

# THE REFORMED THEOLOGICAL REVIEW

---

Vol. L

JANUARY - APRIL, 1991

No. 1

---

## A Review of the New Revised Standard Version\*

The last few decades have witnessed the production of dozens of English versions of the Bible. For a variety of reasons, some of these are important contributions; at the other end of the scale, a few could sink without a trace into a sea of oblivion without any appreciable diminution of knowledge. The NRSV clearly belongs in the former group; in some constituencies it will be judged to lead the pack.

### A. General Impressions

I shall begin by providing examples of the flavour of the NRSV, together with some brief observations, and then offer a few more general remarks on several noteworthy features of this translation.

Gen. 22:8    **RSV**    "Abraham said, 'God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son.' So they went both of them together."

**NRSV**    "Abraham said, 'God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering my son.' So the two of them walked on together."

Note the changed word order. "God will provide himself the lamb" becomes "God himself will provide the lamb"; "my son" is retained in the NRSV, since the referent is clearly male; and the last line in the NRSV is incomparably smoother than in the RSV.

---

\* This was prepared for oral delivery at the Annual Meeting of the Society of Biblical Literature, held in New Orleans, 19 Nov. 1990. It followed papers by Bruce Metzger and Walter Harrelson, who were responsible for the NT and OT sections of the NRSV respectively.

Exod. 11:8 **RSV** "And he left Pharaoh in hot anger."  
**NRSV** "And in hot anger he left Pharaoh."

It is rather useful to relocate that misplaced modifier. Another example of the same species of improvement is found in

Zech. 3:3 **RSV** "Now Joshua was standing before the angel, clothed in filthy garments."  
**NRSV** "Now Joshua was dressed in filthy garments as he stood before the angel."

Two examples where it seems advantageous to adopt a slightly less literal reading than the one espoused by the RSV:

1 Sam. 11:2 **RSV** "gouge out all your right eyes"  
**NRSV** "gouge out everyone's right eye"  
 Cant. 1:5 **RSV** "I am very dark, but comely"  
**NRSV** "I am black and beautiful"

The least that can be said in favour of the latter is that the Hebrew does not have to be read with adversative force.

Some changes are stylistic improvements, even if the resulting translation is less "literal":

Phil. 1:21 **RSV** "For to me to live is Christ, and to die is gain."  
**NRSV** "For to me, living is Christ and dying is gain."  
 Phil. 1:27 **RSV** "For it has been granted to you that for the sake of Christ you should not only believe in him but also suffer for his sake."  
**NRSV** "For he has graciously granted you the privilege not only of believing in Christ, but of suffering for him as well."  
 Deut. 29:5 **RSV** "Your sandals have not worn off your feet."  
**NRSV** "Your sandals have not worn out on your feet."

It is surely better to think of David as a musician than as a manufacturer of musical instruments. The undisciplined in Amos's day

Amos 6:5 **RSV** "sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David invent for themselves instruments of music"  
**NRSV** "sing idle songs to the sound of the harp, and like David improvise on instruments of music".

There are two rather celebrated instances where changes in the wording reflect sensitivity to changes that have taken place in English during the last forty years:

Psa. 50:9 **RSV** "I will accept no bull from your house"

**NRSV** "I will not accept a bull from your house"

2 Cor. 11:25 **RSV** "Once I was stoned"

**NRSV** "Once I received a stoning"

- though "receiving a stoning" somehow seems to downplay the experience.

Several revealing changes come together in the first verse of Ps. 1:

Psa. 1:1 **RSV** "Blessed is the man  
 who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,  
 nor stands in the way of sinners,  
 nor sits in the seat of scoffers."

**NRSV** "Happy are those  
 who do not follow the advice of the wicked,  
 or take the path that sinners tread,  
 or sit in the seat of scoffers."

Note the changes: (1) "Blessed" becomes "Happy": I doubt that this is an improvement: it focuses too narrowly on one's psychological state rather than on God's approval. NRSV does not consistently render *ashrē* by "happy"; nor is *μακάριος* normally so rendered (e.g. the beatitudes deploy "Blessed"). (2) The singular "man" is put into the plural in order to avoid sexist language. That is an altogether happy device, one that is, of course, entirely sensitive both to the meaning of the text and to modern usage. (3) The word "counsel" becomes "advice", thereby imparting a more informal tone, which is certainly what is meant by the psalmist. (4) The older English style (often associated with poetry) reflected in the word order "walks not", becomes "does not" (or, more accurately, "do not", since of course NRSV has gone to the plural). (5) The verb "to walk" has been replaced by the verb "to follow", presumably because the change from "counsel" to "advice" demands this change in the verb if contemporary English idiom is to be respected. (6) The line "nor stands in the way of sinners" – an abysmally literal translation that conveys entirely the wrong impression in English, conjuring up images, perhaps, of Robin Hood and Little John standing in each other's way on the bridge – becomes "or take the path that sinners tread". That is much closer to the idea, and surprisingly few translations have it right. One of the few is the French "Colombe": "Qui ne s'arrête pas sur le chemin des pêcheurs."

