

The Bible According to Beck

(A Review of "An American Translation" by William F. Beck. New Haven, Mo.: Leader Publishing Company, 1975. xiv, 1106 and 344 pages. Paper. 53.00)

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This translation is a monument to the energies of two men. William F. Beck, who died in 1966, was passionately devoted to the Bible and its translation. He campaigned for the publication of his efforts and ransacked dictionaries and libraries in search for a more accurate Bible. In many respects he was a driven man — driven by a fear of the RSV (and NEB), of historical criticism, and of "liberals" (My Old Testament must never get into the hands of a liberal however learned." p. xii). The real publisher is Herman Otten, editor of *Christian Neu.* who single-handedly brought the entire Beck Bible to publication after conventions and committees of the Lutheran Church — Missouri Synod had stalled so long in deciding what to do with Beck's Old Testament. To publish a book of nearly 1500 pages for \$3.00 in 1975 is something of a miracle. While the publisher is backed by private contributions and much voluntary labor, his bargain basement success suggests that the average publisher of Bibles makes no little profit off his high-priced efforts. The cover on the paperback version, however, is very flimsy. (A cloth-bound edition goes for 54.75).

Since Beck's New Testament was published by Concordia Publishing House in 1963, the rest of this essay will focus on the Old Testament portion, published for the first time here (it has been updated by Elmer Smick and Erich Kiehl since Beck's death). A review is necessary since both translator and

publisher have claimed unparalleled accuracy in translation, since the publisher has urged that this Bible become *the* version in all Missouri Synod literature, and since the translator and publisher have invited suggestions for revisions.

STYLE

The Beck Bible is fresh, brisk and clear. A lot of people will find that it does speak an English with which they are familiar. In my opinion you have to be British to really enjoy the NEB while the chief fault of the RSV is that it did not break enough with the tradition of KJV. Beck's "LORD of armies" conveys the warrior character of God better than did the standard "LORD of hosts," and "Music," as a translation for Selah, represents a good guess on the meaning of this frequent word of the Psalter. The reader will discover dozens of similar happy improvements.

But Beck at times went too modern. Contractions abound. Since they have become so much a part of American speech, they are appropriate where the Bible means to be colloquial. Somehow they seem out of place in the lofty Servant Poems and in the Decalogue. We all say, "Don't do this or that" to our children, but the Ten Commandments are laws, and laws — then and now — are formal in structure.

Capitalization of all references (noun and pronoun) to the deity becomes very tedious, often debatable, sometimes

mistaken. Style manuals tend to discourage it in current English usage, but it is questionable primarily because it often represents a desperate attempt to identify Messianic predictions or Chaldeonian Christology where the text will not lend its own support. The "Prince" of Daniel 9:25 is usually held by today's scholars to be either Zerubbabel or Joshua of early post exilic Jerusalem; the "Anointed" of Daniel 9:26 is a reference to the wicked Onias III, a high priest of the second century B.C., who was assassinated. Beck's Bible forces both passages into the Messianic mold. It hardly seems likely either that the "Me" of Psalm 16:10 is the divine Messiah since in verse 4 the speaker protests that he will not pour out drink offerings of blood for the gods. What would that mean on the lips of Jesus?

Beck observes the rules of Hebrew parallelism quite well in poetic passages. These rules were rediscovered by Robert Lowth in the 18th century, which explains why the KJV of 1611 prints the poetic prophets as if they were prose. This failure in KJV to detect the poetic character of much of the Old Testament, of course, makes it an obsolete translation today. Unfortunately, although Beck prints the poems in Exodus 15, Deuteronomy 33, and in 2 Samuel 22-23 in verse, he ignores the parallelism. Since 2 Samuel 22 and Psalm 18 are identical, it is most puzzling that parallelism is observed in the latter case only!

Finally, any book published in 1975 has to be tested for "sexist" language. Note the following: "Dinah ... went out to visit some of the local girls" (Gen. 34:1); "how a man makes his way with a girl" (Prov. 30:19 — the Hebrew is *almah!*); "Grain will make the young flourish, and grape juice (should be "new wine") the girls" (Zech. 9:17). Cf. 1 Cor. 7:28: "if a girl gets married."

