

“only a musical composer of the calibre of Beethoven could recreate this succession of feelings, probably by making use of strings in a slow tempo”.

But being liberated from the facts can also produce some interesting interpretations of the classical world. Markesinis comes to the subject with considerable enthusiasm and a particularly keen eye for the revival of classical themes in art. Among the dozens of beautifully reproduced paintings in his series is Lawrence Alma-Tadema’s painting of Phidias presenting the Parthenon Frieze to Pericles and his mistress Aspasia. Alma-Tadema was an astute classicist, but felt no pressure to limit himself to the historical accounts. His painting, which features Socrates and Alcibiades as curious onlookers, celebrates the process of invention and reinvention that lies at the heart of Classics.

It is a painting that reminds you how easy it is to be overly reverent towards works of antiquity. The Parthenon marbles are so iconic that one forgets the obvious point that they were based on human models; that Phidias was even said to have been accused of impiously incorporating portraits of himself and Pericles into the shield of his colossal Athena. Myths, shape-shifting since before Homer’s time, belong as much to Alma-Tadema and Picasso as they did to Sir Arthur Evans, as much to the sculptors of antiquity as to the 21st-century commentator on Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Classics is a subject that thrives on creative interpretation. If one needs a certain depth of understanding in order to keep the material alive, the vision and skill to reimagine them for one’s own time are just as important.

Only recently, 2,000 years after his death, Ovid received something close to a pardon for the *carmen et error* (“poem and mistake”) that led him to being relegated to the coast of south-eastern Romania. Reflecting on his earlier life in his exile poem, the *Tristia*, he described how naturally his brother had tended towards a career in the senate or law court, while he had struggled to avoid the lure of poetry. “Why pursue a useless subject?”, his father had asked him, establishing a damaging precedent for countless parents since. Ovid might have entered the senate but resisted, preferring to follow the Muses along a path that would rob him of the very freedom he sought in writing. “The once cynical amorist,” as Frederic Raphael puts it, “was left to weep away his last years in solitary uxoriousness.” Ovid remains to my mind one of the great trailblazers for the rebel classicist. As unpretentious as Catullus, as endearingly flawed as Picasso’s Minotaur, but as cultivated as the Alexandrians, he showed just how much fun can be had in breaking the rules you once learned.

# As through a glass clearly

JAMES MUMFORD

## The New Testament: A Translation

By David Bentley Hart

Yale, 616pp, £30.00/ebook £20.89

I’m walking down Piccadilly and my phone buzzes. An email. The New Testament. A new translation. 577 pages. And in English, my language.

People have been burnt at the stake for bringing the vernacular into the country and now it’s popped up into my inbox as I pass the Royal Academy. Legions of spies have been dispatched to seize treacherous translators; now David Bentley Hart has done this with total impunity.

Receive my confession: my spiritual life has of late been threadbare, even non-existent. Part of the problem, and maybe this is to cast blame, is that the text supposed to enliven my spirit, to shake up the day and reorientate the week, to provide relief in times of tension and clarity in confusion, has for me become ossified into familiarity. The words of my various translations were no longer carrying their weight; and—brute that I am—I don’t have the Greek that would let me return *ad fontes*. The preface to the Book of Common Prayer recommends that, “by the daily hearing of holy scripture the people might continually profit more and more in the knowledge of God and be inflamed.” For me that was no longer the case.

But now David Bentley Hart has brought the Bible back to life. Drawing upon a lifetime’s scholarship (the foremost theologian in America today, Hart reads Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic and Syriac), he has, as he says, sought to produce “a pitilessly literal translation”, hoping to “make the familiar strange, novel, and perhaps newly compelling”.

Vocabulary is changed up, for a start. Christ become The Anointed, throughout. Eternal Life becomes The Life of the Age. World is Cosmos. Blessed is Blissful. The effect is to pull you up at every juncture, to slow down your reading.

