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New Revised Standard Version OUP 1995 — Part 1
An Appraisal

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Introduction

From the time of its publication in 1952 the RSV became a widely accepted translation of the Bible. In 1974 it was decided to revise it. Evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls and growing understanding of Semitic languages offered possibilities for improvement. The NRSV was published in the USA in 1990 and an anglicised version in 1995.

The NRSV Committee aimed to produce a revision of the RSV that would retain the AV–RSV tradition of making a translation that would be as close as possible to the Hebrew and Greek texts, avoiding unnecessary 'paraphrastic renderings'. They gave particular attention to the problems that arise in current English from the lack of words of common gender, especially in the third person singular. In older English 'man' was often equivalent to 'person' or 'somebody'. Now 'man' is perceived as contrasted to, and exclusive of, 'woman'. 'He' is perceived as being exclusive of 'she'. So in passages of scripture where references embrace all people, it is now necessary to avoid, so far as possible, the use of 'man', 'he', 'him', etc. Irrespective of whether we think the NRSV revisers have made the best decision in every difficult passage, we must be grateful that they have made the attempt. It is not helpful to have a bible translation which leaves women feeling excluded in contexts where the Hebrew or Greek original texts imply that everyone is included.

On the jacket, the publishers claim that the NRSV 'sets new standards in contemporary Bible translation', that it 'benefits from recent advances in biblical, archaeological and linguistic scholarship, and that it is ideal for private and public reading, group study, and academic work, and offers the Bible in a version that may be regarded as a standard text for today's church'. These are great claims. They generate hope and excitement, but they invite careful scrutiny rather than unthinking reception. Above all, I think we must consider whether the NRSV does accurately convey the meaning and message to be found in the

Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek it aims to translate. Other important issues are whether it adequately represents the narrative and poetic styles of the original literature, whether it does make proper uses of the advances made in linguistic and literary studies, and whether it is suitable for public reading.

I intend to pursue these issues by discussing in some detail a selection of passages from the Old Testament and a selection from the New Testament. To consider more than 1,000 pages would require more volumes than I would have time to write, besides involving much pointless repetition.

A. NRSV: Old Testament

I will illustrate the NRSV translational standards and style from Jonah, part of Daniel, and a poem from Proverbs, with a few references to Genesis and Psalms. Each comment will start with a quotation from the NRSV text.

Jonah

1:1 *Now the word of the LORD came to Jonah.*

'Now', is a word that can have reference to time (equivalent to 'At this time'), or can be used to introduce background information, as in 'He found Philip—now Philip was from Bethsaida...'. It takes its specific meaning from the contexts in which it is used. As the opening word of a book, it has no context. It is therefore difficult for readers and hearers to be sure of its meaning.

1:2-3 *Go at once to Nineveh…But Jonah set out to flee...*

Narrative style in the Old Testament is a finely honed tool. Here, in Hebrew, verse 2 begins with the instruction to Jonah 'set off and go to Nineveh'. Verse 3 begins with a close echo of this, 'so Jonah set off'. The person hearing the story expects Jonah's response to the Lord's call to be obedience: 'So Jonah set off and went.' The opening of verse 3 confirms this expectation but is followed by the shocking and unexpected phrase 'to flee to Tarshish'. This is vivid narrative. It can easily be matched in English: 'Set off and go to the great city of Nineveh. Jonah set off to flee to Tarshish.' This is obscured by the NRSV translation.

1:7 *So they cast lots and the lot fell on Jonah.*

Either the bag with each person's token was shaken till one fell out, or one was drawn out. In no conceivable situation would the lot fall on Jonah (bang!!). Here, literal translation does not convey a sensible meaning. In fact, it should

probably be called a 'grammar-book' translation, rather than a literal translation. The Hebrew preposition *'al* may be given in some grammars as meaning 'on', but its actual range of meaning is covered by such English words as 'on, near to, in addition to', 'against, with reference to'. So an accurate literal translation might be: 'The lot fell with reference to Jonah.' For narrative style English, one might consider, 'It was Jonah's lot that came out', or 'The lot indicated Jonah'.

