

*Letters to Young Churches; also,  
The New Testament in Modern English*

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John Bertram Phillips, born in 1906 and having died in 1982, was truly a man of the twentieth century. His translation efforts, beginning with his 1947 *Letters to Young Churches*, culminating with his 1972 revision of *The New Testament in Modern English*, display his on-going struggles to communicate God's Word to the general reader. In 1963 he published four of the Old Testament prophets (Amos, Hosea, First Isaiah and Micah). In 1958 he published his first edition of the entire New Testament (Macmillan Company). Which volume was a two tone hardcover (red and blue). Unknown to many readers were his numerous emendations and alterations seen in the 1958 release of the entire NT, which is apparent when one compares his earlier efforts: *Letters to Young Churches*, *The Gospels*, *The Young Church in Action* and *The Book of Revelation* to his 1958 version. In Great Britain, his 1958 NT, was titled: *The New Testament in Modern English for Schools*. In his 1958 NT his preface was also revised, and the glowing introduction from C. S. Lewis (in the 1947 *Letters to Young Churches*) is no longer retained.

Phillips in his 1967 publication of *Ring of Truth* (Macmillan 125 pp.), expands and clarifies his philosophy of translation, and strengthens his case against the modern liberal views concerning the integrity and validity of the New Testament text. I have not been able to discover the underlying reason why Phillips created his translation in the first place. He does state that he had difficulty communicating the KJV to young students in London during the second world war. Instead of using the earlier translations made by Moffatt, or Weymouth or Knox (all of which editions he praises), he sets out to make his own version! He also states that "...the preliminary abstracts to each letter will be found especially useful..." (1947, preface), intimating that their presence also justifies his translation effort.

John Phillips apparently loved the dear Lord Jesus Christ. He did not accept the "fundamentalist" view of verbal inspiration, and instead claims that "...it is the *truths* which are inspired and not the words, which are merely the vehicles of truth". (*Ring of Truth*, 21f.). In his 1947 preface he states: "the writer [i.e. himself] felt like an electrician rewiring an ancient house without being able 'to turn the mains off'". Operating within such a view, his translation focus shifts from words to various emotions or expressions, abandoning the solid foundation of pure literal semantics. Hence, his efforts are true paraphrases; as such with no genuine linguistic tethering, he must continually grope and modify his expressions in an attempt to communicate that always illusionary original impact which he supposes the first readers experienced. With a low view of verbal inspiration he is free to roam, and unrestrained subjectivity dominates his paraphrasing, despite his denials. Consequently, we note his revisions, each an effort to improve or explain. Such was the vicious cycle he was trapped in. One of his unsettling abrogations was his acceptance of modern critical views attending the text of the Greek New Testament. Unsettling, because he failed to link it with the other types of liberal agendas via which academics assailed the Holy Writ. In his 1958 and earlier translation efforts, he based his translation upon that Greek text which was followed by the English Revisors of 1881. Which text was closer to the Textus Receptus than say Westcott and Hort or Tischendorf. Upon reconstructing his textual base, it is apparent that he did try to agree with this 1881 Greek text, for example: (the Greek text of 1881 is as per: *The Parallel New Testament Greek and English*, Oxford 1882)

Romans 1:16, Phillips and the 1881 do not add "the Christ".

I Corinthians 1:22, Phillips and the 1881 read "Gentiles" as opposed to Greeks.

I Corinthians 1:23, Phillips and the 1881 read the plural "signs".

On other occasions he writes "Jesus Christ" wherein "Christ Jesus" is the 1881 reading; in his 1958 edition he often corrects the order to follow the 1881 Greek text. (Note Ephesians 2:20, Colossians 1:1 *et al*). This is all well and good, however sometime between his 1958 revision and his 1972 revision, Phillips rejected the 1881 text, and began following the modern critics in utilizing the then popular 1966

Nestle/Aland Greek text. Which text departs even further from the Textus Receptus than all other earlier Greek editions. This decision seems somewhat contradictory in light of some of his statements in *Ring of Truth*:

Let the modern world conform to him, [i.e. Jesus Christ] and never let us dare to try to make him fit into our clever-clever modern world. (page 10).

...it is worth pointing out how criticism by experts percolate through to the non-expert as detrimental and destructive. (page 17).

By the time each source and component has been tagged and labelled, this valiant and compelling body of writing is no more than a cadaver on the theological operating table. (page 17).

In light of the above, collectors should note that the 1972 edition of Phillips' paraphrase departs greatly from his pre-1958 attempts. It is these very pre-1958 editions which have a historical and illuminating value. They (in my opinion) contain a better textual base than his 1972 revision, they also reveal the very real struggles this energetic man had in his communication attempts. When one compares several of his differing editions, one sees first-hand the unlimited and often strained expressions in attempting to create a good paraphrase. Phillips left us with a fine record. Though the editions are not rare, they have various intrinsic values.