Prayer, too, had for me become devoid of meaning. The template, the Lord’s Prayer, felt tired. So, again, Hart’s translation has come as a revelation:

Our Father, who are in the heavens, let your name be held holy; Let your Kingdom come; let your will come to pass, as in heaven so also upon earth; Give to us

today bread for the day ahead; And excuse us our debts, just as we have excused our debtors; And do not bring us to trial, but rescue us from him who is wicked. [For yours is the Kingdom and the power and the glory unto the ages.]

The prose is clunkier, less neat, more contorted, ramshackle, and thereby all the more authentic. The “daily bread” we’re all so used to is so abstract. “Bread for the day ahead” can focus my thoughts better. And what is a “trespass” if you’re no poacher? Hart opts for “debt”. Okay. Now that’s something I can work with. This phenomenon I know—being in the grip of feeling someone owes me because they wronged me. I guess my spirituality felt at-one-remove from reality. Not now.

The greatest achievement of Hart’s translation is to restore the urgency of the original.

In the central chapter of *The Everlasting Man*, “The Strangest Story in the World”, G.K. Chesterton assails the often-widespread picture of Jesus of Nazareth as a wandering teacher. Many of the pagan sages may indeed be described this way, he says. Apollonius of Tyana, the Peripatetics, Socrates—we find them always walking and talking, their wisdom arising from their rambles, glimpses of their genius gleaned from their ad hoc conversations with people they encounter roundabout the place. Jesus of Nazareth is different. “Compared to these wanderers,” Chesterton writes, “the life of Jesus went as swift and straight as a thunderbolt. It was above all dramatic.” He continues:

From the moment that the star goes up like a birthday rocket to the moment that the sun is extinguished like a funeral torch, the whole story moves on wings with the speed and direction of a drama, ending in an act beyond words.

Hart has captured the speed and direction of that drama. How? One example: he follows the original tenses slavishly and adopts the historic present.

Take Mark’s gospel. We find Jesus teaching: “they enter” Capernaum’s synagogue. Next he picks his team/recruits his troops: “and he goes up into the mountain, and summoned to himself those whom he wanted, and they went to him . . .” Then the fireworks begin: “a leper comes to him”; a demon is “crying out with a loud voice.” The Anointed and his band criss-cross the country, causing havoc wherever they go: “they come to Bethsaida”; “he comes into the region of Judaea [and] beyond the Jordan”; “they come into Jericho.” Then news gets out of all that’s happening, spreading like wildfire until it reaches the authorities. “And the ►

Pharisees and some of the scribes coming out from Jerusalem *gather* about him.” They’re roiled by the attention he’s getting. They’re appalled by the blasphemy. And so they strike: all of a sudden, before we know it, the Anointed is being arrested—“And immediately Judas arrives, and with him a crowd with swords and bludgeons”—and after a show trial, quickly executed: “And they crucify him, and portion out his garments.”

Usually the gospel of Mark seems bare, leaving you cold (the fact the grass the five thousand sit on is green is about the only detail). But Hart’s rendering of the prose gets across the sense of gathering momentum, allowing the whole story to move on wings. The most unpalatable gospel suddenly becomes a page-turner.

Hart comments on this in the introduction to the translation (a fine essay in its own right). He puts it too well not to quote him at length:

Before embarking on this project, I doubt I ever properly appreciated precisely how urgent the various voices of the New Testament authors are, or how profound the provocations of what they were saying were for their own age, and probably remain for every age. Those voices blend, or at least interweave, in a kind of wildly indiscriminate polyphony . . . but what all have in common, and what somehow forges a genuine harmony out of all that ecstatic clamour, is the vibrant certainty that history has been invaded by God in Christ in such a way that nothing can stay as it was, and all terms of human community and conduct have been altered at the deepest of levels.

“Perhaps I could never have come to this realisation had I not undertaken this task,” he concludes. Perhaps we will never come to this realisation if we don’t read his translation.

One great achievement of this translation, then, is to restore the urgency of the New Testament. A second is to do rhetorical justice to the great passages of what scholars term “high” Christology.

