

The Holy Bible--Revised Authorised Version (London: Samuel Bagster and Sons; Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1982).

In 1979, Thomas Nelson published the New Testament and Psalms in what came to be called the NKJV--the New King James Version. Now the entire Bible is complete in this version; and in the British edition, in order to retain links with the AV (known as the KJV in America), it is labelled the Revised Authorised Version (RAV).

The AV of 1611 was published with the Apocrypha, and was freighted with a large number of printing errors. Revisions were undertaken almost immediately, and continued sporadically until the present form of the AV was reached in 1769. The publishers of the RAV understand their work to be a continuation of this process, a modernising of the AV that retains the merits of the old version still revered in many parts of the church.

A quick reading of well-known passages turns up the nature of the changes pretty quickly. "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen 1:1)--"heaven" (AV) becomes "heavens". "The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters" (Gen 1:2)--"upon" (AV) becomes "on", "moved upon" becomes "was hovering over"; the RAV retains the AV's practice of italicising words with no specific counterpart in the original. "Now Adam knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Cain, and said, 'I have acquired a man from the LORD'" (Gen 4:1)--AV's prefatory "And" becomes "Now", "bare" becomes "bore", "gotten" becomes "acquired", quotation marks are introduced, and the tetragrammeton (the divine name often represented in English as YHWH or Yahweh) is still represented LORD (in capital letters, as in the AV). "And Joab was told, 'Behold, the king is weeping and mourning for Absalom'" (2 Sam 19:1)--"it was told Joab" (AV) is transposed into the personal passive

"Joab was told", the archaic forms "weepeth" and "mourneth" are modernised, but the equally archaic "Behold" is retained.

Turning to a poetic section, we find, for instance:

What man is like Job,
 Who drinks scorn like water,
 Who goes in company
 with the workers of iniquity,
 And walks with wicked men?

(Job 34:7,8)

The RAV, unlike the AV, adopts poetic form, modernises some of the English ("scorning" becomes "scorn", "goeth" becomes "goes", "Which" becomes "Who", and cleans up some of the worst abuses of punctuation.

Another piece of poetry clearly shows that the RAV, like the AV before it, does not capitalise pronouns of Deity; but departing from the AV, it uses modern pronouns, not traditional "thees" and "thous", even when men are addressing God:

Against you, you only, have I sinned,
 And done this evil in your sight--
 That you may be found just when
 you speak,
And blameless when you judge.

(Psa 51:4)

New Testament passages reveal similar features. Matt 16:17,18 becomes, "Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I also say to you that you are Peter, and on this Rock I will build my church, and the gates of Hades shall not prevail against it." John 3:3 now reads, "Jesus answered and said to him,

'Most assuredly, I say to you, unless one is born again, he cannot see the kingdom of God.'" AV's "Counselor" in John 14-16 becomes "Helper." RAV retains verse structure, not paragraph structure; but it indicates the onset of a new paragraph by putting the relevant verse number into oblique type--the same font used for quotations from the Old Testament in the New.

In more general terms, any Bible translation must be assessed in at least two areas: the texts used, and the quality of the translation. The editors of the RAV tell us that in the Old Testament they used the 1967-77 Stuttgart edition of Biblia Hebraica, while making frequent comparisons with the Bomberg edition of 1524-25. They also claim to have consulted the LXX (i.e. the Greek Septuagint), the Latin Vulgate and relevant manuscripts from the DSS (the Dead Sea Scrolls). "Significant variations," we are told, "are recorded in footnotes." How widely these sources have been used is debatable: at a number of spot checks, I found no mention of important variants. For instance, the LXX and the DSS combine against the Masoretic text at Isa 53:11b to provide "he will see the light of life" (NIV); RAV makes no mention of this.

In the New Testament, the editors have chosen to follow the AV without textual change. In the footnotes, they provide alternatives labelled NU-Text and M-Text. The former refers to the eclectic text of Nestle-Aland and the United Bible Societies, while the latter refers to the reading obtained if one simply counts up the number of manuscripts supporting any particular reading and goes with the "majority text". This "majority text" (or M-Text) is of course closer to the text used by King James's men than is the NU-Text. The editors offer a brief defence of the M-Text, although the great majority of textual critics, including evangelical text critics, come down on the other side of this issue. What is more surprising, however, is that the RAV follows the text of the AV, based as it was on a mere handful of relatively late manuscripts, even

when it differs from both the NU-Text and the M-Text. This shows up not only in relatively incidental cases (e.g. John 13:25), but also in passages where the changes have some significance (e.g. Rev 22) and even in cases of considerable notoriety (e.g. the three heavenly witnesses passage, 1 John 5:7b-8a). The rationale for this remarkable adherence to a textual tradition that virtually all sides admit is inadequate is that "most textual variants have no practical effect on translation". On the contrary: they do have an effect on the translation of specific passages, but little effect on the doctrinal impact of the Bible as a whole.

