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The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version

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No. 1

The Holy Bible, Revised Standard Version

By GEORGE V. SCHICK

IN the fall of 1952 Thomas Nelson and Sons placed on the market the Revised Standard Version of the complete Holy Bible. The New Testament section remains substantially the same as the one which already appeared in 1946, but a few changes of a lesser import were given room when this text was issued in combination with the Old Testament translation. The latter, however, is new and represents the results of years of intensive research by the Revision Committee.

The Revised Standard Version of the Bible was given a varied reception. There were those who extolled its merits to the skies and were ready to have it supplant at once the King James Version of the Scriptures for all purposes. At the other extreme were some who saw in the new version many sinister traces of Modernism and a carefully planned effort to undermine some of the basic tenets of Christianity. Owing to an elaborate and very skillfully conducted advertising campaign, the RSV (Revised Standard Version) has attained a large circulation even at this early date, its sale reaching in the neighborhood of one million copies. As the new year gets under way, additional copies will be ready and no doubt will also find a ready sale. Our church members who have an interest in the Scriptures will buy and read this new version. They will want an appraisal of its merits and faults, and they are entitled to it. To reach one, the following article is intended to be helpful. It attempts to make a fair and unbiased evaluation and to set aside, as much as that is humanly possible, any prejudice and even sentiment in the effort.

On opening and inspecting a copy of the RSV, the external fea-

tures of the make-up naturally first strike the eye. We are here dealing with a modern book. The text is no longer mechanically broken up into shorter or longer verses, but is printed in paragraphs, something which is very helpful to the reader, enabling him at once to see the thought divisions. The direct discourse is indicated by quotes, without which modern books are unthinkable. The poetic sections of the Scriptures are arranged in lines, a practice introduced to a limited extent into the 1881 revision of the KJV (King James Version), but in the RSV employed wherever poetry may appear. The italics of the KJV, which were of no interest to the majority of Bible readers anyway, have completely disappeared. The very fact that the RSV has the appearance of being something that fits into our own era is something in its favor and should invite people to read the Bible.

The modernizing process is apparent also in the language of the RSV. Archaic words have yielded to modern equivalents. The interesting booklet, *An Introduction to the RSV of the Old Testament*, lists no less than five pages of words occurring in the KJV which in the course of time "have so changed in meaning, or acquired such new meanings, that they no longer convey to the reader the meaning which they had for the King James translators and were intended to express." In the interest of better understanding the RSV has replaced such words by modern equivalents.

Among grammatical forms no longer in common use today the KJV has an abundance of "thou" and of the remaining case forms of the singular of this pronoun, of the possessives corresponding to them, and of the plural "ye." All these have been replaced by the plural forms which we are accustomed to use in everyday life, except where God is directly addressed. That this exception was a wise one may be doubted, since it gave occasion to the charge that in passages like Ps. 2:7 and Matt. 16:16 the reference to Jesus by means of "you" is intended to imply a denial of His deity. The charitable explanation may, however, be found in assuming an inconsistency in the use of "thou" and "you" when referring to Christ, for in Mark 1:9 the RSV has: "Thou art my beloved Son: with thee I am well pleased."

The subjunctives which the KJV used liberally but in modern English have practically entirely disappeared, have no room in the

RSV. And that, too, is as it should be. When people have lost all feeling for the subjunctive mood, there is no excuse for trying to continue its use. The Scriptures have a message from God to mankind; they are not to be made a means of a campaign to aid the survival or revival of ways of expression which are on the wane.

The RSV in the Old Testament has dispensed with reproducing the idiomatic Hebrew *le'mor*, literally meaning *to say*, which the KJV rendered by the participle *saying*, inasmuch as it served merely to introduce direct discourse in the same manner as the untranslatable $\delta\tau\iota$ *recitativum* in the New Testament. Luther, who felt himself less slavishly bound to reproduce the original Hebrew word by word than did the translators of the KJV, on occasion also omitted the equivalent for *le'mor* when another verb form of the same verb already occurred in the same clause, e. g., in Gen. 27:6, a passage in which the KJV retains *saying*, but avoids the odd-sounding "Rebekah said to her son, saying," by replacing "said" by "spake." Where the familiar *and it came to pass that* has no particular significance, the RSV drops it in an effort to conform with our modern usage of stating the action or situation more directly rather than in the roundabout Hebrew manner. A troublesome element in the translation of the Scriptures has always been the conjunction *and*, which Hebrew uses with a frequency that becomes monotonous in English. The RSV tries to overcome this effect by sometimes omitting the word entirely and then again varying it by substituting *so, now, then, but*, and other conjunctions, as the context may suggest. Even at that there are still a large number of examples of *and* remaining in the new text. As one reads the Scriptures in this modernized form, one cannot but agree that all these changes make for easier reading.