This past Christmas my church played a nasty trick on the mayor of our borough. We invited him to do a reading at our carol service, only to give him the impossibly difficult reading of John 1. The poor man, fumbling through the fiendish passage as the congregation squirmed, wax from their candles burning their thumbs, willing him through to “This is the word of the Lord.” Here is how the tongue-twister goes (in the New International Version):

1. In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was

God. 2. He was with God in the beginning. 3. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. 4. In him was life, and that life was the light of all mankind. 5. The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness has not overcome it.

Familiar? Obscure? For me, both at once. Hart can’t wait to get his hands on it:

In the origin there was the Logos, and the Logos was present with GOD, and the Logos was god; This one was present with GOD in the origin. All things came to be through him, and without him came to be not a single thing that has come to be. In him was life, and this life was the light of men. And the light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not conquer it.

The familiar becomes strange and the strange familiar. Out goes *beginning*. In comes the freshness of *Origin*. A bolder move: refusing to translate *Logos* at all, allowing it to remain an impenetrable subject. “With God” becomes “*present* with God”: more familiar. There’s greater simplicity: “through him all things were made” becomes “all things came to be through him”. And there is greater drama: *conquer* is better than *overcome*. “Nothing” is elaborated to “not a single thing”. What’s more a few verses later the familiarity of “the word became flesh and dwelt among us” becomes the literal, “And the logos became flesh and pitched his tent among us.”

“Pitched his tent among us.” There is something satisfactory that in describing the incarnation so freshly Hart attests to it. For theologians down the ages have long stressed that the Bible itself is an incarnation. Fully human, fully divine; written by men, inspired by the Spirit. And translation into the vernacular, into the language “understandeth by the people”, to quote Cranmer again, participates in that process.

So the translation is compelling, and it is beautiful. But the all-important question: is it accurate? Does Hart fulfil his vow to tell the whole truth and nothing but the truth? Or does he, at key junctures, veer away from an original meaning when he finds it unpalatable? Does he take liberties with the text? Do we have a case of *traductor traduttore*—the translator as traitor?

Critics have been quick to accuse Hart of imposing his own theological agenda on the text. For example, hailing from the Greek Orthodox tradition as he does, Hart is a universalist. (Universalism is the belief that Hell was evacuated by Christ on Holy Saturday and that in the end all are saved). And he’s up-

front about the fact that he sees this universalism in the biblical text. Well, is he right?

An in-depth analysis of the 2,000-year history of Christian soteriology and the fiendishly complex interplay between scriptural exegesis and doctrinal development lies beyond the scope of this review. Suffice it to say that if you want to defend universalism in the New Testament you have to weigh in the defining debate in New Testament scholarship since the 1960s—the so-called “New Perspective”.

The New Perspective, associated with E.P. Sanders, James Dunn and N.T. Wright, overhauls the Reformation reading of the New Testament’s claims about salvation, particularly as they are worked out by St Paul. Martin Luther famously equated the merit-based views of salvation, which he identified in gross medieval practices like indulgences, with Paul’s criticism of “the works of the law”. Earning your way to salvation through your own effort: that’s what Paul was attacking then, and what—c. 1517—should be attacked now.

According to the New Perspective, Luther couldn’t have got it more wrong. For Paul actually had in his sights law not law as human effort but law as the particular customs and ceremonial rights of a particular people, which had come to be used by the elite as “badges of membership.” On this view, what Paul was really saying was now that the promise given to Israel was opened up to all people through Jesus, it followed that salvation was no longer achieved by adherence to those customs.

This is where it gets interesting. Whether the Reformation or the New Perspective’s conception of salvation is right hinges on how you translate key verses in Paul’s letters.

Take Romans 3:22. Paul proclaims that our salvation comes *διὰ πίστεως Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ*. There are two ways to go here. The Reformers translate it “through faith in Jesus Christ”; that is, through putting your trust in him, something you do or don’t do, believing in what he has accomplished on our behalf. The New Perspective, on the other hand, insists upon salvation coming “through the *faithfulness* of Jesus Christ”. What does this mean? It means that salvation comes because Christ was faithful in carrying out what he did on the cross. And this matters because if this translation is right then the universalist reading opens up. What Christ has accomplished is efficacious for all people, regardless of whether they have the opportunity to assent to it intellectually and existentially.