TEXTUAL CRITICISM

Beck does make major additions from the Septuagint in 1 Sam. 10:1; 13:15; 14:41; and 29:10 although he neglects to add a clause with equal attestation in 1 Sam. 4:1. Emendations are utilized elsewhere without notation; correctly in Psalm 18:15 and 73:4, doubtfully in Job. 19:26. But Beck can also be faulted for excessive caution. He should have emended "potter" to "treasury" in Zech. 11:13 and "rich" to "evil doers" or "demons" (the Hebrew is similar) in Is. 53:9. On textual matters Beck is perhaps equal to the standards of other English versions with the exception of the Roman Catholic *New American Translation*, which marked a significant advance, at least in certain books.

INACCURACIES

Beck was clearly a highly-skilled linguist so that most "inaccuracies" reflect debates about exegesis as much as anything else. But the following cases do reflect imprecision, inconsistency, or error:

- 1) Psalm 18:47 "the God who lets me take vengeance." This translation misses the divine monergism of the text. God gives deliverance to the psalmist; he does not merely permit the Psalmist to go on a rampage.
- 2) Psalm 18:50 "You give Your king great victories: You love Your anointed." The Hebrew has the pronoun "His" for "Your" in both cases.
- 3) Psalm 67:3 May the people praise You, O God, all the people praise You. Psalm 67:5 "The people should thank You, O God, all the people should thank you." Why the difference between "praise" and "thank" since the Hebrew is identical? Similarly the Hebrew expression usually translated "many waters" shows up as "great waters" in Psalm

- 77:19 and as "flood" in Psalm 18:16 ("great flood" in the parallel verse in 2 Samuel 22).
- 4) Psalm 77:9 "Has God forgotten to be kind ..?" "Kind" is much too weak here and in Psalm 30:10. In Psalm 67:1 Beck translates the same Hebrew word "be merciful."
 - 5) Psalm 79:9 "Because of your wonderful name rescue us; yes, forgive our sins for the honor of Your name." The translation "wonderful" hides the important technical term "glory" whereas "for the honor of" seems excessively paraphrastic. The Hebrew has only "for the sake of."
 - 6) Psalm 80:1 "O One enthroned among the angels, shine!" Not only is "Cherubim" to be preferred to "angels," but the imagery involved is of the LORD sitting enthroned invisibly on the ark's cherub throne, not of him presiding in his heavenly court.
 - 7) Psalm 133:1 "See how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live together!" Beck omits the important words "in unity;" cf. the omission of "Therefore," which marks an important transition in Psalm 73:6.
 - 8) Daniel 9:25 "From the coming of the message to restore and rebuild Jerusalem till the anointed Prince will be seven weeks and 62 weeks." The text actually says that there will be seven weeks until the anointed prince comes to restore Jerusalem, and then the city will exist for 62 weeks until it faces a new time of crisis.
 - 9) Zechariah 9:8 "I will camp in front of My people." Hebrew: "I will encamp in front of my house) = the temple)."
 - 1) Genesis 3:15 "And I will put enmity between you and the woman and between your descendants and her Descendant. He will crush your head, and you will bruise His heel." The capitalization of pronouns and the distinction between descendants and Descendant have no support in the Hebrew text. Some Christian *tradition* since the second century A.D. has taken this passage messianically, and this interpretation has often been a bellwether of "orthodoxy" in the Missouri Synod. Careful exegesis, however, shows that the text means only that sin has terrible consequences: people and wild animals are always in mortal combat as a result of our fall. The center margin of Beck's Bible is used to list New Testament references to Old Testament passages. It correctly notes that there are no New Testament references to Genesis 3:15.
 - 2) Genesis 49:10 "The scepter will not pass from Judah ... till the Man of Peace comes." The translation puts orthodox Christology on the lips of Jacob, but the deity of the Christ is something God chose to reveal only later. More importantly, the Hebrew has no reference to a "Man of Peace" at all; instead, it contains an enigmatic "Shiloh" which is frequently parsed as "gifts or tribute to him." If the latter is correct, translate: "The scepter will not pass from Judah . . . till tribute comes to him." The author may have had in mind the economic success of the Davidic-Solomonic empire.
 - 3) Deut. 1:1 "This is what Moses said to all Israel east of the Jordan." The original says "on the other side of the Jordan," an expression possible only on the lips of a writer who lived west of the Jordan river. This passage — in

DOCTRINAL BIAS

Many of the places where Beck mistranslates reflect doctrinal bias or a traditional exegesis imposed upon the text. Examples:

its correct translation — is often used to show that the Pentateuch itself does not claim Mosaic authorship.

