

REVIEW ARTICLE

THE REVISED ENGLISH BIBLE

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The New English Bible as a complete Bible was published in 1970. A major revision was already planned in 1974 by the Joint Commission of Churches. W. D. McHardy, who served as Deputy Director over the first translation, was appointed as Director of Revision. The Joint Committee also saw changes in its composition. Whereas the Roman Catholic representatives were only observers before, now they became full members. The United Reformed Union replaced the Presbyterian Church of England and the Congregational Church, since they had merged. Later the Salvation Army and the Moravian Church joined the Committee.

In the "Preface" to the Revised English Bible (REB), Donald Coggan (Chairman of the Joint Committee) indicates some of the changes made. Special care has been taken to ensure that "the style of English used is fluent and of appropriate dignity for liturgical use. . . ." (p. viii). Some of the Committee seem to have been surprised to find the NEB being read aloud in public worship, since that had not been one of the translation's purposes. While it seems difficult to conceive that a committee of a major translation would think that it would not be used for public worship, the revisers have sought to account for such usage. Other changes include the removal of technical terms; omitting "thou," which formerly was preserved in the language of prayer; and the incorporation of inclusive gender references wherever possible. Textual subheadings have been more extensively used, especially in the Psalms. Ancient terms of measures, weights, and values appear in the text, "but modern equivalents have been used when it seemed appropriate to do so" (p. ix). We shall look at some of these changes and others not mentioned in the "Preface" with greater detail below.

1. *Criticisms of the NEB*

Some of the general criticisms made of the NEB were that (1) it tended to be too colloquial; (2) it was a bit too bold in its textual

critical selections; (3) its dynamic equivalency principle led to interpretations of texts rather than translations; (4) its translations removed too many theological terms; (5) its translations at times appeared anachronistic because of its modernizing tendencies; (6) some infelicitous expressions appeared as a result of its desire for contemporaneity; (7) some translations were pedantic; (8) some translations were technical in nature; (9) some words and phrases were interpretive rather than just translations.

2. *REB Responses to Criticisms*

Let us look at each of these criticisms and see what response we find in this revision.

Too Colloquial

The NEB was the first Protestant authorized version in English that was not a revision of a previous translation, but a fresh translation in contemporary speech. Its aim was to make the Bible intelligible to three groups of readers: young people, people for whom the older version was not easily understood, and those who had little contact with the church. It was not intended for public reading in church—a point that must be kept in mind as we look at the first translation.

One major modification of the REB is that its revisers sought to change those words and phrases that had made the reading of the NEB inappropriate for church services. No doubt some changes would have been made even if that aim had not been modified. Some of the passages where colloquialisms have been removed follow. The first reading in each case is that of the NEB and the second (following the /) is that of the REB.

Matt 22:16—“truckling to no man” / “courting no man’s favour” (see also Mark 12:14)

Mark 6:3—“fell foul of him” / “turned against him”

Luke 4:29—“threw him out of town” / “drove him out of the town”

Luke 7:25—“silks and satins” / “finery”

Luke 15:1—“bad characters” / “tax-collectors and sinners”

Luke 15:14—“to feel the pinch” / “to be in need”

Luke 16:4—“to give me house and home” / “who will take me into their homes”

John 6:60—“can stomach” / “can stand”

John 21:6—"Shoot the net" / "Throw out the net"

Acts 7:51—"Like fathers, like sons" / "You are like your fathers"

Acts 8:9—"swept the Samaritans off their feet" / "had captivated the Samaritans"

Acts 14:6—"got wind of it" / "became aware of this"

2 Cor 11:9—"I sponged on no one" / "I did not become a charge on anyone" (see also 12:3).

Not all such colloquialisms, however, have been changed. Some that remain are "hoodwink" (Num 16:14), "bully" (Matt 24:49), "took to their heels" (Mark 5:14), "touched them on the raw" (Acts 7:54), and "money-grubbing" (1 Tim 3:8). Some unusual words have also not been altered: "panniers" (Job 5:5), "reck" (Job 9:21), "swill down" (Job 20:17), "saltings" (Job 39:6), "gaff" (Job 41:1), "batten" (Prov 5:10), "roadstead" (Ezra 3:7), and "midge" (Matt 23:24).

One must say, however, that the REB has made a vast improvement here, although it loses some of the spiciness of the NEB by doing so.

Too Bold in Its Textual Critical Selections

One criticism against the NEB was that it selected texts in some cases that had poor textual support. In the following passages the NEB based its translation on poorly supported Western readings, while the REB is based on better-supported readings:

In Matt 1:18 the REB has replaced "Messiah" with "Jesus Christ." The NEB had selected "Messiah" (Christ), omitting "Jesus," which was supported only by the Old Latin, the Old Syriac, and the Vulgate versions.