1:1 1-12 *That the sea may quieten down for us.*
It was not the noise of the sea that was the trouble, but its roughness. The Hebrew word *shataq* has a basic meaning 'cease' or 'rest'. We need 'calm down' or 'become calm' rather than quieten down.

1:13 *…the men rowed hard…*
Jonah was in a decked merchant ship. Ships that could carry cargo across the Mediterranean were driven by sail. The Hebrew word *hatar* is used in contexts of breaking violently through (e.g., of robbers breaking through a wall). The LXX translates it as 'exerting force' or 'making every effort' to get to the shore.

1:14 *Do not make us guilty of innocent blood.*
NRSV aims to use 'English language – current in our day' (Preface: To The Reader). It is hard to tell what 'guilty of innocent blood' means and whether it is ever found in current English. We need something like, 'Do not hold us guilty of the death of an innocent man'. In the Old Testament 'blood' is a frequent metaphor for death. Metaphors can seldom be translated literally. 1:16 'and they offered a sacrifice to the LORD and made vows'. Here, with 'made vows' there is (i) a language problem and (ii) a cultural problem.

(i) The word 'vows' is seldom used except in the phrase 'marriage vows'.
(ii) In the Jonah context, it is clear that on board ship only a minor sacrificial animal, maybe a cock or hen, would be likely to be available. The sailors would make a promise of a more worthy sacrifice when they reached home in safety. This meaning in not made clear by the phrase 'made vows'.

In this survey of Jonah, chapter 1, I have not touched on the use of poor English and archaic English, where it does not affect the meaning, but it does have an impact. To use 'upon' for 'on'; 'cried' for 'prayed' or 'called out (for help)'; 'so that we may know' for 'so that we may find out', does cast a kind

of shadow over the narrative—and hardly reflects the aim of using current English. Also, where there is an important dispute over meaning, there is no footnote. In verse 6, the colloquial 'spare us a thought' might well deserve a footnote, 'think and act with compassion'. In verse 8, 'Tell us why this calamity has come upon us?' perhaps deserves a footnote to reflect the Tanakh (J.P.S.) understanding, which is equivalent to: 'It's your fault this calamity has come upon us, so tell us.'

The rest of Jonah exhibits similar levels of translational competence. Perhaps the major cause of concern, especially in view of the claim to have drawn on 'recent advances in linguistic scholarship' is the translation of Jonah 3:5-6.

In Hebrew narrative, as is abundantly clear in Genesis and Ruth, there is a technique of using a headline statement that encapsulates the next main stage of the narrative.

This headline is then unfolded, step by step. In Jonah 3:5-6 the literal translation school of translators (from AV to NRSV) produces a situation in which, in verse 5, everyone from the greatest (the king?) to the least is fasting. Then after that, in verse 6, news of this reaches the king and he has a fast proclaimed—though verse 5 has already said 'they proclaimed a fast'. This makes a nonsense of the narrative. Yet there is not even a footnote to give 'For the message had reached the king' as an alternative to 'When the news reached the king'.

Incidentally, and quite unknowingly, in Jonah 4:6 the translators have provided a good text for the American President: 'The LORD God appointed a bush.' But what does it really mean 'to appoint a bush'?

Genesis

Here are a few examples to illustrate the need to understand Hebrew idioms and Hebrew sentence and narrative structures.

13:8 *If you take the left hand…*
What does it really mean in English, to 'take the left hand'? In Hebrew it means 'to go north', since directions are indicated from the point of view of someone who is facing the dawn.

17:18 *O that Ishmael might live in your sight.*
The context is of Abraham's advanced age and his need of an heir. He cannot initially believe that he and Sarah can have a son. The meaning of the idiomatic' live in your sight' seems to be 'I wish Ishmael could be my heir.'

24:7 *…and who spoke to me and who swore to me.*
In English this looks as though two actions are ascribed to the LORD (i) speaking, and (ii) swearing an oath.

The Hebrew which the AV commonly translates 'and he answered and said' represents a single action and needs to be translated as 'In reply, he said', or simply as 'He replied'. Here also the speaking and the oath-swearing are a single action. Thus 'and who made me a solemn promise' or, 'who spoke to me, swearing an oath to me' would better reflect the Hebrew literary device than 'who spoke to me and who swore to me'.