A number of revealing changes, most of them happy, come together in Psa. 8:

Psa. 8:1 **RSV** "O LORD, our God,  
 how majestic is thy name in all the earth."

**NRSV** "O LORD, our Sovereign,  
 how majestic is your name in all the earth."

Apart from the obvious elimination of all archaic forms of English verbs and pronouns (thees and thous are out, even when addressing Deity, in line with, say, NIV) "our

Lord” becomes “our Sovereign”. On the other hand, in Psa. 110:1 both RSV and NRSV read “The LORD says to my lord.”

Psa. 8:4 RSV “what is man that thou art mindful of him,  
and the son of man that thou carest for him?”  
NRSV “what are human beings that you are mindful of them,  
mortals [fn: “lit. ‘son of man’”] that you care for them?”

Frequently the language of the NRSV is more vivid or more explicit than that of its predecessor.

John 2:20 RSV “and when men have drunk freely, then the poor wine”  
NRSV “and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk”

Quite apart from the transformation of “men” to “guests” (contextually unobjectionable), this is one of many instances where NRSV is prepared to invert clausal order. Certainly the verb *μεθύω* suggests somewhat more inebriation than “to drink freely”; whether it necessarily suggests quite as much as “to become drunk” is difficult to say. Certainly the RSV can be a mite timid:

Gal. 5:12 RSV “I wish those who unsettle you would mutilate themselves.”

No one would say the same thing of

NRSV “I wish those who unsettle you would castrate themselves.”

In one of his written explanations of the NRSV, Prof. Metzger points to places where the concern to prepare a version for public reading was born in mind. Hence the following change:

Luke 22:35 RSV “And he said to them, ‘When I sent you out with no purse or bag or sandals, did you lack anything?’ They said, ‘Nothing.’”  
NRSV “...They said, ‘No, not a thing.’”

In short, by any reckoning the NRSV is fresh, powerful, interesting, and usually right. I would now like to focus on several concrete areas:

## B. Changes with More Theological Significance

Most of the examples provided so far affect very little, theologically speaking, apart from their bearing on the inclusive language debate, about which I shall say more in a moment. But there are many changes that have subtle theological overtones. Only sometimes am I able to perceive why they have been introduced.

John 2:4 RSV “O woman, what have you to do with me?”  
NRSV “Woman, what concern is that to you and to me?”

Doubtless *γίναι, τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί* is notoriously difficult to translate. But one thing is clear: both in its Greek usage and in the semitic background, the expression *always* administers a rebuke. The NRSV sounds more like a collegial and rhetorical reflection than a rebuke.

John 3:3 RSV “Truly, truly, I say to you, unless one is born anew, he cannot see the kingdom of God.”  
NRSV “Very truly, I tell you, no one can see the kingdom of God without being born from above.”

Again NRSV inverts clause order. Its rendering of the Johannine doubled *ἀμην* (“very truly”) is, I suppose better than RSV’s “truly truly”, though I suspect NIV’s “I tell you the truth” (rendering the entire *ἀμην, ἀμην, λέγω ὑμῖν*) is more natural if less literal, and loses nothing. The really interesting change, however is from “anew” to “from above” (rendering *ἀνωθεν*). I agree with it, but that is incidental; more importantly, it is one of hundreds of changes where I wish I could have been party to the discussions so as to learn what motivated the change. Other examples:

John 14–16: The *παράκλητος* is no longer the Counselor; he is now the Advocate (fn.: “Helper”).

John 7:37–38 RSV “If anyone thirst, let him come to me and drink. He who believes in me, as the scripture has said, ‘Out of his heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

NRSV “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me, and let the one who believes in me drink. As the scripture has said, ‘Out of the believer’s heart shall flow rivers of living water.’”

This is a notorious crux, of course. But out of the concern to avoid the masculine pronoun “his” (“out of *his* heart”), NRSV has done away with the ambiguity (Is the referent the believer, or Christ?), and come down on the side of the believer. That is almost certainly the wrong choice, especially if the “scripture” to which reference is made is Neh. 9, including *its* references back to the establishment of the Feast of Tabernacles, as I have argued elsewhere.<sup>1</sup>

Rom. 3:25 RSV “whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood, to be received by faith”

NRSV “whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood, effective through faith”

NRSV follows NIV’s lamentably obscure “sacrifice of atonement”; “effective through faith,” however, is a wonderful solution.