As far as the translation technique of the RAV is concerned, there is good news and bad news. The good news is that the beloved AV has indeed been substantially modernised. The bad news is that not only does this modernisation fail to go far enough, but the editors betray considerable linguistic naivete in the defence of their procedures. What they call the "principle of complete equivalence" tries, they say, "to preserve all of the information in the text, while presenting it in good literary form"; and this they contrast with "dynamic equivalence" which "commonly results in paraphrasing where a more literal rendering is needed to reflect a specific and vital sense." This is simply unfair. A translation can as easily be inadequate or misleading because it is too literal as because it is too paraphrastic. The God who inspired the words of Scripture equally inspired Scripture's syntax and idioms; and good translation technique requires that the translator look not only for the best corresponding words but also for the best corresponding syntax and idioms in the receptor language. For instance, it is good Greek idiom to begin most Greek sentences with conjunctions; but it is not good English idiom to begin most English sentences with "And". To preserve "all of the information" of the donor text, a good translator must preserve among other things the degree of naturalness;

and on that score, not only the presence of too many "ands" but also countless awkward passages conspire to give the RAV a poor grade. Consider, for example, 2 Cor 13:2,3 in the RAV: "I have told you before, and foretell as if I were present the second time, and now being absent I write to those who have sinned before, and to all the rest, that if I come again I will not spare--since you seek a proof of Christ speaking in me, who is not weak towards you, but mighty in you." Contrast the NIV's rendering of the same passage: "I already gave you a warning when I was with you the second time. I now repeat it while absent: On my return I will not spare those who sinned earlier or any of the others, since you are demanding proof that Christ is speaking through me. He is not weak in dealing with you, but is powerful among you." I would be prepared to argue at some length that the NIV more precisely (not to say more readably!) conveys to English readers what Paul wrote to his Greek readers than does the RAV.

Confidence in the editors' grasp of these matters is not inspired by the example they give of faulty "dynamic equivalence." They criticise versions that render a Greek expression in John 3:16 by "only Son" or "one and only Son" rather than by "only begotten Son"--"especially," they say, "in consideration of the historic Nicene statement concerning the person of Christ, 'begotten, not made,' which is a crucial Christian doctrine." Quite apart from the fact that this is an extraordinarily anachronistic approach to the determination of a word's meaning, it is unclear whether the editors think the Nicene statement refers to what some call "the eternal begetting of the Son" (which is not well grounded in Scripture) or the miraculous begetting of the Son as a human being by the virgin Mary (which is attested by clear passages and does not depend on the meaning of one word). In any case, the dispute over the Greek word monogenēs sheds no light on dynamic equivalence; for those who render it by "only" or "one and only", far from being guilty of undisciplined paraphrasis, actually hold

the word means something like "one and only." Etymology does not establish the meaning of a word: use and context do. Failure to grasp the point is to succumb to "the root fallacy". Even at the etymological level, monogenēs could as easily be related to monos (only)/genos (kind) as to monos (only)/gennaō (I beget). If usage is crucial, lexicology favors the view that the word means something like "only one of its kind" or "unique" or "unique and therefore beloved." Hence, when Isaac is called Abraham's monogenēs (Heb 11:17), he is not Abraham's "only begotten son" (RAV), since Abraham also sired Ishmael, not to mention his progeny by Keturah (Gen 25:1,2). But Isaac was indeed Abraham's unique son, his special and beloved son, his "one and only" son in that sense.

Perhaps the editors fall victim to a deeper misapprehension yet. They praise the quality of scholarship displayed by King James's men, suggesting that their classical education gave them an edge over their modern counterparts. But some moderns have also received a classical education: learning did not cease in the seventeenth century. And in two relevant respects, our knowledge is vastly superior to theirs: first, in linguistics and translation technique, primarily because so much more experience in translation work has accumulated since then; and second, in the distinctions between classical Greek and the Hellenistic Greek of the New Testament period. Whatever disputes there may be regarding the precise level of New Testament Greek, it certainly cannot be interpreted by a strict application of the rules of classical Greek. Too often, however, that is what King James's men tried to do, for the great papyrological finds had not yet occurred. To update an old translation and not take into account these relatively recent, God-given aids to understanding and translating the text is singularly unfortunate.

In short, the RAV will serve a useful purpose in helping some Christians move cautiously away from the AV to something very much like it but considerably

(if still insufficiently) more modern. Some readers of the AV will shun the RAV because of a life-long attachment to the Elisebethan English of the former. Certainly there is no good reason why Christians or local congregations who have adopted as their preferred English version the NIV (for instance) should revert to the RAV. Its text is inferior, and its translation substandard.

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