In spite of the modernization of the KJV which the RSV represents, the Revising Committee has made a sincere effort to preserve the style of the earlier version as much as possible. In the preface to their book, p. IX, we read: "The Revised Standard Version is not a new translation in the language of today. It is not a paraphrase which aims at striking idioms. It is a revision which seeks to preserve all that is best in the English Bible as it has been known and used through the years. . . . We have resisted the temptation to use phrases that are merely current usage, and have sought to put

the message of the Bible in simple, enduring words that are worthy to stand in the great Tyndale-King James tradition." Reading the RSV, one gains the conviction that the Committee has remained true to its plan and has adhered as closely as was possible to the KJV. In some instances, as, e. g., in Psalm 23, they have even retained the King James translation word for word except for the introduction of a few modern words.

The RSV further incorporates also the results of modern research in Bible lands. Archaeology has made some important contributions to the understanding of the Scriptures, especially of the Old Testament. *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* devotes a section to pointing out the use which the Revising Committee made of the discoveries made by archaeologists.

Of even greater importance than the matters which have been touched upon so far is the question to what extent the theology of the individual members of the Revising Committee may have influenced the RSV. Prof. Wm. A. Irwin, one of the members of the Committee, expresses himself on this point in *An Introduction*, p. 15. He states: "Linguistic science knows no theology; those of most contradictory views can meet on common ground devoid of polemic, agreed that Hebrew words mean such and such, and their inflection and syntactical relations imply this or that. These facts establish an agreed translation. Then, and then only, may the exegete and dogmatist busy himself with theological deductions from the thoughts of Biblical writers. The Bible translator is not an expositor; however pronounced his views about Biblical doctrines, he has no right whatever to intrude his opinions into the translation, or to permit his dogmatic convictions to qualify or shape its wording. His one responsibility, and it is absolute, is to render the Biblical meaning as accurately and effectively as is possible into appropriate English." What Prof. Irwin states applies, of course, with equal force also to the translation of the New Testament. His position will receive the hearty second of Lutheran Bible students, since the Lutheran Church has always held that a thorough knowledge of the languages in which the Bible was originally written is a *sine qua non* for understanding the Scriptures. Without such knowledge no serious study of the Bible can be carried on successfully. The essential prerequisite

for understanding the Word is the understanding of the words, their meaning and their grammatical forms, in which the Word comes to us from God.

From these preliminaries we may proceed to an inquiry as to how the Revising Committee arrived at what they considered the proper text to use as a base from which to make their translations. In the New Testament the matter was a relatively simple one. Thousands of different manuscripts were available, some of which originated in the early centuries of the Christian era, a few fragments even dating back to within decades of the time when the originals were written. Through textual criticism carried on by competent specialists a text which is considered superior has been established and, where doubt as to the correct reading still exists, a careful record appears of variant readings with their source clearly indicated. A popular critical text of this type is that of Nestle. The RSV takes the results of New Testament text studies into account, and so there appear some variant translations in the footnotes to the English translation which reflect the possibility that in the respective case one may, with good manuscript backing, translate also in a different manner from the one adopted by the Revising Committee and embodied in their text.

But when we come into the area of the Old Testament, the situation is entirely different. There the RSV, especially in the case of the books which do not fall into the category of narrative, has a large number of instances in which the translations are the result of conjectures, in other words, the situation with the Hebrew original was so desperate the translators felt compelled to resort to surgery, that is, reconstruct from the context what they felt the writer originally wished to say. It goes without saying that the Revising Committee in these cases endeavored to use sound judgment and did not simply adopt any arbitrary translation which may have come into their mind. In other instances, the footnotes in the Old Testament section of the RSV explain that the adopted rendering is not based on the Hebrew text as we have it in our printed Hebrew Bibles, but on translations found in one or several of the earliest versions of the Hebrew Scriptures. This has given rise to the criticism that the RSV too frequently adopts readings found in the ancient versions, i. e., the Septuagint, the Targums, the Syriac Ver-