In Matt 10:3 the REB has replaced "Lebbaeus" with "Thadadaeus." The NEB's reading of "Lebbaeus" was supported by D and a couple of Old Latin manuscripts.

In Mark 8:26 the REB has replaced "Do not tell anyone in the village" with "Do not even go into the village." The NEB reading was supported by only one Old Latin manuscript.

Other readings in which the REB has moved away from the Western text are Acts 1:26 and Acts 3:21. In the former text "the other eleven" has replaced "the twelve apostles" and in the latter "from the beginning" has been added to the text.

Some textual changes in the NEB were not dependent on the Western text, such as the interesting translation in John 19:29,

which reads "javelin" rather than "hyssop." The words are very similar in the Greek: javelin is *hyssō*, and hyssop is *hyssōpō* in the dative case. Matthew and Mark use "reed." It is easier to understand the text with "javelin," since "hyssop" is not a rigid plant on which to affix a sponge. However, support for that is very poor, only one late minuscule.

A couple of interesting changes have been made in 1 Cor 8:2-3. The NEB had left the objects out of the verbs "knows" (v. 2) and "loves" (v. 3), but the REB has brought them back. Formerly one would understand the text to mean "if anyone knows" or "loves" in an absolute sense, rather than in the limited sense of "knowing something" or of "loving God."

In Mark 8:38 and 9:26 the REB has added "words" to the text. However, Matt. 5:11 still omits "falsely"; Matt 9:34 is still omitted; in Mark 1:41 "in warm indignation" is simply changed to "was moved to anger"; and Luke 5:17, 12:27, John 13:10, and Acts 4:25 remain the same. The revisers have kept "Barabbas" in Matt 27:16-17, with a slight change (NEB had "Bar-Abbas") in the word.

Dynamic Equivalency Principle Led to Interpretive Translations

One clear example of this, Matt 16:18, shows no change in the revision. Notice the difference between the RSV and the NEB: "You are Peter, and on this rock" (RSV); "You are Peter, the Rock" (NEB).

In 1 Cor 3:9 the Greek is somewhat ambiguous. The RSV translated the phrase "fellow workmen for God"; but the NEB, "God's fellow workers." Actually, there does not appear to be any difference, but the context really demands that the translation should point out a difference between God and those who work together, as it did earlier between the God who gives the increase and the one who plants and the one who waters. God is on one level; and the one who plants and the one who waters—fellow workers—are on another level. The idea of "fellow workers" is between humans and not between them and God. So the RSV translation is preferable to that of the NEB. But the REB has changed its translation to "fellow-workers in God's service."

Another ambiguous passage is Rom 9:5, in which the KJV identifies Christ with God. The RSV and NEB make a distinction by placing a period after Christ. The REB remains the same as the NEB. A similar type of thing is seen in John 1:3, 4. The NEB takes

part of verse 3 and joins it to verse 4 to read, "All that came to be was alive with his life, and that life was the light of men." The REB follows the traditional punctuation and thus reads "without him no created thing came into being. In him was life, and that life was the light of mankind."

A classic passage in which a translation is inevitably an interpretation is 1 Cor 7:36. The various leading options for the people involved in this verse are a daughter and her father, a fiancée and her fiancé, and a woman and a man who are partners in celibacy. The RSV had taken the second option and the NEB the third. However, the REB has shifted from the third to the second option. Thus it reads, "But if a man feels that he is not behaving properly towards the girl to whom he is betrothed, if his passions are strong and something must be done, let him carry out his intention by getting married; there is nothing wrong in it." What is interesting about this translation is that it has taken the liberty to translate the Greek plural by the singular toward the end of the verse. Thus, instead of "let them marry" (RSV), it has "let him carry out his intention by getting married."

An interesting change in the REB is found in Rom 10:4, which in the NEB reads "Christ ends the law." The REB reads somewhat more accurately and ambiguously, "Christ is the end of the law."

In Rev 19:10 the REB has dropped the interpretive translation of the NEB. Instead of "Those who bear testimony to Jesus are inspired like the prophets," the REB reads, "For those who bear witness to Jesus have the spirit of prophecy."

Gen 1:1 was translated by the NEB as "In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth," which was a possible translation but not the traditional one. The REB has gone back to the traditional translation of this passage. Also verse 2 in the NEB had been translated as "a mighty wind that swept over the surface of the waters." This bold translation also returned to the traditional, "the spirit of God hovered over the surface of the water."

Another interesting observation in the translation of Genesis is that the REB has consistently changed the singular of heaven (the translation of NEB) to the plural.

