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The NRSV: All Things to All People

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FACE . . .

The NRSV: Beauty and the Beast

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BEAUTY IS IN THE EYE OF THE BEHOLDER," IT HAS BEEN SAID. THE EYE OF THIS beholder sees the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of the Bible as a thing of beauty.

I see beauty in the primary purpose for the NRSV as stated in its preface: "It is the hope and prayer of the translators that this version of the Bible may continue to hold a large place in congregational life and to speak to all readers, young and old alike, helping them to understand and believe and respond to its message." For that purpose the NRSV is designed for use in worship, education, and private meditation.

I see beauty in the prescribed process of preparation and production of the NRSV:

An ecumenical committee of thirty scholars included representatives from protestant and Roman Catholic traditions, one Eastern Orthodox member, and a Jewish representative.

A gender inclusive committee brought men and women scholars together.

These scholars voluntarily gave of their time and expertise without any monetary stipend.

Other publishers have been given permission to use the text of the NRSV so that it might be utilized by as many different religious traditions and in as many different published formats as possible.

A "universal" English translation was the goal as scholars from the U.S.A., Canada, and England worked together seeking linguistic and idiomatic common ground and grammatical, syntactical, and structural unity.

The Old Testament Apocrypha of the NRSV contains not only the normally expected apocryphal texts, but also those books in the Vulgate Appendix (3 & 4 Esdras and the Prayer of Manasseh) and the books included in the Greek and Slavonic Bibles (Psalm 151 and 3 & 4 Maccabees).

I see beauty in the poignant and provocative product which is the NRSV:

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TO FACE

The NRSV: All Things to All Men People

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THE NATIONAL COUNCIL OF CHURCHES' DIRECTIVE TO THE COMMITTEE RESPONSIBLE for the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) included the clause "to continue in the tradition of the King James Bible, but to introduce such changes as are warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English usage." Writing for the committee, Bruce M. Metzger claims their work was guided by the maxim, "As literal as possible, as free as necessary." It sounds as if the committee, like Paul, was trying to be "all things to all people" (1 Cor 9:22).

In terms of translation theory, "as literal as possible" represents the concerns of those committed to "formal correspondence" in translation. This word-for-word approach seeks to remain faithful to the text by translating each biblical word with a single English equivalent, thus retaining as much of the original language's grammar, syntax, idiom, and even word order as possible. Whether this is desirable, or even possible, is hotly debated these days, and comparison with a translation such as the New American Standard Bible, that does strive to be literal in this sense, would suggest that the NRSV has frequently modified vocabulary, word order, and structure, despite its claim, and to the chagrin of more traditional readers.

"As free as necessary," however, champions the cause of those committed to "dynamic equivalence" in translation. This meaning-for-meaning approach seeks to remain faithful to the text by determining as precisely as possible how the original was understood in its time and trying to find renderings that have the same effect upon readers today. But, what does "free" mean in the context of Bible translation? Do translators have the "freedom" to paraphrase their own theological or political agendas into their renderings? Who decides what modifications are "necessary" for understanding? Gender-neutral language concerning human beings—but not God—accomplished by rewording, pluralizing, or substitution of second person forms for third person forms, accounts for much of the revision. Many readers feel the committee has gone too far, especially with overzealous paraphrases of "men" and "son" (cf. the use of "mortals" for those who are

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The King James Bible tradition was continued as much as possible, except where changes were “warranted on the basis of accuracy, clarity, euphony, and current English usage” (NRSV preface).

The most accurate and up-to-date manuscripts were used. For instance, the translation of the NRSV Old Testament reflects a greater use of archaeological data from sources such as the Ras Shamra texts and the Dead Sea Scrolls of Qumran than any other English translation to date.

The NRSV uses more notes than the RSV to help the reader; it introduces many of these notes to provide alternative translations.

The translation style was to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary” (NRSV preface). Therefore, the NRSV remains, essentially, a literal translation, with paraphrasing used only sparingly; it can continue to serve as a base text which can help reveal structures and expressions of the original languages.

