invites and expects of us; translation is a part of that movement, and must resist any of our human tendencies towards exclusivism.

In this context, one aspect of the Bible that we must never forget is that it is a narrative; Jews and Christians instinctively reach for "story" in their attempt to offer an account of what gives their existence meaning. It is also, of course, a journey, with all kinds of by-ways (not

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[9] Which my irreverent Jesuit colleagues refer to as the "King Nick Version".
[10] See Bauer Arndt Gingrich ad loc, pp. 836-7
[11] John 6:58, for example
[12] Compare the splendid metaphor of God's word as a double-edged sword at Hebrews 4:12-13.
[13] E.A. Nida and C.R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. vii.

necessarily culs-de-sac) of a People in dialogue with their God, or their Mystery. David Martin[14] expresses this well, in a recent review of AC Grayling's secular "Good Book", which is intended to be a substitute bible for non-religious people and atheists: "The Christian Scriptures are not a compilation of disparate and disembedded materials from here and there vaguely focused on what might constitute the individual good life, but a particular narrative of the centuries-long exploration of a people ... into what it might mean to be "in covenant" with God and to experience his presence. It is a linked group of stories, illustrating both trial and moral error..." I have not space here to develop this idea, but I think that there is something very important in the idea of "story"; it actually welcomes the hearer in, and invites him or her to take part.

5. The Bible is different

Let me share with you a number of points, at which it becomes clear to the would-be translator that the Bible is different. I could have chosen others, but these seem to me to point to ways in which the Bible is not the same as other texts that you might be wanting to put into English. These are taken, I have to say, from my own rather peculiar experience of translating the LXX, which is itself already a translation; I simply offer them to you as questions.

The first is the sparsity of biblical narrative: read, if you will, this evening, through the previously mentioned passage that is Genesis 22, the "binding of Isaac"; and notice the things that are *not* said. That taut, spare story, perhaps the most chilling in the entire Bible, tells us nothing of what any of the participants thought about what was going on, nothing of what was in the mind of Abraham, after he had said to God "Here I am"; there is nothing about what Isaac thought (except that he never speaks to his father again in the narrative), nor about what Isaac's mother thought (except that the next thing that she does is to die). When they came to translate the story into Aramaic, the targumists felt the need to fill it out, and they put onto the lips of Isaac a request that he would bind him tight, so that he should not spoil the sacrifice by kicking against it. Is that translation?

The second is that sometimes the biblical narrative has a certain fullness. So at 1 Kings 20:15, the success of Jezebel's plot to kill Naboth, so that her husband Ahaz can have the vineyard that he desires is signalled with the remark that "Naboth is not living; for he is dead". What is the best way to translate that? Should one write, simply, "Naboth is dead"? That seems not quite to capture what the biblical narrative is doing here.

And what do you do with certain other features of the language, or languages, if, as I am, you are translating what is already a Greek translation of the Hebrew? So in the LXX, we have two adverbs used to translate the Hebrew word Wkle(meaning 'go', or ' come'. They are deu/te, or deu/ro. Should one use an English adverb here, something like "hither", or simply ignore the Greek, and just write "go" or "come"?

[14] David Martin, review of A. C. Grayling, *The Good Book* TLS June 3rd 2011, pp. 25-26

Another regular Hebraism, which for the most part goes straight into Greek, is “and it happened”, or in the KJV, “it came to pass”. That is not really English, and you would normally miss it out unless you wanted to draw attention to it. What should you do when you are translating the Bible?

Or consider the formula that you find again and again at the beginning of a king’s reign in the Deuteronomic History (Joshua – 2 Kings), giving the king’s age. If the Hebrew, followed by the Greek has “he was the son of 32 years”, do you give the ordinary English expression, “he was 32 years old” or do you give it all a biblical flavour by keeping the slightly exotic original construction? In that one instance I decided to make it respectable English, “32 years old”. Was I right?

And what do you do about using inclusive language, which is the official policy of my publisher? A regular expression in the Deuteronomic History, at the end of a king’s reign (there are very few queens in the story) is of the form “he slept with his fathers”, which I have *always* translated as “slept with his ancestors”. Is that legitimate, or should I openly admit that this is a patriarchal narrative, rather than pretending otherwise? Am I doing eisegesis, reading a desired meaning into a text that will not bear it without violence? Maybe the response should be that it is silly to suppose that there is a right answer in biblical terms, that we should instead frankly recognise that our culture is in transition at the moment on this matter; and we should, perhaps, be honest about the fact that with a traditional text, the patriarchal past history of translation exerts a force—so that translating ‘fathers’ as ‘ancestors’ may actually be a mistake.

Then there is the Hebrew “absolute infinitive”, which gets put next to a main verb from the same root. This construction serves to emphasise the verb, and goes as such into Greek, and thence into Latin, for example, as “dicens dixit”, “saying he said”, or “dying he died”, which are not really Latin or English expressions, but imported Hebraisms. How do you put that into English? Sometimes I use the English adverb “certainly”, which preserves the emphasising function of the expression, but does not quite catch the “feel” of the biblical expression.

