

BOOK REVIEWS

In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible. By Peter J. Thuesen. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 238 pp., \$27.50.

This book came to birth as a doctoral dissertation at Princeton University. After an extended introduction that lays out the flow of his entire argument, Thuesen proceeds in five chapters. The first is devoted to the Reformation. Here Thuesen relies heavily on the analysis of Hans Frei. In some ways, the “pre-critical” Middle Ages have rightly been labeled a “culture of the Book.” Yet most people who at the time “read” the Scriptures did so through images and reenactments (not least the Mass). Even the intellectual elite, who could read the Bible privately in Latin, rarely did so apart from the broader context of the corporate ecclesiastical rule. More importantly, during this precritical period, “magnificent in its homogeneity” (the phrase is from Erich Auerbach), “the truth of the biblical stories was an assumed quality” (p. 6). Historical reality, present reality, and Scriptural reality combined to constitute one providential universe. Exegetically, this unitary view of history and the Bible fostered some form or other of typological interpretation. In some ways, this typological approach was encouraged by the Reformation, which to that extent made it a premodern movement. In one respect, however, the Reformation constituted a partial transition to the modern world, namely, the domain of authority. Here there was an overturning of the ecclesiastical and iconographic authority of the medieval church. The emphasis on the Bible substituted an authority that was iconoclastic and Biblicistic. Nowhere, argues Thuesen, was this more strenuously the case than in the Anglo-Saxon world—more so, in particular, than in the world of Lutheranism.

The second chapter is devoted to the ideal of Bible revision in the late 19th century. The emphasis on truth, so characteristic of modernity, focused enormous energy on precisionism in lexicography. Newly discovered texts refashioned textual criticism. Increasingly there was a hunger to retrace what were later called the trajectories of the witnesses, in an effort to reconstruct the real history behind the Biblical stories. Out of this historical-critical world emerged the Revised Version (1881–85) and its American cousin, the American Standard Version (1901). Thuesen analyzes Protestant reactions to the new Bible, hailed in the press as “King Truth” (successor to King James). Most conservatives joined in the acclaim, but here and there some raised questions about the RV’s (and ASV’s) textual conclusions—harbingers of more fundamental controversies just over the horizon.

The third chapter treats the making of the Revised Standard Version (1952). The work began in 1937. A committee appointed by the International Council of Religious Education and headed by Luther Weigle, dean of Yale Divinity School, shared the modernist assumptions of the translators of the RV, but sought to go beyond them in several ways. They aimed for the exactness of the earlier work, but aimed to recapture some of the literary elegance of the AV. More importantly, perhaps, they “sought to dispel the unyielding biblicism that had so long characterized Protestantism” (p. 13). When the National Council of Churches (NCC) assumed sponsorship of the project in 1951, the drive toward ecumenical comprehensiveness received new impetus. The old historiography that equated Protestantism with the Word and

Catholicism with the image had to be repudiated, for here was an opportunity to produce a common Bible for English-speaking Christendom.

The fourth chapter charts the inevitable fury of conservative reaction, epitomized in Presbyterian Carl McIntire and Baptist Edgar Bundy. Though the issues raged over a wide range of issues, for both sides Isa 7:14 became the symbol of the debate. Thuesen argues that the controversy over the RSV was simultaneously a debate over authority and a struggle over interpretation. Many conservatives thought the NCC was usurping the authority of the Bible as the people's book. In this regard, the fact that these debates unraveled during the McCarthy era ensured that the NCC, like Communist regimes, was charged with attempting censorship over the printed word. Soon the label "Communist Bible" was attached to the RSV. As late as 1960, an Air Force training manual preserved the label.

In the final chapter, Thuesen traces some of the debates between conservative evangelicals and those he calls moderate evangelicals, many of the former drifting toward a "King James Only" stance, and many of the latter supporting the NAE in the production of the NIV. The developing debates were not pretty, and too complex to sketch here.

