It takes nerves of steel, or a measure of incipient masochism, to agree to review a 550-page book whose cover bears a title that goes on for ten lines and begins with a thirteen-letter word that I had never heard of. But the fact that it was Part Three, implying that someone else was doing the first two volumes, seemed to make it more manageable. That, and the cost (about A$260), which meant that this was the only way I could afford to have a copy on my bookshelf!

This volume is the third volume of a study by retired Perth New Testament scholar, Richard Moore, on the Pauline doctrine of justification by faith. The first volume discusses the doctrine itself; in the second, Moore follows the historical development of the doctrine. The third traces how the significant passages in Romans and Galatians have been rendered in English translations, from the early work of John Wycliffe to the International Standard Version, the last published in the twentieth century. It will appeal to those with an interest in the history of the English Bible and to Bible translators who struggle to render this important doctrine in a clear and meaningful way for their audiences.

In Volume 1, Moore outlined his understanding of Paul’s doctrine of justification, of which the main element is God putting sinners in a right relationship, in good standing, with him. The motivation for this is God’s grace, Christ is God’s agent, and faith is the essential prerequisite in the process (see Moore’s Summary in Volume 1, pages 252–261). It would have been helpful for readers who do not have access to the first two volumes (as I did not, until near the end of the exercise) to have the Summary repeated at the beginning of Volume 3, but the reader who is in that situation will nonetheless pick up the salient points of Moore’s view in the first 40–50 pages of this volume.

In the Introduction of the third volume, Moore makes the startling claim that ‘the doctrine of “justification by faith”, so central to the early Reformers, [was] so obscure in the translations they produced’ (p 1). The major reason for this, he argues, is ‘the fact that the single family of Greek words which are at the very heart of the doctrine was rendered by two families of English words, between which there is no obvious semantic connection’ (p 2). He is referring to the Greek words from the root dikaiο- (abbreviated as the d-family), which are frequently rendered by the English R-family (‘righteous’ and cognates) and J-family (‘just’ and cognates). Although he does not argue it in this volume, Moore takes it as self-evident that it is ‘desirable, where possible, to reflect the original single word-family pattern’ (p 23). This is presumably (I presume he argues it in the first volume, which I did not have the opportunity of reading in detail) the reason he chose the term ‘rectification’ to describe Paul’s seminal doctrine instead of the familiar ‘justification’.
The first four hundred pages of this volume consist of detailed studies of how forty-five English versions have handled this word-family in Galatians 2:15–17 and Romans 1:16–17, 3:21–26 and 4:4–5. Each study begins with a brief historical introduction to the version, followed by detailed discussion of how the translators rendered the *dikaio-* root in Galatians and Romans. These discussions include general statistical observations of what terms the translators used, detailed analysis and assessment of the fidelity and intelligibility of the renderings, and the author’s conclusions on the quality of the translation. And to help readers, most of whom would not have access to the older or more obscure versions, Moore included, in an Appendix of about a hundred pages, a full extract of the relevant verses from each of the versions discussed.

Moore’s assessment of the different versions is based on how closely they represented his understanding of what Paul meant by justification/rectification, and how clearly and intelligibly they expressed it. In his view, the best translation is that of C. B. Williams, published in 1937. He claims that ‘Williams was the first to succeed in expressing in English translation the view that Paul intended to convey the concept of rectification as God’s conferral of the gift of right relationship’ (p 181). He calls it a ‘new departure’ (p 181) in Bible translation, and he clearly sees it as a pinnacle from which later versions have to greater or lesser degrees slipped. Only a few versions, eg Good News, Translator’s New Testament, New Century Version, come close to Williams in Moore’s opinion. Other versions, especially those that use the two English word families or provide a moral or forensic interpretation of the doctrine, are marked down, and if their interpretation is unintelligible, due to the use of traditional technical terms like ‘righteousness’ or ‘justification’, one suspects that Moore has given them a grade of F.

Moore’s assessments won’t appeal to everyone. He is, for example, highly critical of the Living Bible, calling it a ‘gross misrepresentation’ of the doctrine of justification and ‘Taylor’s theology, hung loosely on the general outline of each letter’ (pp 265–270). The New Living Translation fares no better: he calls it an ‘unsatisfactory revision’ and ‘a particular form of contemporary North American Christianity which is being imposed on the apostle [Paul] in such a way as to suggest that he did say such things’ (pp 359–365). Even the NIV is criticised as ‘tendentious at a number of doctrinally sensitive points’, with language that is ‘considerably more sexist even than the Greek it purported to represent’ (p 389). Adherents to the KJV may squirm at hearing of 24,000 variations from the 1611 version (pp 108, 378), and some supporters of the CEV may want to defend that version against Moore’s description of it as a ‘paraphrase’ (p 343). As for Peterson’s *The Message*, Moore found he had to omit it from his study, because ‘at numerous places there is simply no relationship between what Peterson offers and the underlying Greek…its claim to be a translation of any kind entirely lacks credibility. Instead, what we have is a series of thoughts based loosely on the New Testament text by a superb communicator’ (pp 13–14).

I found the historical introductions to each version fascinating. They provide a brief but valuable sketch of the history of the English Bible by not only listing the versions in chronological order but also by describing the reasons why each translation was done and its particular focus. The reader often receives intriguing snapshots of political or theological machinations behind otherwise well-known versions, or wonderful pearls of quotations, like the one in a letter of Thomas Cranmer that all translators will be able to identify with: ‘…until such time that we […] shall set forth a better translation, which I think will not be till a day after doomsday’ (p 45). Moore’s list includes about half a dozen versions that I had not heard of before, that of Williams being one.
The work is a masterful study of a restricted but important area of the New Testament. It clearly required great patience and close attention to detail; similar qualities are required of the careful reader. But Moore does his best to help by making his comments comprehensive and including all the basic reference material, so that nobody has the excuse that they did not have access to the material under discussion. But this comprehensiveness has its own drawback—forty-five translations of the same thirteen verses necessarily involve many similarities and repetitions, and one is tempted to skim over those versions that one is less interested in.

In a work as detailed and complicated as this, some small defects are understandable. I found about a dozen typographical errors, the most serious being the abbreviation GenB instead of GnB to describe the Geneva Bible on page 73. These were just minor distractions. More curious was Moore’s practice of interspersing abbreviated forms of the names of the months (eg Jul, Jun, Sep, Jan, Oct, Feb, Mar, Dec; pp 48–49, 63, 98, 101, 252–253, 296, 502) among ones that were spelled out in full. Once again, these were only minor distractions, but I could discern no reason for the inconsistency.

At the very end of his book, Moore raises some significant issues for Bible readers and publishers. In a world where there is a plethora of different versions, and Bibles are published and promoted with an eye to the market and profit, the faithfulness and accuracy of the translation can easily be compromised. Many of the newer versions aim at good communication (a ‘commendable’ and ‘essential’ element), but Moore asserts that the more important point is that ‘what is being communicated is faithful to the message and intention of the original biblical author’ (p 397). This appears self-evident, but this study has shown that the majority of translators since the Lollards of the fourteenth century have got it wrong, at least in respect to the doctrine of ‘justification/rectification’. So the question remains: Who evaluates the translations?

To give the last word to Moore: ‘Abandoning such evaluation and leaving Bible sales to commercial enterprise and the market place inevitably puts the truth in jeopardy’ (p 398).