37:2 *Joseph, being seventeen years old, was shepherding the flock.*
'Joseph, being seventeen years old' is unnatural English.

37:5 *Once Joseph had a dream.*
The implied contrast denied by 'once' is 'twice', or more than once. There is no Hebrew word indicating 'once'. Its introduction in English causes a problem as the narrative will have comment on two dreams. In the context of dreams, the linking phrase 'One night' would be much more appropriate. 'One night, Joseph had a dream' would not raise the problems of the bald and potentially emphatic 'Once...'.

39:1 *Now Joseph was taken down to Egypt and Potiphar…bought him…*
The introductory 'Now' in the NRSV and the statement 'and Potiphar bought him' seem to suggest that it is at this point in the narrative, after the Judah and Tamar episode, that Joseph arrived in Egypt and was bought by Potiphar. It is as if this event had not already been recorded (37:36).

However, the word order in Genesis 39:1 specifically indicates that the sentence does not concern new action but is a reference to a previous event which will form the background against which the story will develop. It demands the translation: 'Now Joseph *had* been taken down to Egypt and

Potiphar, an officer of Pharaoh…*had* bought him ….' Once we have the proper tense for 'had been brought', it is clear that 'Now' functions to introduce information and not as a time word.

39:4 *he made him overseer of his house and put him in charge of all that he had.* The 'and put' implies that he first made him overseer of his household and then put him in charge of all he possessed. For this the Hebrew would require the narrative verb 'and he put' at the beginning of the sentence. It does not occur. The sentence begins with the object of the verb. It is supplementary information: 'He made him overseer of his household (property/estate...), putting him in charge of all that he possessed.'

The study of Hebrew sentence and narrative structures is an area in which real advances were made in the second half of the twentieth century. One would expect to find these advances reflected in the NRSV.

40:1 …*the cupbearer…and his baker offended their lord, the king of Egypt.* In current English 'to offend someone' usually means to cause them emotional distress by an inappropriate word or action. The Hebrew word here implies 'committed an offence against'. Obviously, from Pharaoh's reaction, it was a very serious offence. This is not implied by 'offended the king'.

There is an additional small point here. Is 'lord' an appropriate term in an anglicised edition? In England a member of the House of Lords is never a king. It might be better to say 'committed an offence against their master, the king of Egypt'.

These examples from Jonah and Genesis suggest that those who worked on the NRSV, despite their genuine achievements, were not wholly at home with Hebrew narrative styles and Hebrew metaphors, were not completely at ease where cultural considerations were involved and were not thoroughly committed to using the English that is 'current in our day'.

Let us now turn to consider how the NRSV handles Hebrew poetry. We will look at a poem from Proverbs and a verse from Psalm 107.

Jonah, Proverbs and Psalm 107

The twentieth century saw advances in our understanding of Hebrew poetry. In

particular, we understand more about varying types of parallelism, more about introductions and conclusions, and more about ways of marking stanzas.

Jonah

For example, Jonah 2:2-9 is a poem. The first stanza is concluded by a reference to 'your holy temple' (v. 4). This is balanced by 'your holy temple' in verse 7. Verses 8 and 9 are a reflective coda.

The poem has an introduction (v. 2) which gives an overview of the whole situation:

> In my distress I called out to the Lord,
> And he answered me.

This needs to be seen on the printed page as an introduction; otherwise it appears that the answer to Jonah's prayer is expressed in the words, 'You hurled me into the depths of the sea'!

In NRSV, in Jonah, chapter 2, there is no attempt to indicate the stanzas or parts of the poem by how they are laid out on the page. We shall see the same failing in our main example from Proverbs 23.

Proverbs 23

This is a poem about addiction. To give a feel of its poetic force, I offer my translation of it, which owes a lot to W. G. E. Watson (Classical Hebrew poetry).

> Who groans?
> Who moans?
>
> Who gets into quarrels?
> Who gets into trouble?
> Who gets bruises for no reason?
> Who gets dark and bloodshot eyes?
> The ones who sit up late over their wine,
> Those who keep searching for spiced wine.
>
> Don't look at wine

when it is red like blood,
when it sparkles in the glass,
when it is alive with bubbles.
Later on it will bite like a snake,
Like a serpent it will sting.