Removal of Too Many Theological Terms

No significant changes have taken place here except in the use of the word "church." In the NEB there was a deliberate effort to make a distinction between the Jerusalem church and other

churches. The word "church" was used for the Jerusalem church, and "congregation" was used for local churches, such as at Corinth, Rome, etc., except in Revelation. This kind of distinction is generally no longer found in the REB in Acts. The word "congregation" is kept in Matt 18:17, apparently making a distinction between the universal church of Matt 16:18 and a local congregation in Matt 18:17. Perhaps the same reason holds for keeping "congregation" in Acts 14:23 and 14:27, although it is difficult to justify this distinction when the word "church" is used for local congregations as well.

In the epistles, "church" generally has taken the place of "congregation" in the REB. Only once in five passages in Romans has "congregation" been kept (16:23). In 1 Corinthians, seven times "church" has replaced "congregation" or "community" (once, 6:4), while "congregation" has been kept in 11:16, 18; 14:19, 23. "Community" has been kept in 12:28; 14:4, 5, and "meeting" has replaced "congregation" in 14:35. In 2 Corinthians in every instance (seven times) "church" has replaced "congregation," except for 8:18, where the pronoun is used in both the NEB and the REB. In Galatians "church" has replaced "congregation" two times. In one instance "congregation" has been preserved (1:22). In Ephesians "church" was used eight times in the NEB, and these remain unchanged. In Philippians everything remains the same—3:6 "church," and 4:14 "congregations." In Colossians "church" continues to be used two times, and "congregation" once, but in one instance "church" replaces "congregation" (4:16). In 1 Thessalonians "congregation" has been changed to "church" twice. This is also true of 2 Thessalonians, while in 1 Timothy "congregation" remains once, and once "church" replaces it. In 2 Timothy "congregation" remains (5:16). In Philemon "church" replaces "congregation" in verse 2. The two instances of the use of *ekklesia* in Hebrews continue to be translated as "assembly." In Jas 5:14 "church" replaces "congregation," but in 3 John "congregation" remains in three instances. Finally, in all seventeen instances in Revelation "church" remains. It is difficult to understand the reason for these differences and to have a consistent explanation for them.

Anachronistic Translations

1 Cor 16:8 provided the most glaring example of the use of an anachronistic word in the NEB. There "Whitsuntide" was used for "Pentecost." "Pentecost" has taken its place in the REB.

“Sunday” is always used for “first day of the week” in the NEB, except for Acts 20:7, where it is translated “Saturday night.” The REB goes back to “first day of the week,” except for two instances: Acts 20:7, where it keeps “Saturday night” and 1 Cor 16:2, where it keeps “Sunday.” Once again, it is hard to understand why there is no consistency. It is difficult to defend not changing those two when all the rest have been changed.

Two other instances of anachronistic translations can be mentioned. Both of these have been changed. “Ten Towns” in Matt 5:20 has been changed to “Decapolis,” and the title “prince” with regard to Herod Antipas in Matt 14:1; Luke 3:1, 19; 9:7 has been changed to “tetrarch.”

Infelicitous Translations

Several critics had referred to the unfortunate translation of “loose livers” in 1 Cor 5:9. This has now been changed to “those who are sexually immoral.” Roger Bullard referred also to Rev 16:6, where the NEB reads: “Thou hast given them blood to drink. They have their deserts!”¹ The questionable part has now been translated as “They have what they deserve!”

Bullard also pointed out certain passages in the NEB which he claimed “sound funny to the point of being ludicrous.”² These include Prov 5:4; 19:29; Jer 20:7; 38:6; 51:20; Job 7:20; 18:11; Deut 25:17-18; and Gen 43:18. Before reading any of these passages in public he had cautioned the reader to look them over beforehand, lest he should find himself embarrassed, especially with Job 18:11. In the REB Prov 5:4; 19:29; Jer 20:7; and 51:20 remain substantially the same. However, in Job 7:20 the word “butt” has been replaced by “target,” and in Gen 43:18 the word “asses” by “donkeys.” In Deut 25:18, in place of “cut off your rear,” the revisers have put “cut off those at the rear.” The anomaly in Jer 38:6 has been removed by substituting “put” for “threw.” Job 18:11 has been translated in more polite English than the colloquial of the NEB.

Pedantic Language

When one thinks of the NEB, one would hardly think of a pedantic translation. Walter Specht and I had pointed out a few

¹Roger Bullard, “The New English Bible,” *The Duke Divinity School Review* 44 (1979): 113.

²*Ibid.*, pp. 118-119.

pedantic passages, including 1 Tim 1:9-11; 4:3; 6:4; Jas 3:9; and Rev 18:18.³ All these passages have been improved in the REB. However, having compared carefully the NEB with the REB, I found the extent of pedantic translations in the NEB to be much greater than I had realized. Let me just refer to a few of these, which have all been changed. The first translation is the NEB, and that following the / is the REB.

