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The Book of Isaiah, from the New International Version (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1975)

Some time ago I wrote a review of the NIV New Testament. The Old Testament in this version is due off the press in 1978 in North America, and early in 1979 in Britain; but the translators and publishers have whetted our appetites by producing Isaiah in advance.

The New International Version is the product of several teams of evangelical scholars drawn from around the English-speaking world. Their aim has been to produce a contemporary translation of the Scriptures which molds together the strengths of accuracy, sensitivity and clarity. They try to use rugged, straightforward English that is contemporary without being quickly dated, dignified without being stilted, idiomatic without being colloquial. Sponsored by the New York Bible Society, they hope the NIV will fill the place in this day that the AV filled in its own day. In my judgment, the NIV New Testament fulfils, to a remarkable degree, all the aims but the last one; and this one too, may be achieved in time.

Of course, few of the scholars who worked on the NIV New Testament are working on the NIV Old Testament, since the latter was written in Hebrew and Aramaic and the former in Greek. Therefore many appreciative readers of the NIV New Testament have been cautious about supporting the NIV as a version until the Old Testament appeared in print.

If Isaiah is anything to go by, the Old Testament teams of translators have not let ~~their~~ side down at all. This translation by and large preserves the best of all worlds. It retains smooth cadence in the poetic sections, clarity, comprehensive scholarship, felicity of expression without sacrificing genuine precision, and at the same time provides pungent intelligibility.

The NIV Old Testament preserves "LORD" (in block letters) as the translation of the tetragrammaton (YHWH). Shaddai is rendered "Almighty". Where the AV has "Lord GOD" (the second word by its block letters indicating the tetragrammaton behind it), the NIV offers "Sovereign LORD" - a rendering at once more consistent and more accurate: eg.

For as the soil makes the sprout come up
and a garden causes seeds to grow,
so the Sovereign LORD will make righteousness and praise
spring up before all nations.

(Isa. 61:11)

The NIV Isaiah uses poetic format wherever the text itself is full of poetic parallelism; the rest is printed in paragraph form. Sectional headings, in italics, are helpful without being obtrusive. The only aid to pronunciation is the inclusion of bullets to separate syllables which might mistakenly be coalesced: eg. Mo·ab.

Footnotes are kept to a minimum, and are used for four things. First, in a handful of cases, an alternative translation of the text is offered (eg. at 63:19) or an explanation of the difficulty the translators must face (eg. at 43:28 and at 28:10). Second, in one place where, in the text, the Hebrew words for "ten-yoke", "bath", "homer" and "ephah" have been rendered, respectively, by "ten-acre", "a few gallons", "six bushels" and "half a bushel", an explanatory note is included (5:10). Third, a few Hebrew words are translated differently because of the exigencies of idiom, or the odd place-name is identified: for example, "Cush" is always noted as the name for "ancient Ethiopia", "Chaldeans" as the equivalent of "Babylonians".

The fourth use of footnotes is perhaps the most important. The NIV translators have adhered pretty closely to the standard Masoretic text (MT); but, wisely, they have not followed it slavishly. In a small number of instances, they adopt the reading of one of the Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) and/or of the Septuagint (LXX). In about the same number of instances, they retain the MT while noting the alternative DSS or LXX reading in a footnote, judging it to be worthy of mention even if not worthy of inclusion in the translation itself.

Thus, in a passage that has been a classic conundrum for a long time, NIV rightly has:

How the oppressor has come to an end!
How his fury has ended! (Isa. 14:4)

while the AV offers, "How hath the oppressor ceased! the golden city ceased!" The NIV and the RSV are here very close. The NIV translators, however, have been very cautious about abandoning the MT. Indeed, in a few instances, one wonders why the Dead Sea Scrolls are not even accorded honourable mention (eg. at 40:12; 60:19).

Perhaps the most useful thing I could do is to copy out a few

passages from NIV Isaiah in order to provide some idea of its flavour:

"Woe to me," I cried. "I am ruined! For I am a man of unclean lips, and I live among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD Almighty."

(Isa. 6:5)

When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people consult their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn.

(Isa. 8:19f)

This is the plan determined for the whole world;
this is the hand stretched out over all nations.
For the LORD Almighty has purposed, and who can thwart him?
His hand is stretched out, and who can turn it back?

(Isa. 14:26f.)

On this mountain he will destroy
the shroud that enfolds all peoples,
the sheet that covers all nations -
he will swallow up death forever.
The Sovereign LORD will wipe away the tears
from all faces;
He will remove the disgrace of his people
from all the earth.

The LORD has spoken.

(Isa. 25:7f.)

So this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

See, I lay a stone in Zion,
a tested stone,
a precious cornerstone for a sure foundation;
the one who trusts will never be dismayed.

(Isa. 28:16)

In the fourteenth year of King Hezekiah's reign, Sennacherib king of Assyria attacked all the fortified cities of Judah and captured them. Then the king of Assyria sent his field commander (an excellent rendering of AV's "Rabshakeh") with a large army from Lachish to King Hezekiah at Jerusalem.

(Isa. 36:1,2a)

Surely he took up our infirmities
and carried our sorrows,
yet we considered him stricken by God,
smitten by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was upon him,
and by his wounds we are healed.

All we, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to his own way;
and the LORD has laid on him

the iniquity of us all. (Isa. 53:4-6)

The NIV Isaiah, in my judgment, is uniformly excellent. It is eminently suitable for both public reading and private study and memorization. One might question this or that rendering, entertain the occasional doubt about a particular textual choice, marvel at the retention of "Behold" at 65:17 (although in this case, a better choice does not spring readily to mind); but these are quibbles. This version is smoother, more accurate and more intelligible (because more contemporary) than the AV; less stultified than the New American Standard Bible; more faithful to the text and less pompous than the New English Bible.

I look forward with eager anticipation to the appearance of the completed NIV.

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