Rom. 9:5 RSV “to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for

<sup>1</sup> D. A. Carson, *The Gospel of John* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), *ad loc.*

ever. Amen.”

**NRSV** “to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen.”

The really significant change here, of course, is the one that makes “God blessed forever” appositional to Messiah, as in the **KJV**. Doubtless the Committee was persuaded by its chairperson’s excellent article in the Moule *Festschrift*.<sup>2</sup> Somewhat more mystifying is the use of “Messiah” as opposed to “Christ”. Frequently the more semitic form is used where the Greek has an article, but this does not appear to be consistent. N. T. Wright of Oxford has argued that even where *χριστός* is slipping over into becoming a name, it never in the NT entirely loses its titular force. The distribution of “Messiah” and “Christ” in the **NRSV** does not follow a plan I can identify. Acts goes back and forth (16 times for the former, 12 for the latter); Matthew begins with “An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah”, whereas Mark begins with “The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ.”

Phil. 1:6 **RSV** “he who began a good work in you will bring it to completion at the day of Jesus Christ”

**NRSV** “the one who began ... by the day of Jesus Christ”

The change from “he” to “the one” is unexceptional, even though **NRSV** does not normally try to remove masculine pronouns that refer to Deity. The change in preposition certainly affects one’s understanding of the eschatological dimensions of the text.

Phil. 1:7 **RSV** “because I hold you in my heart”

**NRSV** “because you hold me in your heart”

The change does not, of course, depend on a textual variant, but on a problematic infinitive compounded with a double accusative: which accusative functions as the quasi “subject”, which as the object? Commentators have gone back and forth. If the Moeller-Kramer rule is correct, however, **RSV** has it right, and **NRSV** has erred.<sup>3</sup>

Phil. 2:13 **RSV** “for God is at work in you, both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

**NRSV** “for it is God who is at work in you, enabling you both to will and to work for his good pleasure.”

Surely this is quite unwarranted weakening of the compatibilism that Paul here assumes.

<sup>2</sup> B. M. Metzger, “The Punctuation of Rom. 9:5,” *Christ and Spirit in the New Testament*, Fs. C. F. D. Moule, ed. Barnabas Lindars and Stephen S. Smalley (Cambridge: University Press, 1973), pp. 95-112.

<sup>3</sup> H. R. Moeller and A. Kramer, “An Overlooked Structural Pattern in New Testament Greek”, *NovT* 5 (1961-62), pp. 25-35.

Along similar lines, some will be pleased by **NRSV**’s substitution of “rulers and authorities” for “principalities and powers”; others will not. In a published review, Walter Wink has articulated his ecstasy; I doubt if Peter O’Brien will be equally joyful. For myself, I suspect O’Brien’s studies<sup>4</sup> are closer to having the rights of the matter.

### C. Text Critical Matters

The most dramatic text-critical decisions, as Prof. Harrelson has pointed out, concern the adoption of several readings attested by the Dead Sea Scrolls. Most of these are convincing. Not so

1 Sam. 15:32 **RSV** where Agag says: “Surely the bitterness of death is past” – before Samuel hacks him to pieces.

**NRSV** “Surely this is the bitterness of death” – where the reading is based on the DSS and the LXX. It sounds too much like a pedant’s emendation. Some changes turn on different pointing of the Hebrew radicals:

Ps. 23:4 **RSV** “Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death”

**NRSV** “Even though I walk through the darkest valley”. Many commentators have revocalized the consonants to give this reading, and they may be right; but I am still not persuaded, owing not only to one or two parallels in Job, but even more to the support of the traditional rendering provided by the ancient versions.

Turning to the NT:

John 1:18 **RSV** “No one has ever seen God; the only Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known.”

**NRSV** “No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father’s heart, who has made him known.”

The abolition of the bosom is doubtless a good thing. Something more imaginative than “[he] has made him known” might have been found for *ἐξηγήσατο* - e.g. “[he] has narrated him.” But the textual variant is what captures one’s interest. The deity of the *λόγος* is now affirmed in this verse, perhaps to close the *inclusio* opened in v.1. But surely “God the only Son” is insupportable on text-critical grounds. Of the nest of variants, most today opt for *μονογενῆς θεός*, the latter word perhaps in apposition to the former: “the unique one, [himself] God,” or the like. Or do the translators assume that *ὁὓς* is understood?