Matt 3:15—"we do well to conform this way with" / "it is right for us to do"

Matt 14:8—"she is beforehand with anointing my body for burial" / "she has anointed my body in anticipation of my burial"

Matt 18:16—"all facts may be duly established" / "every case may be settled"

Luke 2:29—"thou givest thy servant his discharge in peace" / "you are releasing your servant in peace"

Luke 6:23—"ban your very name as infamous" / "slander your very name"

Luke 22:29—"now I vest in you the kingship which my Father vested in me" / "now I entrust to you the kingdom which my Father entrusted to me."

Technical Legal Language

Specht and I had referred also to technical and legal language in the translation of the NEB.⁴ The expression "laid an information" has been changed to "lay a charge" or "bring a charge," and "stand in the dock" to "being in trial." The latter expression of the NEB seems to have been dropped throughout.

Interpretative Tendencies in Word and Phrase Selection

The NEB at times added words not in the original to give added force to an expression, but these appear to have been eliminated in the revision. Notice a few examples of this. The first translation is that of the NEB and the second (following the /) that of the REB.

Matt 7:3—"great plank" / "plank"

Matt 11:7—"reed-bed" / "reed"

³Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth-century English Versions of the Bible*, rev. and enl. ed. (Grand Rapids, MI, 1983), p. 211.

⁴Ibid., pp. 210-211.

Matt 12:10—"guardian angels" / "angels"

Matt 14:8—"mock homage" / "homage"

Matt 16:26—"true self" / "self"

Matt 23:28—"brim-full" / "full"

Luke 20:20—"secret agents" / "agents"

Luke 23:12—"standing feud" / "feud"

Acts 6:5—"former convert" / "convert."

The NEB also tended to interpret verses to make them clearer. These interpretations may be correct, but they would constitute overtranslating. Notice a few examples of this:

Matt 5:3—"How blest are those who know their need of God" / "Blessed are the poor in Spirit"

Luke 10:15—"skies and depths" / "heaven and Hades"

Luke 22:24—"to discuss ways and means of putting Jesus into their power" / "to discuss ways of betraying Jesus to them"

Rom 1:25—"bartered away the true God for a false one" / "exchanged the truth of God for a lie"

Rom 11:36—"Source, Guide, and Goal of all that is" / "From him and through him and for him all things exist"

1 Cor 1:22—"Jews call for miracles" / "Jews demand signs"

1 Cor 2:15—"A man gifted by the Spirit" / "But a spiritual person"

1 Cor 4:3—"human court of judgement" / "human court"

1 Cor 4:6—"as you patronize one and flout the other" / "as you take sides in support of one against another"

1 Cor 14:15—"I will pray as I am inspired to pray, but I will also pray intelligently" / "I will pray with my spirit, but also with my mind"

2 Cor 12:7—"a sharp, physical pain" / "a thorn in my flesh."

Miscellaneous Items

We have mentioned previously the use in the REB of gender-inclusive language, the dropping of "thou" and its forms throughout (even in the language of prayer), and the reinclusion of the subheadings in the Psalms. We have also mentioned that weights and measures have generally been changed from contemporary usage to ancient usage.

The NEB was criticized for its rearrangement of OT chapter divisions. A check in several places shows that some changes have been made. The verses in Jer 12 have been placed in the traditional

order. The same is true for (1) Joel 3:9-12, (2) Zech 2:13; 4:1-3, 11-14; 3:1, and (3) 11:17; 13:7-9; 12:1. Jer 15:13, 14, formerly relegated to a footnote, have been brought back into the text. However, no change has been made in (1) Gen 26:15, 18, 16, (2) Isa 40:20; 41:6,7; 40:21, (3) Amos 5:5, 6, 8, 9, 7, and (4) Job 39:30; 41:1-6; 40:1.

One somewhat strange translation, especially for the NEB, was the use of "Jehovah" in selected passages. These included Exod 3:15; 6:3; 33:19; and 34:5, 6. These have all been changed to "LORD." Likewise, the same change has been made in the following verses: Gen 22:14 ("Jehovah-jireh" to "The LORD will provide"), Exod 17:15-16 ("Jehovah-nissi" to "The LORD is my Banner"), Judg 6:24 ("Jehovah shalom" to "The LORD is peace"), and Ezek 48:35 ("Jehovah-shammah" to "The LORD is there").

3. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the REB is an improvement over the NEB in many respects. Its basis (text) is sounder; its translations are more accurate; its language is more acceptable for pulpit reading; its style has been improved by the removal of pedantic translations; and it has been made fully contemporary by its removal of the use of "thou" and related terms, by the dropping of the name "Jehovah," and by inclusive gender language. Areas where it can further improve have been indicated above. Some readers will miss the spiciness of the earlier translation, its boldness in selection of Greek variants, and its interpretive translations.