sion, and the Vulgate, which are either entirely lacking in the so-called Masoretic Hebrew text or are at variance with it. There can be no doubt that in some instances these versions reflect the original Hebrew text, for it is well known that the so-called Masoretic text, which we have in our printed Hebrew Bibles, represents a *textus receptus* which was established by Jewish Biblical scholars of the early Christian centuries and since then has been transmitted with almost incredible accuracy by copyists down to the present day. This explains why the hundreds of Hebrew manuscripts in existence today show practically no variants. The only exception involving a longer text is the Book of Isaiah among the so-called Dead Sea Scrolls, which were only recently discovered. But even this ancient scroll, though it dates from approximately the second century B. C., yielded only thirteen instances where its variants proved worthy of consideration. The footnotes introduced by "One ancient Ms." in the Book of Isaiah indicate them. Yet it must be reasonably concluded that the original Hebrew text in the course of centuries must have suffered at least to some extent at the hands of copyists. To assume that the Pentateuch, written approximately 3,500 years ago, is still preserved letter by letter in its original form would involve nothing less than a miracle. The testimony of the Septuagint, in view of its age, cannot be completely ignored. But to what extent this oldest of the known translations of the Old Testament can be relied upon is again a question that is often difficult to decide, since its text, too, has suffered at the hands of copyists. How much importance is to be attached to the readings of the remaining three ancient versions to which we referred above remains a matter of judgment in the various instances where they have departures from the Masoretic text.

Every translator of the Old Testament Scriptures, in instances where the Hebrew text apparently did not make sense, has resorted to conjectures. A passage in point is, e. g., Micah 2:4, the final words of which the KJV renders: "Turning away he hath divided our fields." Luther offers: "Wann wird er uns die Aecker wieder zuteilen, die er uns genommen hat?" Obviously the situation of the Hebrew text is desperate, yet the translator is obligated in some way or other to reproduce the text he has before him. Nothing else remains but to rely on one's judgment and to offer the reader

what may seem best in the context. The translator must see to it, of course, that in such cases he does not violate the clear teachings of Scripture elsewhere.

Our Lutheran Church has also never taken a stand against a translator's making use of the ancient versions in order to determine the meaning of a passage in the Old Testament. Luther, e. g., in Ruth 4:5, follows the text of the Vulgate rather than the Hebrew, a procedure adopted in this passage also by the RSV. Many other instances could be mentioned where Luther, the KJV, as well as the RSV find it necessary to fall back on the ancient versions in order to produce a sensible translation. There is a danger, of course, that a translator relies too much on the ancient versions, and if he becomes guilty of this attitude and does not give the Masoretic text the consideration it deserves, his translations are justly subject to criticism. To judge the RSV on this score at this early moment would be premature, since it would involve a very exhaustive and time-consuming examination of the RSV text.

In a few instances the RSV has even adopted additions which do not appear in the Hebrew. An example of this occurs in Gen. 4:8, where the Samaritan Pentateuch, as well as the four ancient versions referred to above, have additions, the sense of which the RSV reproduces by: "Let us go out to the field." One may have doubts as to whether these words ever appeared in the original Hebrew. Their addition is readily explained. The verse begins with "Cain said ('amar) to his brother Abel," but no direct discourse follows. The King James Version was aware of the difficulty, but softened it by replacing *said* with *talked with*, which, of course, is not an accurate translation. Yet the RSV's inclusion of the addition seems unnecessary, since elsewhere it does not seem to feel the necessity of avoiding this form of aposiopesis. Another instance of it occurs Jonah 2:10, where the Hebrew has: "The Lord said," and again no direct discourse follows. In this instance the RSV employs the same device as the KJV and replaces *said* by *spoke*. The addition of: "Let us go out to the field," looks very much like a scribal addition introduced from the story of David and Jonathan, 1 Sam. 20:11. Another addition not found in the Masoretic text occurs in the RSV in Gen. 21:9, where the words "with her son Isaac" are introduced from the ancient versions. Also here the added words seem to re-

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flect a scribal interpretation and are unnecessary. However, it is a comfort that in these instances, as well as in a few other passages where the RSV has additions, nothing of any importance is involved.