At quite a number of places, the text and footnote in the **RSV** have exchanged places in the **NRSV**. So, for instance, Phil. 3:3. One wishes there could have been more documentation on the reasons.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. esp. his “Principalities and Powers: Opponents of the Church”, *Biblical Interpretation and the Church: Text and Context*, ed. D. A. Carson (Exeter: Paternoster, 1984), pp. 110-150.

#### D. Inclusive Language

Doubtless other reviewers will say more in this area than I, but I cannot forbear to offer a few observations. The NRSV translators have taken great pains to eliminate the sexual bias inherent in the English language, whenever the reference is to people generically, to people who are not gender-specified. On the whole, their efforts are judicious, thorough and effective, as perhaps one should expect from a Committee chaired by Prof. Metzger, among whose many gifts is that most uncommon one, common sense. A generic “man” often becomes a plural (as we saw in Ps. 1); “fathers” often becomes “ancestors”; “brothers” often becomes “brothers and sisters”. By my less than exhaustive count, “one” is used sparingly, “someone” a little more frequently, and “anyone” rather too much. “Son of man” (Heb. *ben adam*) in Ezekiel, where God addresses the prophet, is rendered “mortal”. In the Psalms, third person singular pronouns referring to the author may get transposed to the first person singular; those referring to a person generically may get transposed to the second person plural. To take an example of the former:

Ps. 41	RSV	“My enemies say in malice, ‘When will he [i.e. the Psalmist] die, and his name perish?’”
	NRSV	“My enemies wonder in malice when I will die, and my name perish.”

In a few instances, such personal metamorphoses threaten so much havoc that the translators throw up their hands in despair and leave the offending masculine pronoun in place (e.g. Ps. 109).

Most of the changes introduced by these commitments are happy ones. For example:

Mark 2:27	NRSV	“The Sabbath was made for humankind, not humankind for the Sabbath”
-----------	------	---

– though for various reasons of both theology and euphony I would have here preferred “people” above “humankind.”

1 Tim. 2:5	NRSV	“There is also one mediator between God and humankind, Christ Jesus, himself human” (Gk. <i>διάνθρωπος Χριστός Ἰησοῦς</i> .)”
2 Cor. 12:2	NRSV	“I know a person in Christ who, fourteen years ago ... ”
2 Cor. 12:4	NRSV	“heard things that are not to be told, that no mortal is permitted to repeat.”

The translators leave in place masculine words in the parables, even where a generic term such as *διάνθρωπος* is used, judging that the social assumptions both of the writer and of the initial readers require it. Hence, e.g.:

Matt. 25:14	NRSV	“For [the kingdom of heaven] is as if a man, going on a
-------------	------	---

journey, summoned his slaves ... ”

Masculine pronouns for Deity are thinned out, but not neutered, and not feminized.

Published criticisms of this particular inclusivist language policy have sometimes fallen into one of three misjudgments:

1. On the conservative wing, some have found fault with passages such as Ps. 8, already quoted, on the grounds that this psalm is given a Christological interpretation in Heb. 2. Quite apart from questions about relations between the Testaments, this is in my view a mis-reading of Heb. 2. True, Ps. 8 is there *applied* to Jesus, but, as the context shows, it is applied to him *qua* human being. It is not a Christological title with univocal reference to Jesus (the dominant if not exclusive usage in the Gospels).

2. On some feminist wings, the policy is not nearly radical enough. The issues are, of course, extraordinarily complex; I do not want to leave any impression to the contrary. But to me the critical issue lies in the peculiar elements of both Judaism and Christianity that can be subsumed under the rubric “the scandal of historical particularity”. Unlike, say, Buddhism, neither Judaism nor Christianity can long survive a divorce from real history. However we understand “revelation” to occur, it takes place in specific languages and cultures and times. Doubtless we have to think through how the historically-conditioned Scriptures are to be applied to and by believing communities today – communities, I might add, that are *also* historically conditioned, a point we sometimes ignore. But we cannot afford the foundation documents themselves to be too greatly abstracted from *their* historical particularity.

3. There is a range of criticisms that focus on the inconsistency of the *application* of the policy. For instance, one reviewer objects that “brothers” is retained in Acts 15:1, instead of substituting “brothers and sisters”. But can you imagine the national snicker if our churches were to read, “certain individuals ... were teaching the brothers and sisters, ‘Unless you are circumcised ... you cannot be saved’”? Of course, there is a deep issue here as to how women *were* incorporated into the covenant of Sinai; but I duck it, and press on.