There is a similar problem with a Hebrew (and then Greek) expression which often finds its way into English as “behold” or “look!”. It performs two important functions. The first function is when a human character responds to God (for example Abraham at Genesis 22:1, or Moses at Exodus 3:4). The second is to give the text a sense of awe; Matthew makes good use of the expression in this way, underlining the mysterious nature of God’s action (where Mark would prefer to use his favourite adverb “suddenly”, giving a very Marcan breathlessness to the action). Many modern translations simply omit it, thinking no doubt that it is a waste of bytes in their computer, or that it makes it sounds “too biblical”; but my sense is that the omission destroys the tone of the passages where the word appears in Hebrew or Greek.

And for the final example, I must ask those of you who are of a refined cast of mind to close your eyes and ears. There is an idiomatic Hebrew expression, which appears in just the

following places: 1 Samuel 25:22-34; 1 Kings 14:10; 16:11; 21:21; 2 Kings 9:8; Isaiah 36:12, and simply means to denote a person of the male gender, possibly in a slightly contemptuous way. To take the expression as it appears in 2 Kings 9:8, in Hebrew it goes ryqiêB. !yTiäv.m; ‘ba'x.a;l. yTiÛr:k.hiw>, ("and I shall cut off from Ahab anyone who urinates against the wall") and in Greek it is translated exactly as evxoleqreu,sw tou/ Acaab ouvrou/nta pro.j toi/con, and for that Jerome in the Vulgate has interficiam de Ahab mingentem ad parietem, which is quite accurate, even to the rather odd preposition. But now turn to the English versions, and they are all overcome with a fit of coyness. Knox, who is translating the Vulgate, can only bring himself to say "every male of Ahab's house", followed by RSV, NAS, and NRSV. NJB is a bit different, with "every manjack", though I am not absolutely sure what a "manjack" is. And in this year of its quatercentenary, it pleases me to share with you that the King James Version, God bless it, goes for "him that pisseth against the wall".

6. The Bible is inspired

So the bible is different, as I hope the examples I have given above make clear. There is, though, something more to be said. Believers, whether Jewish or Christian, instinctively want to give the Bible as "God's Word" some kind of privileged status, and the metaphor that they use for that status is that of "inspiration", or "breathing". The idea seems to come from the use of the word qeo,pneustoj in 2 Timothy 3:16, which means something like "God-breathed", and if it is correct to translate the word for "writing" in that verse as "scripture", then it means "all scripture is God-breathed", a lively metaphor, which carries the sense of God's presence in the world and in the text.

It leaves unresolved, however, the question of what on earth it might mean. There are several possibilities. The first, suggested by G. K. Chesterton with his usual gusto, is that we know Scripture is inspired, "because it sounds like it"[15], but clearly there is a danger here of a thoroughly circular argument, which will therefore not take us much further forward. Except, I have to say, that if you read Nehemiah 10:2-28 (a list of names), you will not immediately find yourself saying "Yes – it sounds like it".

At a very crude level, we may, secondly, mean not much more by "inspired" than "that which the Church accepted into the canon", the agreed texts (whose precise numeration is slightly different in different Christian traditions). Although I have to say that if you compare the non-canonical gospels, for example, or even the Book of Enoch, with the texts that made it into the accepted lists of books, you will find that the Church showed admirable sobriety in selecting the documents that it eventually agreed upon.

Thirdly, we may think of "inspiration" as God telling us exactly what we are to do, for example with regard to the questions of homosexuality, divorce and remarriage, and the ordination of women. That is the option that we call "fundamentalism", and it is the approach to the Bible that is espoused by Professor Richard Dawkins, and devastatingly criticised by

[15] I have not so far been able to track down this reference.

my colleague Fr Gerard J. Hughes[16]. Reading the bible is not, however, a matter of getting texts to tell us what to do; it is more a question of hearing the voice of God, and so creating a context for making the kind of decisions that we all have to make. Fidelity to the biblical text means listening to the culture that produced the texts, and then asking what one would have to do, today, and in this place, in order to live in fidelity to the message.

One difficulty, of course, in speaking of the Bible as "inspired" is that it is easy to slip into some version of Docetism, the first and (in some ways worst) of the heresies, the belief that Jesus only *seemed* to be human, which is a denial of the Incarnation. If you are not careful you can reduce the Bible to something untouchable, a text quite unlike other texts; then you are swimming in dangerous waters (and a similar peril awaits those who talk carelessly about the doctrines of the Eucharist and priesthood; but we can leave those for another day!). Nevertheless, and I suppose that this is a fourth sense of "inspiration", I do want to say that there is something special or different about the library of books that we call the "Bible"; I know people who will do what the Romans called *sortes virgilianae,* that is to say opening the text of the Bible at random (as at least some educated Romans would open their Virgil at random) and finding that God speaks to them in the verse that first catches their eye. I do not want to say that Christians who do this are crazy to do so.

