



## ROBERT GALVESTON BRATCHER (1920-2010)

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### Introduction

The book of Genesis tells of Joseph in Egypt and how he saved his family. Then the book of Exodus begins its story after the death of Joseph with the words “Then a new king, who knew nothing about Joseph, came to power in Egypt” (Exod 1.8). This is the way of history; generations come and generations go. People of one generation are well known, but succeeding generations forget them or remember them only dimly.

This is true in the field of biblical scholarship and Bible translation, as in any other field. Consider, for example, William Baird’s two-volume *History of New Testament Research*. One reads page after page about scholars who were influential in New Testament studies in the eighteenth, nineteenth, and early twentieth centuries. Names such as B. H. Streeter, Kirsopp Lake, and Arthur Darby Nock fill the pages of Baird’s study. Yet most students in the field of biblical studies today hardly know their names, let alone the importance of their contributions to New Testament studies.

Robert G. Bratcher was honored with his picture on the cover of the April-June 1994 issue of *Bible Collector’s World*, which referred to him as a “significant 20th century translator.” Bob’s influence on Bible translators was felt literally

world-wide in the second half of the twentieth century. With his death in July 2010, it may all too soon be said, “Then new translators arose who knew nothing about Bob Bratcher.” Bratcher’s colleague William Smalley correctly noted, “for the most part translators are not remembered long, or are remembered only in a tiny corner of the world” (1991, 18). The paragraphs which follow are written to remind the new generation of why they should know about Bob Bratcher. Concerning Jesus, the writer of 1 Peter told his readers, “You love him although you have not seen him” (1 Peter 1.8a). If I may paraphrase and say to Bible translators regarding Bob Bratcher: You have been influenced by him although you have not seen him.

So, who was Bob Bratcher? What was his contribution to Bible translation? What is the extent of his influence in Bible translation? Let’s begin with the first question.

### **Who was Bob Bratcher?**

The short answer is this: Bob Bratcher was born in Campos, Brazil, in 1920 and grew up in Brazil as a child of Southern Baptist missionaries, speaking both Portuguese and English. He received his Th.D. from the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1949 and returned to Brazil to teach as a Southern Baptist missionary at a seminary there. Several years later, he joined the translation staff of the American Bible Society and later joined the United Bible Societies as a translation consultant.

The longer answer is this:

Bob Bratcher was much more than a biblical scholar and translator. He was very dedicated to his wife June, to whom he was married for sixty-five years, and to his children Meredith, Priscilla, and Stephen, and their families.

He was a life-long Baptist and stood in a long tradition of Bible translators who were Baptists—William Carey (1761-1834), Helen Barrett Montgomery (1861-1934), Charles Williams (1869-1952), Edgar Goodspeed (1871-1962), and Clarence Jordan (1912-1969), to name just a few (Omanson 1996). He was also a faithful and active member of Binkley Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, since he moved to the area in 1975. He served the Binkley community as a teacher, preacher, and wise elder. He also was a strong proponent of compassion for the less fortunate, justice for the oppressed, and world peace. Until his death on July 11, he helped prepare meals monthly at Community House in Chapel Hill. And classical music, good writing, and, especially, poetry spoke to his heart.

Everyone who knew Bob knew that he was a person of deep integrity. Two examples will have to suffice here.

(1) In the mid-1960s, the Southern Baptist Convention initiated the twelve-volume *The Broadman Bible Commentary*, a series of commentaries for laypeople. Volume 1, published in 1969, contained nine general articles on the Bible, including Bob’s article on “The Scriptures in Translation,” and commentaries

on Genesis and Exodus. Almost immediately, a segment of Southern Baptists objected to the volume, primarily because G. Hinton Davies, a British Baptist scholar who had written the commentary on Genesis, had made statements concerning the story of Abraham and the sacrifice of his son Isaac in Gen 22.1-19 that were considered heretical. The controversy became especially severe during the 1970 annual convention meeting in Denver, where Southern Baptists adopted a motion to withdraw Volume 1. A compromise solution was eventually adopted in which Dr. Clyde Francisco, a professor at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, was asked to rewrite the commentary on Genesis. The other articles would remain in Volume 1 (Faught 2003). Bob, however, believed that this was a violation of academic integrity and refused to allow his article to be included in the revised volume.

