

## REVIEW ARTICLE

### THE NEW REVISED STANDARD VERSION

SAKAE KUBO  
Chico, CA 95926

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) was published under the authority of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America in 1989. The particular volume from which I am working is Zondervan's NRSV Reference Bible, which contains various types of previously published helps. My comments will be restricted to the text of the NRSV.

Bruce Metzger, writing on behalf of the translation committee, set forth in his preface some of the changes made in this revision. The directive to the committee was "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" (p. ix). More specifically, the committee sought to eliminate masculine-oriented language in keeping with modern societal attitudes, to remove the archaic second-person singular pronouns and their corresponding verb forms, and to bring the version into line with current English usage.

Let us look in more detail at these changes.

#### 1. *Revisions Highlighted in the NRSV's Preface*

##### *The Elimination of Masculine-oriented Language*

The first category deals with the elimination of masculine-oriented language. This has been accomplished in several ways, depending on the context.

The word "man" (or "men"), for example, has been substituted for in some of the following ways: "humankind," Gen 1:26, 27; "human beings," Ps 8:4; "those," Eccl 11:8; "everyone," Eccl 12:13; "mortal," Mic 6:8; "one," Matt 4:4; "others," Matt 5:19; "people," Mark 1:17, Luke 1:25, John 1:4; "human," 1 Cor 3:4; and "human leaders," 1 Cor 3:21. In addition, "human heart" replaces "heart of

man," "what is truly human" replaces "a man's thoughts," and "human spirit" replaces "spirit of the man," 1 Cor 2:9, 11.

In other cases a plural pronoun is used, a noun referred to in the context is substituted for the masculine-oriented language, or the clause is rephrased to a passive. Examples of the first case are found in the following passages: 1 Cor 2:14, "those who are unspiritual" replaces "the unspiritual man"; Matt 5:12, "in the same way they persecuted" replaces "so men persecuted"; Ps 1:1, "happy are those" replaces "blessed is the man." An example of the second case is 1 Cor 3:10, where "each builder must choose with care" replaces "let each man take care." Examples of the third case are Prov 6:27, where "can fire be carried in the bosom" replaces "can a man carry fire in his bosom"; and 1 Cor 3:14, where "if what has been built" replaces "if the work which any man has built."

Where the words "father(s)" and "son(s)" have a broader meaning, they are replaced by "parents" (Exod 20:5; Luke 1:17) and "ancestor" (Matt 3:9) or "ancestors" (Luke 1:55). In a similar manner, "heavenly beings" is used for "sons of God" (Job 1:6), "children" and "people" are used for "sons" in Matt 5:45 and Luke 1:16 respectively, and "mortal" or "mortals" for "son of man" (Ezek 23:2; 24:2; Ps 8:4). "Son of Man" as a title for Jesus continues to be used in the Gospels.

Where "brother" and "brethren" have broader reference, they are replaced by "brother or sister" (Matt 5:22-24) and "brothers and sisters" (Matt 5:47). The third person masculine pronouns "he" and "him" also have been changed where the RSV used them in a general way (e.g., Ps 8:4-6).

### *The Removal of Archaic Second Person Forms*

The second category of change aimed at by the translation committee was the removal of archaic second person singular pronouns. Most of these had previously been dropped from the RSV, except for those places where God was addressed. In this revision, however, all archaic forms in every context have been eliminated. Those who have been accustomed to the traditional wording, especially in the Psalms, may not appreciate the change, but the RSV has been lagging behind other modern versions in this regard.

### *Bringing the RSV up to Current English Usage*

The third major area of change, as noted in the preface, was to bring the RSV up to current English usage in a more general

manner than in the two previous categories. While the NRSV is still limited by its deliberate continuation of the KJV tradition and by not opting for a fresh translation in modern speech, it has departed from that tradition in being more paraphrastic than literal in its move away from masculine-oriented language. Other changes in this area have been more conservative.

Professor Metzger points out in the preface (p. xv) that the contrast in "the more stately English rendering of the Old Testament with the less formal rendering adopted for the New Testament" is deliberate. This is due to the fact that the OT represents the classic form of the Hebrew, while the NT represents the more colloquial Koine Greek.

Some examples of changes in current English usage are now provided. The following words and expressions from Gen 1-3 have been replaced in the NRSV: "firmament" by "dome," "heaven" by "sky," "behold" by "see," "midst" by "middle," "beguiled" by "tricked," "seed" by "offspring," "pangs" by "pain," "put forth" by "reach out."