Thuesen ends his book with a brief epilogue that comments on the multiplicity of versions that have appeared since 1965. Although both liberals and conservatives are accused of being held in bondage by a modernist epistemology, undoubtedly Thuesen's most trenchant criticisms are aimed at the conservatives. For instance, he states, "Unfortunately, the realities of the critical context meant that even the most uncompromisingly conservative of Bibles would never fully settle the truth-question, for the biblical text would still be evaluated by modern standards of rationality. Fundamentalists who professed unswerving faith in every jot and tittle of Holy Writ still tended to subject the Bible's claims to the scientific criteria of 'evidence' and 'proof.' The very shibboleth of inerrancy presupposed a disjunction between the biblical story and real history. Conservative Bible-readers tended to find complete truth in the text, while liberals tended to find only partial truth; yet for both, history would always exist, to a greater or lesser degree, in discordance with the Scriptures. . . . It is this truth-obsessed reading of Scripture, not the Babel of Bibles per se, that deserves greater scrutiny. . . . The problem of modern Bible-reading is the problem of Isaiah 7:14 writ large—the confusion of textual with historical questions—and this exegetical indigestion is nearly impossible to neutralize, even by so potent a pill as Hans Frei's *Eclipse of Biblical Narrative*. Frei's is nevertheless a powerful case for a more literary, aesthetic reading of Scripture. This method does not exclude truth-questions but brackets them in favor of exegesis that treats the Bible as something like a realistic novel. For Frei, the biblical novel's individual stories are to be read not primarily for their external referents in 'real history' but for their internal relations as part of a large narrative. 'Narrative' reading is simultaneously literal and typological: the stories mean what they say, and they relate to each other by providential juxtaposition" (pp. 154–155).

So what shall we make of this intensely interesting and well-written book? To evaluate it aright, one must abandon any thought that this is a book that seeks to evaluate select translations. It is not. It is a book of *Rezeptionstheorie*. The literature it cites and the focus of its interests belong to the debates over how certain Bible translations were perceived. There is virtually no serious wrestling with translation theory, developments in linguistics, lexicographical research, and the like. If we are to form a fair appraisal of the book, it must be in terms of the fairness and accuracy of its presentation of the data regarding the reception accorded the RV and RSV (in

all fairness, other translations are not much more than footnotes), and especially in terms of the overarching theory that seeks to explain these data.

But it is precisely in these arenas that I sometimes feel a trifle uneasy about this book. For all its strengths, and interest, it leaves me with questions in at least three domains.

First, has the narrow focus on the RV and the RSV skewed Thuesen's ideological assessment? Suppose he had also studied the reception afforded the J. B. Phillips paraphrase, the Living Bible, the NIV, the CEV, and so forth, *not least reflecting on how many copies of each version were published in each five-year cycle of its life*. I attempted just such a survey a few years ago, and was astonished by the result. (See D. A. Carson, "New Bible Translations: An Assessment and Prospect," in *The Bible in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Howard Clark Kee [New York: American Bible Society, 1993] 37–88.) At the very least the result hinted at just what communities were reading (or at least buying!) different versions of the Bible—and this gives a rather different picture of evangelical reception of new translations than the much narrower focus depicted here.

Second, one of the major arguments Thuesen advances is that virtually all of the disputes between liberals and conservatives over Bible translations stem less from concrete differences over translation theory than from the fundamental perspectives the parties adopted in their own "worlds"—worlds that owed far more to modern epistemology than either side acknowledged. Let us acknowledge considerable merit in this argument. Nevertheless it immediately raises another question: What world does Thuesen inhabit? How many of his criticisms arise from his own location—on the edges of postmodernism, very comfortable with Hans Frei's analysis—much more than from the data at hand? Would, say, the conservatives in Thuesen's book identify themselves in his analysis? Or would they say that several of his categories are so skewed that they feel they have not been fairly represented?