(2) In 1962, UBS held its first major Translators' Institute, bringing together missionaries and translators from many languages to Bobo Dioulasso in Burkina Faso (Upper Volta at that time). Bob Bratcher, Heber Peacock, and other UBS translation personnel lectured and taught about the Bible and Bible translation. Bratcher later recounted to Phil Stine, "Without intending to do such a thing, I think those lectures made it possible for some of those people there who had never seen the Bible as anything but a sacred icon that had fallen from heaven and had been given to the people straight from God, to develop a new understanding" (Stine 2004, 60). Of course not all of the missionaries at the conference appreciated the lectures. Years later one of those missionaries asked this writer, "Do you believe in the Bible, or do you believe like Peacock and Bratcher?"

But Bob also had a sense of humor and humility about his work. New translations (and their translators) are often severely criticized and rejected when they first appear. Though Jerome's Latin Vulgate translation would one day become the official Bible of the Roman Catholic Church, during his lifetime only his revision of the Gospels was widely accepted. John Wycliffe's bones were dug up and burned in 1428, nearly a half century after his death, and William Tyndale was burned at the stake in 1536. It is little known today among staunch defenders of the KJV that the KJV continued to be attacked as long as eighty years after it was published in 1611. Many preferred the Geneva Bible of 1560. Goodspeed's *American Translation* (NT 1923) was also heavily criticized. So it is not surprising that in some cities in the South of the United States copies of the TEV were gathered up and burned in protest. Bratcher enjoyed saying, "Thank heaven we live in a time when they burn the translation and not the translator!"

### **What was his contribution to Bible translation?**

After finishing his Th.D. degree in 1949, Bob served as a Baptist pastor in Indiana (1943-1944), as a U.S. Navy chaplain during World War II (1944-1946), as a missionary professor in Rio de Janeiro (1949-1954), as a Visiting Professor of NT Greek at the Baptist seminary in Louisville (1954-1955), did graduate studies in Manchester, England (1955-1956), and then joined the American Bible Society as a Special Secretary in the translation department in 1957 (Reyburn 2000).

During his time at ABS, Bob was asked to prepare a new translation of the New Testament in “common English” (see Orlinsky and Bratcher 1991, 196-205; Nida 1977, 45-55). The New Testament was published in 1966 as *Good News for Modern Man: The New Testament in Today's English Version* (TEV). A second edition was published in 1967, and a third in 1971. Beginning in 1967, Bob headed up a team of seven scholars who began translation of the Old Testament, using the same “dynamic equivalence” approach to translation. The completed Old Testament was published with a revised edition of the New Testament in 1976 as the *Good News Bible: The Bible in Today's English Version* (GNB). By 1982, this edition had sold more than 52 million copies (Paul 2003, 37).

Basil Rebera, who was the UBS Translation Services Coordinator when he wrote the following, explained the significance of this translation:

Bob's translation of the Bible into English, the TEV, marked a watershed in Bible translation. While Eugene Nida and his colleagues developed and expounded the theory of dynamic equivalence common language translation, Bob Bratcher gave it concrete realization in the Today's English Version (TEV). This translation, which has gone on to become the most influential model in Bible translation, has been a model to other English translations and countless translations in other languages throughout the world—world languages, major languages and minority languages. (Rebera 2000, xiii)

Bob Bratcher's contributions to biblical studies extended far beyond his initial translations in English. He made extensive contributions as one of the revisers of the New Testament of the Almeida Revista e Atualizada, published in 1951, and as one of the translators of the common-language Brazilian Portuguese translation *A Bíblia Sagrada. Tradução na Linguagem de Hoje*, published in 1988 (see Kaschel 2000, 111-26). He was also one of the revisers of this translation, launched in 2000 as *Nova Tradução na Linguagem de Hoje* (NTLH).

