

HOLY BIBLE: THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

Hodder and Stoughton.

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In April 1974 I reviewed the NIV New Testament in the columns of this paper; and in July 1977 I followed that up with a review of the NIV's 'Isaiah', the first part of the NIV Old Testament to be published. The entire Bible in the NIV was published in Britain on February 26 and this is therefore the final part of the overall review.

The NIV is a new translation of the Scriptures, not a revision. It had its beginning in the vision of the Christian Reformed Church in America, and in the National Association of Evangelicals (a group not altogether unlike the BEC). However, by 1966 the control of the new translation was placed on a much broader base — broader in the sense that scholars were chosen across denominational lines and international borders. Evangelical commitment was the common binding factor, but sectarianism was prevented by the rich diversity of denominational backgrounds from which the scholars emerged.

Ultimate responsibility was placed in the hands of a self-governing body of 15, the Committee on Bible Translation. This body made final decisions; it did not do all the work. Each translation went through several committees, the hands of literary experts complementing those of linguistic and biblical experts.

To the very end of the task, the senior committee encouraged open lines of communication, inviting criticism from those who thought they might have something to contribute. (At least one reader of this paper had his suggestions taken into account). As far as I know, no serious objection or suggestion was ignored. Indeed, a small number of improvements have been introduced into the NIV New Testament which first appeared five years ago.

The vast sums required to finance the project were put up by the independent New York Bible Society (now the New York International Bible Society).

Some have asked whether this version is a literal translation or a paraphrase. The answer is difficult because the question assumes an 'either-or' stance. We may legitimately distinguish between a literal translation and a paraphrase by contrasting extreme examples: say, the *Revised Version* of 1881, and the *Living Bible*. Even in

One liberal reviewer accused the NIV of being 'mainly a fundamentalist rival to recent versions like the Good News Bible. He asserted that in the NIV 'theological (i.e. evangelical) influences are at work to determine the translations of various passages' — and cite its rendering of Isaiah 7.14 ('a virgin shall be with child . . .') as evidence of 'glaring subjection of translation to late theological doctrines'.

So if some liberals dismiss it as theologically conservative, what does an evangelical make of it?

The NIV whole Bible is here reviewed by Dr. Donald A. Carson, Canadian Baptist pastor. When he reviewed the NIV New Testament in 1974, he was studying in Cambridge and a member of Eden Street Baptist Chapel. He is now teaching theology in the USA.

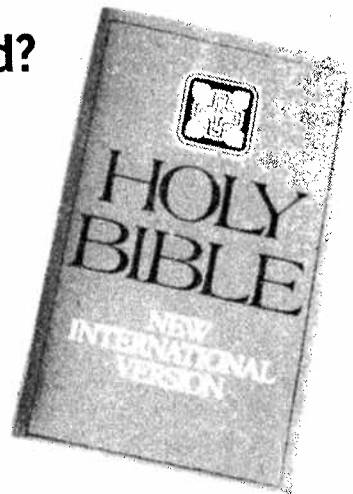
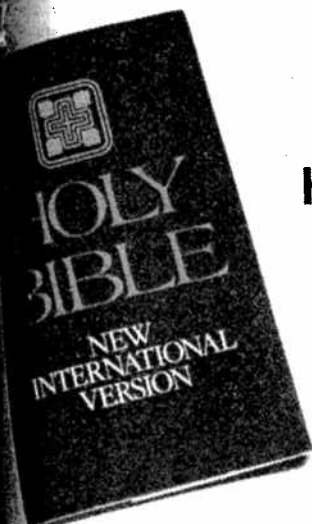
such instances, however, the paraphrastic *Living Bible* boasts many literary renderings and the RV must resort to paraphrasis to cope with idioms English does not have.

When we move away from the extremes toward the centre of the spectrum, the distinction between literary translation and paraphrase becomes artificial. There is no agreed cross-over point. A translation is too paraphrastic if it conveys meaning other than, less than, or more than what is in the original text; it is too literal if it sounds harsher, more confused or less natural than the original text did to its first readers. In other words, a translation may be criticized for being too literal just as it may be criticized for being too paraphrastic.

From this perspective, the NIV is excellent. It uses clear, uncluttered modern English, yet it seeks to convey the meaning of the original as clearly as possible. The British editions have British spelling.

Criticisms of the NIV's English have so far been of two kinds, both unjustified. Some feel that the language is not archaic enough, holding that archaism and piety are somehow united. Others, enamoured by the Oxbridge sound of the *New English Bible*, feel that the NIV is too prosaic, even trivial. But how many readers of Holy Scripture have enjoyed the advantages of British university education? At any rate, it is worth remembering that the writers of the New Testament did not use the affected Greek of an earlier age, even though that was the literary fashion of the time. Rather, with minor adaptations, they chose the simple Greek of common parlance.

It takes a long time and sustained



Hopes fulfilled? Fears allayed?

A look at the NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION

The LORD is my light and my salvation —
whom shall I fear?
The LORD is the stronghold of my life —
of whom shall I be afraid? Ps 27.1.
By wisdom the LORD laid the earth's foundations,
by understanding he set the heavens in place;
by his knowledge the deeps were divided,
and the clouds let drop the dew.
Proverbs 3.19,20.

Hear this word the LORD has spoken against you, O people of Israel — against the whole family I brought up out of Egypt:
You only have I chosen of all the families of the earth; therefore I will punish you for all your sins.' Amos 3.1,2.