Your eyes will see strange things,
With mind deranged you'll babble on;
You'll lie there with a queasy stomach,
You'll lie there with a splitting headache:

They hit me – but I felt no pain!
They beat me – but I did not know!
And when I wake I'll go
And seek for it
Again.

Poetry is carefully crafted to say something beautifully and memorably. The force of a poem's message lies not simply in the words but in the form and style in which they are expressed.

In this poem, the poet has carefully laboured to build tension and to provide balance. He has thrown tremendous emphasis on his last word 'AGAIN' (~), to show that if his message is not heeded the whole story, of falling unconscious, of being beaten and of feeling sick, will be repeated.

Because a poem is a unitary whole, it is important that it is printed so that it can be seen as a unit. Because poets paint ideas as a series of word pictures, often shifting to a new perspective or a contrasting view and often unfolding changing emotions, it is important that stanzas are clearly visible as stanzas.

What does the NRSV do? It does not mark the beginning of the poem. There is no visual evidence on the page of any break between 23:28 and 23:29. It does not mark the end. It pushes 24:1-2 right up against 23:35 and does not insert a break until the end of 24:2.

The NRSV does not mark any of the stanzas. It passes from 'those who keep

trying mixed wines' to 'Do not look at wine when it is red', without the stanza spacing that would indicate a brief reflective pause before moving to view another aspect of the theme. One wonders what benefit NRSV has derived from advances in the study of Hebrew poetry.

Psalm 107:23

In Psalms, the NRSV has inherited through the RSV a tradition of translation in which great care was taken that the English should sound well when read aloud or sung. On the whole, NRSV seems to read well in Psalms. But maybe sometimes the very beauty of traditional language has obscured the need to ask if the translation accurately reflects the meaning and cultural background. I offer one example.

In Psalm 107, verse 23, in NRSV we read the lovely line: *Some went down to the sea in ships.*

We can, perhaps, picture ships sailing down the Thames in the sunset towards the open sea. But this is to conjure up an inappropriate picture sparked off by questionable translation.

In Palestine, one had to go down to the sea first and then find a ship (Jonah 1:3). Psalm 107 speaks not of 'going down *to* the sea' but of 'going down the sea'. The verb 'going down' can be used literally of 'going downwards' or, metaphorically, for 'travelling'—much as in England we can say, 'Next week I'll be going down to Cornwall'. The parallel line which NRSV translates 'doing business on the mighty waters' confirms that what is implied in the first line of the pair is not going to the sea but *across* the sea.

'Doing business on the mighty waters' is also a questionable translation. A trader actually does his business on shore after the sea has been crossed. Also the Hebrew does not describe the waters as 'mighty' but as 'many' or 'lengthy'. We need a translation like:

> Some sail across the sea in ships
> plying their trade across the expanse of its waters.

We have looked at examples of Hebrew narrative and poetry. How does NRSV fare with Aramaic?

Daniel

From 2:4 to 7:28, Daniel is written in Aramaic.

2:5 *This is a public decree...*
In 2:13 and 15, the Aramaic word 'data' is used for a decree. Here in 2:5 a much more general word is used: 'milleta' which is elsewhere translated as 'account, matter', etc. 'This is a public decree' seems excessive for an expression which may mean 'My decision has been made'.

2:9 *until things take a turn*
We can speak of things 'taking a turn for the better', but by itself 'take a turn' usually means to take one's turn at playing after another player has had a go. Would it not be clearer to say 'until the situation changes'?

4:16 *And let seven times pass over him*
The word 'times' can also be translated 'years' which conveys a clearer meaning. See also 4:32 and 7:25.

4:17 *…and set over it the lowliest of human beings*
The setting is Babylonia, where kingly power was exercised only by men. The guideline set out in To The Reader (p. XV) says that passages reflecting 'the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture' should not have their 'masculine-oriented language' eliminated. Here, I think the guideline should be followed: 'the lowliest of men' or 'the least important man'.