Hart sides with the New Perspective. He comes down on the “faithfulness of Jesus the Anointed.” Does he therefore impose his agenda on the text? Well, the truth is that

# Books



# Talmudic titan

NOEL MALCOLM

John Selden and the Western Political Tradition

By Ofir Haivry

Cambridge, 518pp, £75

John Selden is famous, but not at all well known. His fame was earned as a lawyer (one of the cleverest, and absolutely the most learned, in 17th-century England), and as an MP who played a significant role in English political history from the 1620s to the 1640s. In the earlier period he helped to lead the House of Commons' opposition to Charles I, being awarded several years of imprisonment in the Tower of London for his pains; but in the 1640s his energies turned more to opposing abuses of parliamentary power, such as the "Act of Attainder" against the Earl of Strafford—a kind of murder by legislative decree—or the exclusion of bishops from the Lords.

He also earned a place in English religious history, through his decisive interventions in the Westminster Assembly. This was an advisory body, set up by Parliament in 1643 in order to work out how to convert an episcopal Church of England into a Presbyterian one. Again and again, Selden succeeded in blocking or overturning the arguments of the dominant Scottish Presbyterians, who had to go scurrying back to their studies to do more homework. The eventual changes to the system of Church government were, as a result, much weaker than they would otherwise have been.

Yet at the same time Selden is not well known, at least not in the way that he would have wanted to be. He was a man of astonishing polymathic knowledge, equally at home with Greek calendar systems, Anglo-Saxon poems and Arabic chronicles. He acquired such an expertise in the study of Jewish texts, including the Talmud, the Aramaic Targums and many densely written rabbinical commentaries, that he was referred to, sardonically but also appreciatively, as England's Chief Rabbi; and the information he gleaned from these studies was put to use in a string of works in Latin, discussing such matters as Jewish testamentary law and the nature and powers of the Sanhedrin. The Latin-reading European "republic of letters" paid warm tribute—despite the fact that his Latin was peculiarly rebarbative, stuffed with nonce-words and recondite allusions. But that Latin-reading public ▶

the text is ambiguous. Both readings can be supported by other verses in scripture (Romans 10:9, for example, seems to support the Lutheran reading). In the end a translator must make his decisions. Hart nails his colours to the mast, which will alienate some readers, but what else can he do when facing a historic exegetical dilemma? What I think sets Hart apart as a translator is that he's upfront about the choices he has made. In extended footnotes and essays bookending the translation he "shows his working", as it were, explains his choices. Further: the readings he comes up with in other places—for example, the notorious proof-text for original sin in Romans 5:12—is not a modern or idiosyncratic revisionist take on the text. It is the Eastern orthodox one.

Back to why a New Testament translation might be a New Year resolution. It is not just my spirituality this translation has transformed. It affected the translator too. During the course of the extraordinarily ambitious project Hart suffered a serious respiratory illness. But he continued to work, in the snatches available to him. Was there a particular part of the New Testa-

ment that came alive to him during this dark time? In the worst period he was in the middle of translating the gospel of Luke. He writes: "The figure of Christ as Luke presents him turned out to be crucial for my sanity and my resistance to despair. There is a luminous quality of love in the Lucan narrative that brings out the event of Christ in history as a true revelation of God's love."

The figure of Christ as Luke presents him is always getting into trouble for the company he keeps. Whether it's traitorous tax collectors (essentially the equivalent of the Stasi—men who inform to the oppressor upon their own countrymen) like Zacchaeus; or Samaritan lepers (doubly outcast for the Judeans) in society; or prostitutes like the one who dares to anoint his feet with priceless unguent; or children barred from entry—it is these encounters distinct to Luke which reveal the luminous quality of love. And the translation bears this out. This is how Hart renders the tenderness of Christ's feeling for Jerusalem: "How often I have wished to gather your children as would a bird her nestling beneath her wings." (Luke 13: 34.)

*"The Four Evangelists", 1625-1630, by Jacob Jordaens*