Third, that brings me to the heart of the issue. Thuesen's work does not, of course, attempt a dispassionate summary of the evidence and nothing more. The evidence he capably amasses is fitted into a frame largely dictated by the historiography of Hans Frei. Frei recognizes, as does Thuesen, that in the so-called "precritical" or pre-modern period, Christians lived comfortably in the world of the Bible, in a world where present reality and the reality of the Bible constituted one smooth, whole, providential universe. But they did this, of course, precisely because they were persuaded that what the Bible says *about* that reality is true, i.e. they presupposed extratextual referentiality, and the faithfulness of the textual description of that extratextual referent. After all, the Bible does not suggest that men and women are saved by ideas about God and Jesus and the cross; rather, we are saved by God and Jesus and the cross. Of course, Christians cannot think about God and Jesus and the cross (to go no farther) apart from what the Bible says about them. But what the Bible holds out is not salvation effected by thinking holistic thoughts about God and Jesus and the cross, whether or not there is any extratextual referentiality, but a salvation achieved by the God and the Jesus and the cross with existence independent of the Bible, to which the Bible bears witness. On the one hand, it is always refreshing to hear exponents from the Yale School urge more diligent and systematic reading of the Bible, so as to fill the Christian mind with the Biblical universe; on the other hand, it is always deeply disturbing to find the same exponents (I am thinking of Lindbeck at least as much as of Frei) either downplaying the importance of extratextual referentiality in the Bible, or flat out insisting that the affirmation of any connection between the Biblical text and extratextual reality is the product of modern

epistemology. On the one hand, it is good to be reminded of the Bible's different literary genres, for failure to develop sensitivity to such matters, and to the Bible's providentially ordered story line, undoubtedly wreaks exegetical havoc; on the other hand, to treat the bulk of the Bible's story line "as something like a realistic novel" is a position that must be argued and defended, not least because there are countless details in the Biblical text that call such a glib genre category into question.

Consider the extended quote above. Thuesen argues that the concern for truth is nothing but the product of modern epistemology, now more or less eclipsed. But there is a considerable literature, some of it informed and sophisticated, that has shown that concern for the truthfulness of Scripture is not dependent on a particular epistemological paradigm. One finds, for instance, correspondence between Augustine and Jerome on whether it is possible to imagine an error in the canonical gospels—and no one, I think, would be so bold as to charge the patristic Fathers with a nasty, modern epistemology. When Frei and Thuesen recognize that "precritical" Bible readers thought that the Biblical world and the present world constituted one seamless whole, they must surely see that this is possible only because such Christians thought the Bible describes things as they really were, and are.

We have noted above that Thuesen asserts that during the period he scrutinizes, conservative Bible readers "tended to find complete truth in the text," while "liberals tended to find only partial truth." But this is at best ambiguous, and at worst misleading. True, conservatives insisted that the Bible is completely true (in line with the great central tradition of all Christendom), but the best of them did not argue that the Bible tells *all* the truth, i.e. the *complete* truth, on any particular. True, liberals tended to find only partial truth in the Bible, in the sense that they also found partial error; it is not the case that the typical liberal scholar supported the view that what the Bible says is true, but that it provides only a part of the truth. The reason the conservatives reacted to liberal scholarship (sometimes, it must be admitted, with a considerable want of wisdom) was not because the latter held that the Bible was true, but only told part of the story. Rather, they reacted to liberal scholarship because liberals held that the Bible is frequently just plain wrong, but that it is sometimes possible to get behind the text to what *really* happened—something quite different from what the text said happened.

Undoubtedly both liberals and conservatives were far more dependent on modern epistemology than either side fully recognized, but it does not follow that the questions with which they wrestled can be "bracketed out" or "paradigmed out" by appealing to the postmodern epistemology Thuesen presupposes when he adds that "for both [conservatives and liberals], history would always exist, to a greater or lesser degree, in discordance with the Scriptures." At one level, of course, that is a mere truism: there is always more to an event or to a series of events than can ever be captured by any description, by any text, however short of long or holy (save the "text" in the mind of Omniscience). But that does not mean that any particular description of the event or series of events *must* be mistaken or in error or untruthful. It certainly does not provide any obvious warrant for treating the Bible "as something like a realistic novel."

In short, as stimulating as Thuesen's book is, its analytical categories are tendentious and flawed.

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