In addition to his own work as a translator in English and Portuguese, Bratcher served translators worldwide through the writing of numerous handbooks and guides that were published by the United Bible Societies for translators (Omanson 2000). He wrote or co-wrote seven of the translator's Handbooks, each one focusing in detail on issues involved in translating a particular book of the Bible, including Psalms, the Gospel of Matthew, and Revelation, as well as numerous “Helps for Translators.” He also wrote scholarly essays on translation issues, published numerous articles related to Bible translation, many appearing in the pages of this journal, and lectured all over the world. He was one of five scholars who wrote the notes for the British edition of the Good News Study Bible (GNSB), published in 1997, and one of four scholars who wrote the notes of the Portuguese study Bible called *Bíblia de Estudo NTLH*, published in 2005.

Further, he participated in four- to six-week translators' workshops in Mexico, Central America, South America, East and West Africa, Japan, Fiji, Papua New Guinea, Irian Jaya, Thailand, India, and the Philippines, such as the one in Bobo

Dioulasso mentioned above, helping train translators. He also traveled widely and lectured on issues of Bible translation (see, for example, Bratcher 1984).

He was not only a translator of the Bible, he was also a student of the history of Bible translation, as attested by *A History of Bible Translation and the North American Contribution* co-authored with Harry Orlinsky, and by articles such as “English Bible” (Bratcher 1985) and “Translations, English Language” (Bratcher 1994).

### **What is the extent of his influence in Bible translation?**

The GNB followed the principle of dynamic equivalence, and became a model for translators around the world, as noted above by Basil Rebera. Because the GNB made implicit information explicit, made ambiguous pronoun references clear, restructured sentences into more easily understandable sentences, used common language rather than technical terms or “church” language, etc., translators could much more easily understand the meaning of texts that they were translating into their own languages.

UBS translation officers usually encouraged translators to study what the GNB translators had done and then follow the same principles in translating into their own language. Unfortunately, translators often took the easy way and simply translated the GNB literally into their own languages. Because of this, the GNB has frequently been criticized, but the fault is not really in the GNB translation but rather in the fact that translators translated it instead of studying it in order to apply the same principles in their own language.

The words of Danny Arichea are worth quoting here:

GNB has influenced the task of Bible translation in Asia, particularly in Indonesia and the Philippines. By simply following the analysis and translation of GNB, many translators have produced meaningful translations in their own languages. But the usefulness of GNB goes far beyond what it has actually done. GNB has become a model not only in the sense that it is followed very closely in the translation task, but also, and more importantly, by providing an example of what is possible in translation. (Arichea 2000, 200)

Perhaps the highest compliment a translator can receive is praise from another competent and respected translator. J. B. Phillips wrote in 1967 regarding the TEV, “All in all I must in all honesty commend those responsible for this popular, but dependable and accurate, version of the most important books in the world” (Phillips 1967, 100).

### **Concluding personal thoughts**

As noted above, Bratcher was one of the authors of the notes in the British edition of the GNSB. When it was published, Bob sent the following note, dated July 7, 1997, to those of us who had worked with him on this project. This note shows the humility and deep sense of friendship that characterized his entire life and

helps those who did not know him understand why those of us who were his colleagues loved him so much.

Dear GNSB colleagues:

I have just received a copy of the Good News Study Bible. It was a rare moment of gratitude and of remembrance. Gratitude to God for making it possible for this to happen, and remembrance of you all—Sarah and Roger and Gerald and Paul—with deep gratitude and love. You were (and are) not only my colleagues in a scholarly enterprise—above all you were my sister and brothers, who showed me love and goodness. During those years you were my dearest colleagues—as I experienced it, we formed a real *koinonia*—a place where not only love but truth prevails, where truth is spoken in love, where one is accepted as one is, where there is celebration and rejoicing.



I cannot tell you how grateful I am for all of you.

A prayer of thanks to God came to my heart as I looked at the volume. I am not quite ready to intone the *Nunc Dimittis* (that will have to wait until the publication of the Brazilian Study Bible, sometime in the next millennium), but I felt that my prayers had been answered—in a way far beyond my poor deserving. As you can see, it is an emotional moment for me. I only wish we were all together once more, in body as well as mind and spirit, in order to celebrate this occasion. The Lord has been good to us.

Thank you, dear friends. I love you all.

Bob

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