

# THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE

BY LANE COOPER

*THE author of this article, Professor Emeritus of the English Language and Literature at Cornell University, is a Rutgers alumnus of the class of 1896, and has long been a Friend of the Rutgers Library. His commentary on the new American version of the Bible follows up a pamphlet he wrote on "Certain Rhythms in the English Bible," reviewed in the Journal in December, 1952.*

**T**HE COSTLY, "new," and overrated "American" version of the Bible which has been freely advertised (beginning, say, with the *New York Times Book Review* for Sunday, October 12, 1953) suffers from a bad defect, not new at all, that already had become traditional. For the Bible, it may be reckoned as at least some seventy or eighty years of age. The defect, lurking in the frequent changes to a supposedly novel wording, is simply the lack of rhythm. Virtually all the recent renderings of the Bible that have been brought to public attention suffer in the same respect. The translators from 1870 to 1885, and translators from then down to our own time, seem never to have studied the cadences of good English prose, or any other; and seemingly never studied anything on the rhythms of the English Bible. These rhythms grew up in a long tradition, but may be called the work of William Tindale (more than anybody else), who began to publish his translation in 1525. The rhythms of Tindale, Coverdale, and their predecessors were taken over by the scholars who translated the Bible into English at Oxford, Cambridge, and London, under stimulation from King James, to give the English-speaking people the so-called "Authorized" Version of 1611. This version really marks the culminating point in a process of revision and improvement that had been going on for something like a thousand years, from the time of the Venerable Bede through Wyclif down to the days of James. Since then, in some three hundred years, for the ordinary reader the changes called for by the advance of scholarship, that is, necessary changes in the meaning, are relatively few, and for such a reader, mostly of no importance; it is better for him doubtless to read "adder's den" for "cockatrice's den" in Isaiah 11.10: "And the weaned child shall put his hand on the cockatrice's den"—though "the cockatrice's den" makes a better cadence than

“the adder’s.” Of course where we know the meaning better, where the earlier translators could not know what we do now, changes must be made. Most of them were already made in the anniversary translation of 1911, published by the Oxford Press of New York City, a book that in 1952, unfortunately, is hard to obtain. For euphony this version here and there marks an improvement on the “Authorized,” mainly because, when there are alterations, the revisers for the Oxford Press made use only of words and forms belonging to the stock in the vocabulary of the book of 1611 which they were revising. Thus in 1 Cor. 10.24 they read: “Let no man seek his own advantage,” which is better than “Let no man seek his own good” in the “American” version—an example in an advertisement in the *New York Times*, and a phrase with an inferior rhythm, or none.

There may be somewhere a published study of the rhythms of the English Bible that I do not know of, and could not discover three years ago or since; nor could any of my friends. We have good books on the history of the English Bible, such as Pollard’s on the making of the “Authorized” Version; Sir Frederic Kenyon’s *Story of the Bible* (published by E. P. Dutton, 1937); and for the “Authorized” Version as related to its predecessors and to its place in literature and literary influence, we have the compact little volume of Albert S. Cook (published by G. P. Putnam’s Sons, 1910). But on cadence in the “Authorized” and subsequent versions, let me say with due humility, the only thing there is to mention is a little book called “Certain Rhythms in the English Bible” which the Cornell University Press was good enough to publish for me in April, 1952.

It is a grave question how much good is done by replacing, in the poor man’s Bible, a number of older forms by words now current. The translators for King James purposely retained traditional forms that were slightly archaic then as they are now, *leadeth* for example, and *restoreth*, in Psalm 23. Changing to *leads* and *restores* destroys the music of our Bible, and bids fair to injure the music of familiar hymns that are based upon that Psalm; “He leadeth me,” for instance. Meanwhile *leads* and *restores* are both used by Shakespeare, whose unerring ear employed them in faultless verse; in his authentic work I never caught him once in a lack of euphony or a fault in metre. Any farmer who can read will understand “He restoreth my soul”; and having a vocabulary of several thousand words, the rural

friends I talk with do not need a reduction of the Bible to 800; in the "Authorized" Version there are said to be, all told, 6000.

The Bible must be read aloud. Where I have tested this new version, or the reduction of the Bible to a "basic English" of 800 words (in another dubious experiment), neither makes for euphony in reading. In my Preface I ask the readers of my booklet on Rhythms, of the quoted verses, say, to read with the voice and not with the eye alone.

The current usage of any language is a shifting thing; so far as a translation makes use of the shifting part, the translation will not have great permanence. One advantage of reading the "Authorized" Version aloud, and of memorizing and repeating selections from it, as Ruskin was compelled to do by his watchful mother, is the advantage of conservation, a thing that is good for the soil and for the soul. At this point let me urge conserving Psalm 1, Psalm 23, and parts of Psalm 119; note there how the rhythmical structure helps conserve the sense, and is indeed essential to it. Our tongue was in a nobler stage in the days of Elizabeth and James than it is in this year of 1955. The prose of that elder but not ancient time (which was the time of Milton too), and the verse as well, "preserve as in a vial" "the precious life-blood" of our civilization, of true humanity, true culture.