The translators claim to have aimed at language that is 'idiomatic but not idiosyncratic, contemporary but not dated'. At this point their success is remarkable.

One of the problems surrounding the plethora of English translations today is the fact that, partly because no one translation dominates, memorization of Scripture is fast becoming a lost discipline. The use of one translation for public worship, private meditation, family devotions, evangelistic preaching and mass distribution is much to be desired. For several years I have been using the NIV New Testament for all of these purposes. I take delight now to find the NIV Old Testament equally acceptable in these areas.

Some, no doubt, will choose some other translation over the NIV. I have no quarrel with them. Nevertheless, the days have come when individuals and congregations must make conscious choices as to what they will use. Failure to choose will engender needless diversity; and in many areas, church retention of the KJV for the sake of tradition will find many members and adherents adopting all kinds of other translations with little thought as to accuracy or literary quality. If congregations, like individuals, must choose, they could not choose better than the NIV.

The handicaps still plaguing the NIV are two in number: first the NIV is a late entry; and second, it has not yet appeared in study editions with marginal references (like those of the New American Standard Bible, for example). The latter problem will no doubt be remedied within a few years; the former need not be a decisive limitation.

No translation is perfect; but this one ranks with the best. May the incarnate and glorified Word use this translation of the written Word to advance his kingdom, strengthen his church, and bring glory and honour to his own name.

begin to assess a translation adequately. This review is by way of interim report. Perhaps it would be most useful at this stage to focus on a number of passages to see what the NIV makes of them. The passages chosen are all from the Old Testament, but from Isaiah, as earlier reviews have discussed the NIV translation of Isaiah and of the New Testament. One preliminary remark may be useful: The Old Testament translators and large follow the Massoretic text published in the latest editions of the Biblia Hebraica; but they have not felt it necessary to do so, and from time to time deal judiciously to the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and other sources. In each instance there is a clear footnote. Other footnotes are explanatory or offer alternative translations.

Gen. 1.1 reads: 'In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth.' In other words, these words are treated as an independent sentence instead of being subordinated to the next clause. Gen. 2.4 is presented as the introduction of what follows, not (as in many versions) as the conclusion of what precedes. Gen. 11.1 reads: 'Now the whole world had one language and a common speech' — to be vastly preferred over the NIV's 'Once upon a time all the world spoke a single language and used the same words', which sounds like the introduction to a fairy tale. In the difficult Shiloh clause of Gen. 22.10, NIV offers 'until he comes to know it belongs', which is most likely incorrect. NIV is sensitive to the vast range of meaning in Hebrew words like *ruach* and *nephesh*. For instance, it rightly translates the latter by 'neck' in Ps. 69.1:

'for the waters have come up to my neck'.

As in the New Testament, the NIV Old Testament has introduced helpful headings at discrete intervals. These are usually not interpretative, but descriptive. Sometimes they are more than commonly helpful, as in the Song of Solomon where the various speakers are identified by the headings. In Hebrew the speakers are identified by the inflections; but this is usually lost in English translation.

Two Psalms with well-known difficulties of interpretation are the second and the forty-fifth. The NIV retains the Aramaic word *bar* in 2.12: 'Kiss the Son, lest he be angry'. A footnote offers 'or son' (without the capital letter); but the suggestion of the Septuagint or the emendations of the NEB are alike (and no doubt rightly) ignored considering the reference to 'son' in verse 7. Ps. 45.6 is, in the NIV: 'your throne, O God, will last for ever and ever'.

In Dan. 7.13, the Aramaic reads: 'like a son of man'. The NIV renders it just this way; for even if the expression is equivalent to 'human being' in this and some other passages, it is also the foundation of a major Christological title.

In Eccl. 1.2, NIV reads: 'Meaningless! Meaningless!' — says the Teacher. 'Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.'

Perhaps that is acceptable. The word 'meaningless' is not as evocative as 'vanity', but no doubt more accurate. Often in Ecclesiastes the expression translated 'meaningless' by NIV and 'vanity' by KJV seems to refer to what is transitory. But I do not have the courage to recommend that 'transitory'

should displace 'meaningless'. In Zech. 12.10 the transition from first person singular to third person singular is dealt with by a clause in apposition: 'They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and mourn for him'.

The ineffable name *YHWH* is translated 'the LORD'; and when preceded by *adonai* it becomes 'Sovereign LORD', an excellent rendering. 'YHWH of hosts' becomes 'LORD Almighty', and 'YHWH God of hosts' becomes 'LORD God Almighty'. These renderings are accurate enough, but cannot be distinguished from *shaddai*, also rendered 'Almighty'. However, when the latter occurs, a footnote identifies the Hebrew word.

Very occasionally, NIV seems to soften a harsh saying. In 1 Sam. 15.33, we no longer read that Samuel hewed Agag in pieces; rather, he 'put Agag to death'. It is always difficult to know just how to render a Hebrew idiom like that in 1 Sam. 24.3, where Saul goes into a cave to cover his feet. The NIV, like the NEB, says he went in 'to relieve himself' — vastly to be preferred over the jolting Americanism in the *Living Bible*: 'Saul went into a cave to go to the bathroom'.

Perhaps it would be worth citing a number of well-known passages from the NIV:

Do not let this Book of the Law depart from your mouth; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be terrified; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go. Joshua 1.8,9.