- 4) Psalm 3 and *passim*: A psalm by David. This translation of the frequent Psalm caption tries to decide the authorship question once and for all. But the Hebrew is much more ambiguous. Did it mean "by David," "for David," or "belonging to a Davidic collection?" And even if it meant "by David," were these captions part of the original text? NEB and *Today's English Version* omit them completely. In the appendix to the Bible, Beck seems to argue that Christ — not David! — was the author of Psalm 22. And what about Psalm 72? Beck renders: "About Solomon." Why not "By Solomon?"
- 5) Psalm 2:12 "Kiss the Son." The word translated "Son" is Aramaic and not Hebrew. More likely, it is neither, but only an ancient textual error that happens to resemble an Aramaic word. Hence skip both the capitalization and the translation "son." The RSV represents the best emendation to date: "kiss his feet."
- 6) Psalm 8:5 "You make Him do without God for a little while." This passage in its original context has nothing to do with the "state of humiliation" of Jesus. The writer was describing what fantastic honors and responsibilities God entrusted to men and women through creation. Beck's "Him" and "a little while" ignore the context. Here is verse 4 in his translation and verse 5 in the correct RSV : "What is man that You should think of him, or a son of man that You should take care of him? Yet thou hast made him (= man) little less than God ..."
- 7) Prov. 8:22 "The Lord became My Father at the beginning of His way." This passage was understood Christologically at least as early as the Arian controversy. The RSV is superior: "The Lord created me (= wisdom) at the beginning of his work." Apparently Beck interpreted the passage as referring to Jesus instead of "personified wisdom." Since he could not square such a view of Jesus with the Nicene Creed (begotten, not made), the Biblical text had to yield. Beck writes in the introduction: "Promotion of my translation will run up against special difficulties with my exact translation of the prophecies and every doctrinal passage. Modernist powers use all their tricks and tyranny to oppose a Christ-centered Bible." (p. viii.) The real problem, we suspect, is that Beck did not think through the implications of Hebrews 1: 1: "Long ago God spoke to our fathers in many different ways by the prophets."
- 8) Prov. 30:18-19 "Three things are too wonderful for me and four things I can't understand: How an eagle makes his way through the sky, how a snake makes his way on a rock, how a ship makes its way in the middle of the sea, and how a man makes his way with a girl." We have already noted that "girl" is inappropriate here for stylistic reasons, but what is more astonishing is that Beck did not translate the final word as "virgin" since he argued frequently that *almah* always meant "virgin" in the Hebrew Bible. This passage, of course, is the best evidence against that claim since the author is marvelling at four things in his world that leave him in awe: a bird's flight, a snake's meandering, a ship sliding through the waves — and a man and a woman making love! There is no question that Matthew and Luke testify to the virginal conception, and that it has become part of orthodox Christian belief. The question is: did Isaiah talk about a virgin's giving birth? Prov. 30:19

shows that philology makes no such demands. What would the context of Is. 7:14 indicate? Is verse 15 — especially in the Beck translation! — really a description of Jesus? "He will eat curds and honey before He (note capitalization) knows how to shun evil and choose good." Was there a time when Jesus did not know the difference between right and wrong?

EDITING

Given the size of the undertaking, matters of production and editing seem to have been handled with some competence. A reviewer cannot possibly read the whole text, but in the fairly large portions I read only three typographical errors cropped up: Psalm 80:15 "strenthened" for strengthened; Prov. 8:22 "Lord" for LORD; and in Zech. 10:12 the verse number is placed one sentence late. Footnotes are not handled well. There is a footnote to the caption of Psalm 46 on p. 655, but the reader must turn to p. 628 to find out what the letter "i" means. The editors should have eliminated the British spelling of "Saviour." Is "Old Being" in Daniel 7 better than "Ancient of Days"?