Reference has repeatedly been made in the preceding paragraphs to instances in which one may not agree with the procedure and the choices of the Revising Committee in bringing out the RSV. The main attacks on the new version, however, are focused on a few passages, to which we shall now direct our attention.

The translators of the RSV have been severely taken to task for giving preference to the expression "young woman" to "virgin" in the familiar passage Is. 7:14. The claim has been made that here again we have another link in the evidence which proves the new version's Modernistic tendency. The present writer is convinced that the Revising Committee made a mistake in this instance and would have translated far more in conformity with the context if it had retained "virgin" in the text and placed "young woman" in the footnote instead of vice versa. However, there may be extenuating circumstances. The Committee's eagerness to be very scientific may have dictated the choice, for it cannot be denied that the Hebrew noun "almah" has the meaning "young woman." The masculine counterpart is "elem," rendered in 1 Sam. 17:56 by both the KJV and the RSV by "stripling," i. e., a youth who is entering manhood. The female counterpart is the "almah," a mature young woman. The word does not stress the idea of virginity, but is never used of a married woman. It is therefore perfectly in harmony with the context in Is. 7:14 if the Septuagint translates "almah" by *παρθένος*, and it is regrettable that the RSV, which otherwise in many instances places great weight on the text of the Septuagint, here does not follow its lead. So far as the doctrine of the Virgin Birth is concerned, the translation "young woman" in the Isaiah passage in no wise puts it into jeopardy, for this doctrine is based on the inspired revelation of the Evangelists. Even though Matt. 1:23 quotes the Septuagint version, this by no means elevates this version or any part of it to the status of inspired Scripture.

Another passage in which the Revision Committee's translation is disappointing is Ps. 2:12, where KJV reads: "Kiss the Son," but the RSV makes of it: "Kiss his feet." As the footnote indicates,

this translation is a pure conjecture for which no reason can be given except that the revisers for some reason or other felt that the KJV's rendering was unacceptable, but why this was the case is not indicated. Franz Delitzsch, in his *Biblischer Kommentar ueber die Psalmen*, fifth edition, has a full discussion of the difficulties which the ancient versions had in dealing with nashsh-qu bar. He expresses his surprise that all of them except the Syriac had failed to grasp its meaning, which in Delitzsch's opinion can only be: "Kiss the Son." The choice of "bar" for "son" he explains as due to an effort to avoid the unpleasant combination "ben pen," which would have arisen if the usual Hebrew word for son (ben) had been used. Fortunately, as in some other instances, no great harm is done by the RSV's translation in this case, since the eternal generation of the Son is declared in the earlier part of Psalm 2, and there the version is satisfactory. Nevertheless we cannot complacently accept the shift of homage from the Son to Jehovah, something which the RSV's conjecture makes mandatory. Neither do we agree with the footnote that "the Hebrew of 11 b and 12 a is uncertain."

The RSV's translation of Job 19:26, 27 seems to involve a contradiction. In verse 26 the English for "mibb-sari" is "without my flesh," which evidently is intended to mean deprived of my flesh. Yet in the immediately following verse Job very clearly speaks of his eyes, which are a part of his flesh or his physical make-up. Job is here speaking of his hope of a bodily resurrection after his death; and if the RSV had taken into the text the footnote "from my flesh" or had translated "out of my flesh," there would have been no difficulty. It may further be remarked that the translation of the preposition "min" by "without" is in itself something very unusual.

Turning now to the New Testament section of the RSV of the Holy Bible, we learn from the Preface that the Revising Committee has made about eighty changes in the 1946 edition of the New Testament before republishing it in 1952. Most of these are not of a very important nature, but readers will no doubt be grateful for the reappearance in Acts 17:28 of the KJV's rendering: "In him we live and move and have our being." But there are some additional instances in which, to our way of thinking, a change would have improved the text. In 1 Tim. 3:2 there still remains the subjective translation: "A bishop . . . must be married only once."

It is true, a footnote is added to the effect that the Greek has: "A bishop must be . . . the husband of one wife." If this is the literal translation of the original, why not put it into the body of the text? That would leave it to the individual interpreter to decide according to his own best judgment what the Apostle had in mind. As the situation now is, the reader is told that the Apostle meant to forbid a second marriage in the case of priests, but, of course, if one is not satisfied with this opinion, one may also have another, which, however, is of inferior worth.