Whenever appropriate the NRSV committee sought to eliminate masculine-oriented language, “without altering passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal cultures” (NRSV preface). However, masculine pronouns referring to God are not changed in the NRSV. At this time in the church’s history, the committee was not mandated to work toward this change.

Pronouns referring to God are not capitalized, following contemporary English style and RSV and KJV precedent.

Archaic pronouns referring to God (thee, thou, and thine) and verb forms (art, hast) in the Psalms and in other prayers to God are eliminated.

“Beauty is only skin deep,” it has been said. And the beauty of the NRSV is no exception. For beneath the surface of this beautiful translation is the beast of the word of God. The beast is the word made flesh and living among us as Jesus. The beast is the word dying for us as Christ crucified. Christ crucified is not beautiful. Christ crucified is the beast of death. Christ crucified is death to all that we would see as beauty, to all that we would see as life.

But we are given new life and beauty through the beast. For the resurrected life of Easter’s empty tomb rises from Christ’s crucified death on the cross. In this cross we are brought into God’s love. And from this cross we emerge as new people.

The eye of this beholder sees that the words of the Bible interpreted and proclaimed are the word of God as beast and beauty. In the NRSV, I see the word in words that are beneficial for preaching and teaching, appropriate for liturgical use, theologically sound, and aesthetically pleasing. I see beauty in the NRSV. ⊕

promised that “death will be no more” in Rev 21:3-4 and the inclusion of girls in Herod’s slaughter of the innocents with the translation of “children” at Matt 2:16). Other readers, objecting to the patriarchal portrayal of God, feel the committee has not gone far enough.

The directive from the National Council of Churches reminds us that the NRSV is not a new *translation* but rather a *revision* of the RSV, which was a revision of the ASV, which was a revision of the KJV, which was a revision of the Bishop’s Bible, which was, itself, a fourth generation revision of Tyndale’s earlier work! In my opinion, this is the most serious shortcoming of the NRSV. In a day that has seen fresh translations (and even subsequent revisions!) of God’s word from Anglican (NEB/REB), Roman Catholic (JB/NJB), evangelical (NIV), and Jewish traditions (JPS), the committee has been limited to yet another tweaking of the venerable KJV.

These comments, however, should not detract from the many excellent aspects of the NRSV. Speaking as one engaged in the study and teaching of Hebrew syntax, I have appreciated the attention paid to such matters. For instance, several of the rhetorical functions of the particle *hinneh*, previously translated as “behold,” were given due consideration (e.g., 1 Kings 19:5b, “Suddenly”; Genesis 24:15, “Before he had finished speaking, *there was* Rebekah”). Purpose clauses, marked in Hebrew by the simple *vav* with the precative, were frequently translated as purpose clauses and not simply as future statements. Verbal coordination, in which the first of a pair of verbs functions as an adverb of manner, was often recognized (cf. Jonah 1:2, “Go *at once* to Nineveh,” with the RSV translation, “*Arise*, go to Nineveh”). In general, sentences beginning with “And...” were avoided and some attempt was made to translate *vav* consecutives in ways that presented conditional (“If”), temporal (“When, then”), or logical (“So”) structures rather than the rhetorically numbing “And...and...and” familiar from both the KJV and the RSV (comparison with the RSV rendering of 1 Kings 11: 8-9, 14, 19-20, 24, 27, 29, 31, 37-39, 42-43, quickly makes this point in a randomly chosen narrative passage). The committee’s decision to extend the replacement of archaic second person pronouns (“thee, thou, thine”) and their associated verbal forms (“hast, dost, shalt”) to the Psalms and speech addressed to God is also to be applauded.

Any Bible that people are reading is better than any Bible sitting unopened on the shelf. God can work through any translation – it’s just easier for God to work through some translations than others! The NRSV excels in its capable handling of biblical syntax, euphonious style, and concern for inclusivity. As we await the fresh translation of God’s word by these eminently capable scholars – and the methodological and linguistic consistency that translation will entail – I plan to balance my reading in this, the best of mainline scholarship, with large dollops of reading in the New International Version, the best of evangelical scholarship. Won’t you join me? ☩