DAHOODIANISMS

The discovery of the Ugaritic texts in 1928 has led to great advances in Hebrew philology. Mitchell Dahood used these texts as a major resource for writing his three volume Anchor Bible commentary (Psalms 1-50, 1966; Psalms 51-100, 1968; Psalms 101-150, 1970). Dahood discovered hundreds and hundreds of new readings, and his creativity has been the marvel of comparative philology. The trouble is, Dahood is almost totally innocent of self criticism, so that the majority of his suggestions must be rejected. From notes written on his deathbed, it appears that Beck used Dahood's work although it is difficult to tell whether it

was only through his many articles or Volume 1 of his commentary. In any case, a number of Dahood's readings have been incorporated, many presumably by editors Smick and Kiehl. The Dahoodian readings which were discovered in my reading of the Beck Bible are almost always untenable. The following are obviously only a sampling:

- 1) Psalm 22:3 "But you are holy, on Your throne, You are praised by Israel." Better: "But you are holy, who sit enthroned on the praises of Israel."
- 2) Psalm 22:20 "My precious life from the edge of the ax." The usual translation (. . . power of the dog) seems to refer back to the "dogs" in v. 16.
- 3) Psalm 22:25 "I praise You a hundred times ..." To praise a hundred times is a denominative verb invented by Dahood.
- 4) Psalm 30:5 "His anger means destruction." Better: "His anger is only for a moment." Dahood's reading depends on interpreting the second half of the verse as a reference to eternal life. At least Beck avoids the latter error.
- 5) Psalm 30:11 "Change my weeping to dancing." The imperative force stems from Dahood's interpretation of the perfect tense as precativ, but the past tense (you have changed ...) is necessary to account for the change of mood in the Psalm, which ends with praise for past favors.
- 6) Psalm 74:3 "Lift up Your people from these permanent ruins." The Psalm actually asks God to direct his steps *to* the permanent ruins. The preposition in question can mean "to" or "from," but the Dahood neologism "Your people" results from the isolation of an emphatic conjunction *pa*. It is an unlikely conjecture.

- 7) Psalm 77:6 "At night I play the lyre." The Massoretic Text is very difficult here, but the usual emendation to "I commune" (at night in my heart) seems probable, especially in view of verse 12.
- 8) Psalm 80:15 "Take care of what Your right hand planted." Instead of "take care," most versions have "the stock," which is parallel to "the vine" in the previous verse.
- 9) Psalm 89:1-2 "LORD, I will sing of Your love ... I will tell how Your love made the heavens, O Eternal One." The two uses of the possessive pronoun "Your" are not in the Hebrew text; Dahood claims that love in each case shares the suffix of a following noun. The divine epithet "Eternal One" is a mistaken interpretation of the adverb "forever." Dahood's commentaries swarm with such new epithets, and here, as often elsewhere, he ignores the necessary role played by the word in question in its conventional interpretation. The balance of probability in these nine cases would seem to be against Dahood and Beck. It is surprising, to say the least, that this "conservative Bible" adopts so many readings (I have only given a small sample) from so uncertain a source as Dahood.

CONCLUSION

Two accurate readings, finally, struck me as surprising because they present severe difficulties for Beck's *exegetical* approach. The first of these is Ex. 6:3: "I appeared to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob as God Almighty, but I didn't (does God really use contractions in oracles?) reveal Myself to them by My name 'the LORD.'" This verse comes from the call narrative of Moses according to the Priestly Writer, and it stands in sharp tension with Gen. 4:26 and Gen. 15:1. The fact that the name LORD was used

in the days of Enoch and Abraham according to these verses while such early use is explicitly denied in Ex. 6:3 was and is one of the most telling pieces of evidence for the multiple authorship of the Pentateuch.

The second surprising translation is Is. 40:3: "A voice is calling: 'Prepare a way in the wilderness for the LORD.'" Beck's translation is right, but it also clearly eliminates this passage from the "messianic predictions." Instead of it referring to John the Baptist crying in the wilderness, this passage reports God's directions to his heavenly court to build a superhighway in the desert for bringing his exiles home from Babylon.

Primarily a review of a new translation should be expected to point out questionable renderings. I would be the last to deny that much rich Bible study is possible on the basis of this version. But those who consider using it for public worship or official sanction should be aware of its biases, its inaccuracies, its dependence, as in the case of Dahood, on unproven scholarship.