In Rom. 9:5 it is regrettable that the Committee did not see its way clear to restore the KJV's relative clause: "Who is over all, God blessed forever," a grand declaration of the Apostle's faith in the deity of Christ, climaxed by a solemn "Amen." To the reader of the Greek New Testament this appears as a very natural meaning and thoroughly in harmony with Paul's estimate of the Lord Jesus, whose appearance to him on the way to Damascus had left an indelible impression on his entire life. The question whether the words are to be understood as a modifier of the noun Christ or as a doxology, such as the Apostle occasionally used in his Letters, ultimately becomes a matter of deciding what the proper punctuation of the passage ought to be, and the ancient manuscripts on this score are of no help whatever.

Entirely to be rejected is the RSV's translation of τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου in Gal. 4:3 by "the elemental spirits of the universe," which ascribes to the Apostle an entirely pagan conception of the spirit world, foreign to him both as Jew and as Christian. Far superior is the KJV's translation "elements of the world," the meaning of which becomes clear from the context, especially from verse 9. Lenski's comments on τὰ στοιχεῖα τοῦ κόσμου are convincing and to the point: "The Old Testament believers were placed under material, earthly things that were beggarly, indeed, all of them far beneath these believers. They had to submit to regulations about food and drink, washings and purifications, sacrifices of all kinds, rules about places, times, bodily actions of all kinds." The Apostle is thus here speaking of the yoke of the Law, and that is a theme on which he had much to say to the Galatians, whom false teachers were leading astray so that they might turn their back on the doc-

trine of salvation through faith and might seek once more a righteousness through the works of the Law.

The criticism of the RSV which we have submitted is not exhaustive. As the new version undergoes scrutiny by thousands of eyes, many other instances may be discovered where improvement is possible. If the RSV achieves nothing more than to stimulate people to examine its text closely in order to determine whether or not it reproduces in English in an acceptable manner the divine truths couched in the Hebrew and Greek of the Scriptures, the project has already achieved a worth-while end.

To be of some actual value, criticism must be fair. In some instances this has not been the case. Thus, e. g., because the RSV places the pericope of the adulterous woman in a footnote, the RSV has been accused of making a footnote of the inspired Scriptures. That charge is entirely misleading. Before it can be made in justice, proof must first be furnished that John 7:53—8:11 is actually part of the inspired Scriptures. The fact that this text appears in the KJV proves absolutely nothing, since it is missing in some ancient manuscripts, in others appears at the end of the Gospel according to St. John, and in still others at the end of chapter twenty-one of St. Luke. The problem of its authenticity is an old one. The learned conservative exegete E. W. Hengstenberg, a front-rank battler against the rationalism which had invaded Germany, in his commentary on the Gospel according to St. John, published in 1862, declares: "There can be no doubt that this section was not an original part of the Gospel, but was carried into it by a strange hand. It is lacking in so numerous and important critical aids that this reason alone may almost suffice to establish its spuriousness." Hengstenberg was a Lutheran, and the Lutheran Church, which is broad enough in its outlook to recognize homologoumena and antilegomena among the books of the Bible, has no hesitation to grant honest textual criticism a voice in establishing the genuine form of the original Scriptures.

In conclusion the question: "What shall be our attitude toward the RSV?" deserves brief consideration. There are some who advocate boycotting the new version because of its shortcomings. This, to us, seems a very shortsighted policy. The RSV has its faults, so has the KJV, and so has every other translation of the Bible. If this

fact is accepted as sufficient ground for a boycott, Christianity may just as well cease to produce translations and insist exclusively on the use of the Scriptures in the original tongues. The Septuagint was in many respects a very poor translation, and yet the New Testament deigns to quote it. Why should we not make use of the RSV to the extent that this appears possible? With all its shortcomings it nevertheless presents the Word of God in the language of the people. Any sinner can learn from it the way of salvation through faith in Christ Jesus, and, after all, that is the main purpose of the Scriptures. The Revising Committee has shown itself agreeable to make changes where they seemed necessary. If this willingness continues, future editions of the RSV may show a progressively improving text which ultimately will receive the approval of all Protestant church bodies.

St. Louis, Mo.