

Book Reviews

The Holy Bible: New International Version (NIV). The New Testament. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1973), Paperback edition, 546 pp., 60p.

The appearance of yet another translation of the Scriptures will doubtless arouse many a bored 'Ho-hum!'; but the present reviewer is convinced that the NIV deserves careful and respectful attention—quite unlike the attitude of one reviewer who actually lumped it together with the *Living Bible!*

The NIV is a fresh translation—that is, it is not based on some previous translation. Plans for this work, sponsored by the New York Bible Society, began in the fifties, although major translation did not begin until 1968. The scholars are evangelicals, but the translation is preserved from sectarian bias by the diversity of their background. Most of them are Americans, including such notables as Dr. Richard N. Longenecker, Dr. R. Laird Harris, Dr. J. Barton Payne, Dr. Gleason L. Archer, Dr. Edmund Clowney, Dr. William Hendriksen, and Dr. Meredith G. Kline; but a few come from other countries, the best known being Dr. Leon Morris, Rev. F. Derek Kidner, Prof. W. J. Martin, and Prof. Donald J. Wiseman.

The unabashed goal of the translators is to produce a contemporary version which will 'do for our time, what the King James Version did for its day', and to reflect clearly 'the unity and harmony of the Spirit-inspired writings'. Accordingly, the translators have striven for accuracy, readability, and contemporary idiom, without sacrificing sobriety on the altar of novelty. They have eschewed sensationalism. With remarkable balance, they have avoided the opposing precipices of unwarranted paraphrasing and that mechanical literalism which fails to take note of the differences between languages.

The British edition conforms to the spelling of the OED, the American to Webster's Dictionary. The international flavour of the list of contributors is no doubt designed to eliminate American and British (and other) colloquialisms. Being a Canadian, I am more or less insensitive to both; and so I asked an English friend to try to find Americanisms. He noted the following: '... and turned him over to Pilate...' (Mt. 27:2; cf. Mk. 10:33; Lk. 18:32; as opposed to Lk. 22:6); 'insurrectionists' (Mk. 15:7); 'then they went bail for Jason...' (Acts 17:9); 'Have the people sit down...' (Jn. 6:10); frequent use of 'write' instead of 'write to' (e.g. 3 Jn. 13; Rom. 15:15; 1 Cor. 5:11; 2 Pet. 3:15). 'One of those days...' (Lk. 6:12) is surely awkward on both sides of the Atlantic.

The directness and simplicity of the NIV can only be appreciated by reading it through. It eliminates archaisms, including all obsolete verb forms and pronouns ('dost', 'begat', 'thee', etc.) as the text of Scripture was first penned in the idiom of the people (allowance made for LXX influence). It follows the KJV in avoiding capital letters for pronouns of Deity. Idioms which read smoothly in Greek but which sound strange to English ears of this century are expressed in flowing English idiom. For example, emphasis achieved by the pairing of verbs (e.g. 'they were amazed and marvelled, saying...' Acts 2:7) is

preserved, but in a more English form: 'Utterly amazed, they asked...'.

The translators hold closely to the inspired text: this is no rambling paraphrase. That said, they nevertheless rightly recognise that thought patterns, rules of grammar, and social customs differ from language to language, age to age, and culture to culture; and these differences necessarily affect the translation. Some examples of excellent judgment in the translation of Matthew's gospel include: 1:18, 'This is how the birth of Jesus Christ came about. His mother Mary was pledged to be married to Joseph, but before they began to live together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit.' 5:18, 'I tell you the truth, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished'. 16:22, 'Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Perish the thought, Lord!" he said. "This shall never happen to you!"' 22:16, 'They sent their disciples to him along with the Herodians. "Teacher," they said, "we know you are a man of integrity and that you teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. You aren't swayed by men, because you pay no attention to who they are.'" (The last two clauses in the KJV are rendered: 'neither carest thou for any man; for thou regardest not the person of men'.) 26:34, "'I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "this very night, before the cock crows, you will disown me three times"'. (This is much better than 'deny me'.) 27:24, 'When Pilate saw that he was getting nowhere, but that instead an uproar was starting...' An examination of John's Gospel produces evidence of similar clarity and precision: e.g. 1:12f., 'Yet to all who received him, to those who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God—children born not of natural descent (footnote: "Greek 'of bloods'"), nor of human decision or a husband's will, but born of God'. The very difficult idiom in John 2:4a is rendered, 'Why do you involve me?'