For my part, I would occasionally fault the translators for being so consistent that they introduce other problems. Does *ben adam* in Ezekiel really connote “mortal” – or “human”? Surely the use of “mortal” in Rev. 21:3 is misguided: “See, the home of God is with mortals.” Apart from the doubtful wisdom of rendering *σκηνη* by “home”, thus losing the connection with Ex. 33-34,<sup>5</sup> surely the one thing that is clear in Rev. 21–22 is that those with whom God dwells are no longer afflicted with mortality. The shift from “son” to “child” and from “sons” to “children” in Proverbs introduces some incongruous readings. E.g.:

Prov. 10:5	NRSV	“A child who gathers in harvest is provident,
------------	------	---

<sup>5</sup> For one reason or another, NRSV obscures many canonical connections. This owes something to the fact that it is tilted a little more to the “dynamic equivalence” side of the spectrum than

but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame.”

Where, I wonder, were the child labour laws?

In Gal. 4:4-7, the move from “son” to “child” – without warning footnotes – as applied to Christians, loses the connection with Jesus, the son *par excellence*. Notoriously, the figure of Dan. 7 is now “one like a human being” (fn: “like a son of man”): the obvious canonical connections are lost. Whereas I do not think canonical connections should be forced – philology and exegesis are central to translation – neither should obvious canonical connections be sacrificed on the altar of a slightly too rigid policy. Nor is this reasonably a matter of deferring to Jewish sensibilities: how will Jewish scholars articulate the connections between Daniel and *I Enoch*? At very least the text and footnote should swap places. Twice in Philippians and frequently enough elsewhere, *ἀδελφοί* becomes “beloved” (1:12; 2:12) instead of “brothers and sisters”: to me, “beloved” sounds downright smarmy – but perhaps my ears are at fault.

But what is clear is that for use in any context where virtually all the people are sensitized to inclusivist language (not least the university environment), the NRSV sounds incomparably more modern than its closest rivals. In such circles, TEV, NIV, NASB, JB – all sound terribly dated in comparison. What a difference a couple of decades make! Still, I should perhaps add that the NRSV preserves its share of renderings that are not modern enough – frequently in contexts that have nothing to do with problems of inclusivist language. “All the *saints* in Christ Jesus” (Phil. 1:1) will mislead some ordinary Christians; “in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation” (Phil. 2:15) is not as smooth as, say, NIV, which drops “midst”: i.e. “in a crooked and depraved generation.” “Zechariah ... spoke this prophecy” (NRSV) sounds more angular than RSV’s “Zechariah ... prophesied, saying.”

## E. Formal Features

I should offer at least three or four sentences on the formal features of this translation. There are *far* more footnotes. Many of the footnotes deal with text-critical matters, some with alternative meanings that depend on disputed exegesis. Thus in Phil. 2:5, a footnote offers “let the same mind be in you that you have in Christ Jesus” – thus allowing that the line argued by Käsemann, Martin and others may be right. Here, however, I rather think a recent article should have laid the matter to rest.<sup>6</sup> In Phil. 3:3, NRSV’s “but one that comes through faith in Christ” offers as an alternative in a footnote “through the faith of Christ” – thus acknowledging that Richard Hayes and others may be right. Perhaps the feature of the notes that is most difficult for the reader

---

its predecessor, something to its policy of inclusivist language, and doubtless to half-a-dozen other factors. In a period when “inner-textual” connections are being explored on every hand, this is perhaps particularly regrettable.

to discern is the principle on which in the OT *tiqqune sopherim* were included or excluded.

The NRSV resorts to poetic format far more often than does the RSV. Most of these arrangements are entirely happy, even if here and there one wants to demur. Its paragraphing reflects many recent exegetical judgments: e.g. there is now a new paragraph beginning half way through Phil. 3:1.

## F. Final Reflections

But enough. I have not been asked to assess market potential, constituencies, and the like. But if I were offering a rather personal evaluation of the NRSV on a scale of one to ten, with ten signalling perfection, I would, in a US school, assign about 9.0; or in the British and Canadian tradition from which I spring, where, on a scale of ten, perfection is attained about 8.5 or 9.0 (leaving the rest of the scale unused), I would assign 7.5 or 8.0 – B+ or A-. Since my students will testify how stingy a marker I am, that means the NRSV is a jolly good piece of work.

D. A. CARSON

Trinity Evangelical Divinity School.

---

<sup>6</sup> N. T. Wright, “ἀπραγμός and the Meaning of Philippians 2:5-11,” *JTS* 37 (1986), pp. 321-352.