5:1 *...he was drinking wine in the presence of the thousand*
The Aramaic is more likely to mean 'in front of' than 'in the presence of'. The king would be on a raised dais or platform, where he could be seen and could visibly display his superiority.

7:28 *Here the account ends*
The Aramaic 'data' (see note on 2:5) is used for an important pronouncement or decision. To start a new paragraph with 'Here the account ends' suggests that the writer had a written account before him which ended at this point. But the section began at 7:23 with 'This is what he said'. So, the account that ends at this point is likely to be his spoken explanation of the visions. By stopping at the explanation about the fourth beast, the speaker leaves unexplained the

vision of the one who was 'like a son of man'. That account refers to the complex of visions plus explanations rather than an 'account' is confirmed by the repetition at the end of the verse, where NRSV deserts the idea of 'account' and translates, 'but I kept the matter in mind'. It is at least possible that 'This is the end of the matter' is the final remark of the one giving the explanation—a cutting off of the conversation equivalent to 'Do not ask me any more questions'.

In the Aramaic section of Daniel, there are perhaps fewer places where there are apparent errors of translation than there are in Jonah. However, translation is not only a matter of meaning; style is also important. The Committee of translators themselves wrote of the need to make the Bible available in the form of the English language that is widely current in our day. This seems a laudable aim. But has it been achieved? Beside what they have stated as their aim, let us set an example from Daniel's flowing and dramatic narrative.

Daniel 2:6b –10a NRSV
…Therefore tell me the dream and its interpretation. They answered a second time, 'Let the king first tell his servants the dream, then we can give its interpretation.' The king answered, 'I know with certainty that you are trying to gain time, because you see that I have firmly decreed: if you do not tell me the dream, there is but one verdict for you. You have agreed to speak lying and misleading words to me until things take a turn. Therefore, tell me the dream and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation.' The Chaldeans answered the king, ' … '

Here, in the speech margins, we have 'They answered', 'The king answered', 'The Chaldeans answered'. A study of speech margins in current English literature which reports to-and-fro conversations is unlikely to reveal examples of 'he answered' unless a specific question has been asked; and even then 'he replied' is more likely.

'They answered a second time' is a somewhat stilted expression, especially as the wording differs a little in their second response. 'They repeated their plea' might be better.

In verse 8, the king gives an angry reply. The measured tones of the NRSV

phrase 'I know with certainty' are scarcely appropriate. Similarly, 'I have firmly decreed' is a strange introduction to a threat which is equivalent to, 'If you don't tell me, I'll have you all killed.' Again, in verse 9, 'there is but one verdict for you' is hardly direct and meaningful as a translation of a statement which means that they will all suffer the same punishment.

'You have agreed to speak *lying* and misleading words' has a slightly curious ring to it. A person can tell a lie and so be a lying person. But can a word really be a lying word? I am not sure.

'Therefore, tell me the dream'—'therefore' is a word that is more at home in a logical argument than in an exchange of angry words. Why not, 'So, tell me the dream?' Compare with the NRSV style, the style of the following translation:

'So, tell me the dream and what it means!' They repeated their plea, 'Tell us, your Majesty, what the dream was, and we will tell you its interpretation.' 'It's just as I thought!' the king replied, 'You are trying to gain time because you can see that I have made up my mind that, if you don't tell me the dream, there will be a single punishment for all of you. You have agreed to lie to me, using misleading words, hoping that the situation will change. So, tell me what the dream was and I shall know that you can give me its interpretation.' 'Your Majesty,' the Chaldeans replied….'

The Committee has claimed to be more than a committee of revisers. They call themselves 'the Committee of translators'. Therefore, it seems reasonable to assess them not simply in terms of how closely they have followed the RSV, but also in terms of whether they have produced a translation that is true to the Hebrew and Aramaic originals and at the same time true to current English usage and style.

Conclusion

I was excited when I saw what NRSV was proclaimed to be. The more I study it, the more disappointed I become. In narrative there seems to be a deficient understanding of Hebrew narrative construction techniques. In poetry, Hebrew techniques seem to be too little noticed and English poetic resources too little used. In prose and poetry alike there is a gulf between NRSV and current English usage and style.