The NIV incorporates a minimal but helpful footnote system which gives alternative renderings, a little manuscript evidence, references to Old Testament quotations, and the occasional helpful note. An example of the latter is found in Matthew 1:17, to explain that 'the Christ' (Greek) and 'the Messiah' (Hebrew) both mean 'the Anointed One'. The paragraph layout is helpful, and the paragraph headings will assist readers to locate passages more rapidly. Only rarely are they misleading.

Good judgment has been shown by the translators in preserving the 'hour' numbers of the original (e.g. Jn. 1:31; 4:6; Mk. 15:34; etc.) since at least some students of Scripture question whether they all refer to Jewish time. The ambiguity of Romans 10:4 is likewise preserved: 'Christ is the end of the law so there may be righteousness for everyone who believes'. The word 'end' reflects the Greek *telos*, and both can mean 'completion' or 'goal'. (The NEB eliminates the ambiguity by its rendering, 'Christ ends the law'.) The 'saints' in Paul's letters become 'God's people'. 'Propitiation' becomes 'sacrifice of atonement' or 'atoning sacrifice'. The occasional interpretive phrases are helpful and are usually indicated by footnotes: e.g. in 1 Corinthians 7:36, the virgin becomes 'the virgin he is engaged to', the probable interpretation. The alternative, a reference to the man's daughter, is found in the footnote. Again, Romans 8:3 reads: 'For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by our sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering' (footnote: 'Or "man, for sin"'). Sometimes I would prefer the footnote and the text to exchange places: e.g. John 1:5, 'the darkness has not overpowered it' is probably a better rendering of *katelaben* than 'the darkness has not understood it' (cf. 12:35).

At some points where an ambiguity exists in the original, the translator must make up his mind, weighing the probabilities carefully and reverently. Inevitably, some will dispute his decision. Instances of this are found here and there. Not all will be convinced that the elders 'came to a decision' to put Jesus to death (Mk. 15:1; Mt. 27:1),

though I think this is probably correct. 2 Corinthians 3:13 equates 'the end of what was fading away' with the radiance. Again, I think that is correct, but many would judge that it is the law's passing which is in view. 2 Corinthians 5:17 is rendered, 'Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!' Some think the context requires, instead of 'he is a new creation', the rendering 'there is a new creation' or 'there is a new (act of) creation', a rendering of the Greek not less plausible than the other. In 1 Corinthians 12:1, the word rendered 'spiritual gifts' could be 'spiritual things', or even 'spiritual people'. But the translator cannot often sit on the fence. He must put down something, and, if he feels the alternatives to be of significance, he may record them in footnotes. The same may be said of the use of quotation marks. Does Jesus' speech in John 3 end after verse 13, verse 15, or verse 21? By and large, the NIV translators have, in my opinion, exercised good judgment.

A few printing errors have slipped by the proof readers: 'Woh' instead of 'Who' in Matthew 24:45; 'doing' instead of 'going' in Luke 10:31; a quotation mark instead of an exclamation mark in John 1:36; and somehow 'of the church in Ephesus write': was erroneously omitted from Revelation 2:1. References to money are not all handled the same way—even within the same book (compare, for example, Lk. 10:35; 15:8; 19:13; 20:24).

Christian students will realise, of course, that no translation is perfect. Decisions on translation, as on the Greek text itself (which, rightly, is eclectic), sometimes have to be taken on the basis of majority vote by the final committee. I think I took exception to proportionately more renderings in 1 John than any other New Testament book; but such opinions are better sent to the translation committee than used to bore readers of reviews. No doubt later editions will incorporate a number of desirable corrections. In all events, in the opinion of this reviewer, the NIV is the best version in the English language, eminently suitable both for private and public use, as well as for memory work. If the Old Testament, due in 1978, maintains the same high standard as what we already have before us, the publishers should be encouraged to produce the work in as many and varied an array of sizes and bindings as possible, in a solid effort to do for our day what the KJV did for its own day.

It is worth remembering that the KJV in its time was not accepted without a struggle; and further, that within the first fifty years of its advent, the Puritans twice attempted to set in motion the machinery necessary to revise it. Those eminent divines were already convinced that the KJV was dated, and sometimes plainly erroneous. With the fall of the Puritans from power, the dream passed. The NIV is the first version to convince this reviewer, at least, that the Puritan goal in this regard has been attained for our generation.

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