What I think I want to say, and I offer this with some hesitation, for there are shoals here, is that the Bible is different, in some of the ways that I have indicated, and that this in part reflects the fact that the voice of God is audible just below the surface of the text. The difficulty, of course, is with the doctrine of Creation; if God created everything that is, the unnumbered galaxies, and the tiniest microbe, then God is responsible for everything, and it seems inconsistent to single out just one book, or set of books, as a particular place of God's speaking. I should like to try to defend it, however, by using the old Catholic doctrine of "both-and"; so I want to say ***both*** that God created everything, and that therefore God's voice can be heard in the whole of creation, including all literature, ***and***, at the same time, that there is this special set of texts, which we call, rather loosely, "The Bible", in which God's voice may be particularly heard. A similar example is available to those in the Catholic tradition of Christianity, who wish to say both that Jesus the Lord is everywhere and that he is present in a special way in the Blessed Sacrament of the Eucharist. Or again, consider this: I have just spent two weeks working as a brancardier in Lourdes; and it is my experience that it is what Celtic spirituality calls a very "thin" place, that is to say, a place where prayer comes easily and naturally. At the same time, of course, I should wish to say that prayer can take place anywhere where humans raise their minds and heart to God; I wish to claim in all these cases a "both-and". Can I decently do so? You can perhaps help me in this.

Let me end this glance at the question of inspiration with a possible metaphor to signal what goes on in the Bible, one that, like all metaphors, could easily get quite out of hand. What suggests itself to me is to say, something that I have hinted at before in the course of this lecture, that what makes the Bible "different" is that in ways we cannot easily understand, the Mystery of God lurks just below the surface of the text. Perhaps we should leave the question there.

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[16] See his important recent book *Fidelity without Fundamentalism: A dialogue with tradition*, DLT, 2010.

7. Conclusion: is the Bible a text just like other texts?

Irritatingly, my answer to this question is a very English “Yes and No”. There is nothing fixed about the text of the Bible. Scholars are agreed that we cannot translate the entire Old Testament (some suggest that as much as 30% of it is beyond our reach, more in the case of the Book of Job[17]), despite the unruffled confidence displayed by vernacular translations. Similarly, the Greek text of the New Testament is only a scholars’ guess, and what we have in our modern editions is not a manuscript that ever existed; all the manuscripts that we possess have mistakes in them, so we do not even know what the original text was. And if you wish simply to stick to English, and, in this anniversary year, the apparently serene unshakability of the KJV, then be aware that KJV never ceased to be corrected, from edition to edition, over the 150 years after its first publication. Likewise the Hebrew text always had to be translated, first into Aramaic and then into Greek, and then, by divergent paths, into the Rabbinic corpus, and the Latin Vulgate, and so into the astonishing number of languages in which it finds itself in our contemporary world. The fact is that we never arrive at the full meaning of a text, any text, and with the bible in particular we must always resist the danger of ossification. If we are to be true to the Bible, we must allow the life that is in the text to pulse through whatever we do with it. The basic question remains: how can any of us, ever, succeed in communicating our meaning to another person? The question is still more complicated when we start from different languages, and perhaps more complicated yet when our text is the library known, with deceptive simplicity, as “the Bible”.

Is it possible to venture a little further? I think that somewhere in all talk of translation there lurks a picture of translation as ‘equivalence’, as getting across into the target language that which was there in the source language; this would imply that when you translate your aim is exhaustively to convey only what the original said, and all that the original said. I feel, however that there is more, and hardly have words to convey it, but it goes something like this: for God always speaks, and can still speak in fresh ways through the texts of the Bible, no matter in what language we encounter them. Whatever we say of revelation, it takes place in history, and history moves on, which means that meaning also moves on. What remains the same is the one unchanging God, and God’s one Word. When we translate, our task is not to find just the right word for the Hebrew word for “covenant”, for example, but to become aware of the history of God’s engagement with humanity, in which the ancient story of the People of God, and the newer story of Jesus, God’s word, whom God raised from the dead, always plays a definitive role.

However you talk about it, when you and I open the pages of the bible, something happens. What do you think that something is? And what explains it?

[17] Though it is only fair to warn the reader that my distinguished colleague, Professor John Barton, has indicated, in a private communication, that this can be overstated: “Overall I think people tend to be far too pessimistic about our knowledge of Biblical Hebrew: where there are problems they are mostly textual rather than philological... Given the small corpus and the distance in time, I think we know a lot about Biblical Hebrew”.

History of the Morpeth Lecture

The Morpeth Lecture was established in 1967 to celebrate the great partnership between the University of Newcastle and the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle.

The Morpeth Lecture aims to present relevant and challenging issues from a theological perspective.

The name of the Morpeth Lecture comes from the College of St John the Evangelist at Morpeth, the previous ministry training and education centre of the Anglican Diocese of Newcastle.