Other changes noted in areas checked are: "graven image" to "idol," "bow down" to "worship," "visiting the iniquity" to "punishing . . . for the iniquity," "take in vain" to "make wrongful use of," "manservant" and "maidservant" to "male or female slave," "sojourner who is within your gates" to "alien resident in your towns," "ass" to "donkey," "afar off" to "at a distance," "peace offering" to "offering of well-being," "parts the hoof and is cloven-footed" to "has divided hoofs and is cleft-footed," "swine" to "pig," "girdle" to "sash" or "belt," "made an end of" to "finished," "garments" to "vestments" (in the context of ceremonial garments), "solemn rest" to "complete rest," "continual offering" to "regular offering," "kinsman" to "relative," "maidens" to "young women," "merry" to "contented," "whence" to "where . . . from" or "from where," "rent" to "tore" or "torn," "brought forth in iniquity" to "born guilty," "sluggard" to "lazybones," "give ear" to "listen," "dwell" to "live," "esteemed him not" to "held him of no account," "betrothed" to "engaged," "call his name" to "name him," "ascertained" to "learned," "and lo" to "and there," "they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy" to "they were overwhelmed with joy," "preach" to "proclaim" (in the context of the gospel), "is at hand" to "has come near," "begone" to "away with you," "gospel" to "good news" (in the Gospels and Acts), "ministered to" to "waited on," "astonished" to "astounded," "a great while before day" to "while it was still very

dark," "advanced in years" to "getting on in years," "it fell to him by lot" to "he was chosen by lot," "from his mother's womb" to "before his birth," "perceived" to "realized," "regarded the low estate" to "looked with favor on the lowliness," "exalted those of low degree" to "lifted up the lowly," "tenth hour" to "four o'clock in the afternoon," "truly, truly" to "very truly," "folly" to "foolishness," and "it pleased God" to "God decided."

## 2. *Revisions Made Due to the Selection of Textual Readings from the Original Language*

The textual changes in the NT are due to the fact that the translation is based on the United Bible Societies' *Greek New Testament*, third edition, corrected in 1983. The changes listed below result from this fact. However, it will be noticed that a few of these changes had already been made in the revision of the NT made in 1961. What is surprising is to note the extent of the changes made as a result of the adoption of the UBS text. One observes also that the brackets around a word or words in the *Greek New Testament*, which indicate disputed passages, simply disappear in the translation. The result is to give these disputed variants greater certainty than they deserve, and the translation results in favoring a more conservative approach to the text, i.e., it tends to add more than omit.

Matt 12:47—This verse was omitted previously but has now been added.

Matt 26:20—The NRSV omits "disciples," which was in the first and second NT editions of the RSV.

Matt 27:16-17—The NRSV adds "Jesus" to "Barabbas."

Mark 2:4—The NRSV takes the reading "bring him to Jesus" instead of "get near him."

Mark 7:3—The word "thoroughly" has been added, with the explanation in the footnote that the meaning of the Greek word is uncertain.

Mark 7:35—The NRSV adds "immediately" to the text.

Mark 16:9-20—In the first NT edition of the RSV this "longer ending" of Mark was placed in a footnote in small print, with the "shorter ending" following it in the note. In the second NT edition, vv. 9-16 were restored to the text, separated by a blank space and accompanied by informative notes describing the various arrangements of the text, including the "shorter ending," in the ancient

authorities. In the NRSV it is placed in the text enclosed in double brackets but preceded by the “shorter ending,” and another addition after v. 14 is provided in the explanatory footnote.

Luke 11:33—The NRSV follows the papyrus manuscripts in omitting “or under a bushel.”

Luke 22:19b-20—This Western non-interpolation was added in the second NT edition of the RSV and has been retained in the NRSV.

Luke 22:43-44—In the first NT edition of the RSV these verses appeared in the text without brackets; in the second NT edition they were placed in a footnote; now they again are included in the text, but within double brackets.

Luke 24:5—The last portion of the verse, “he is not here, but has risen,” was formerly omitted but now has been restored.

Luke 24:12—This verse previously was omitted but now has been restored.

Luke 24:36—“And said to them, ‘Peace be with you’” had been omitted but now has been restored.

Luke 24:40—This verse was omitted in the RSV but now has been restored.

Luke 24:51—“And was carried up into heaven” was added to the text in the second NT edition of the RSV and has been retained in the NRSV.

Luke 24:52—The NRSV adds “worshiped him, and.”

John 1:18—The NRSV chooses to include “God” in the second clause, so it reads “God the only Son” instead of “the only Son.”

John 4:1—The NRSV replaces “the Lord” with “Jesus” in the opening clause.

John 7:39—The NRSV omits the word “given.”

John 7:53-8:11—The same thing has happened here as in Mark 16:9-20. This passage was placed in a footnote in small print in the first NT edition of the RSV. In the second NT edition it was restored to the text, separated by a blank space before and after, with a footnote describing the arrangement of the text in various ancient authorities. In the NRSV it is retained in the text but is placed within double brackets.

John 8:16—The NRSV replaces “he” with “the Father.”

John 10:29—The NRSV chooses the reading in which “greater than all else” refers not to the Father but to what has been given to Jesus.

John 14:14—The NRSV adds “me” after “ask.”

John 16:23—The NRSV connects “in my name” with “ask” rather than with “give.”

John 16:27—“God” replaces “the Father” at the end of the verse.

Acts 13:48—“The Lord” replaces “God.”

Rom 8:21—The NRSV replaces “because” with “that.”

Rom 8:28—Previously the text read, “in everything God works for good.” In the NRSV the word “God” has been dropped, so that it reads as in the KJV, “all things work together for good.”

Rom 8:34—The NRSV omits “from the dead.”

Rom 11:17—The NRSV substitutes “rich root” for “richness.”

Rom 11:31—The NRSV adds “now.”

Rom 15:19—The NRSV substitutes “spirit of God” for “Holy Spirit.”

1 Cor 2:1—The NRSV has selected the word “mystery” here instead of “testimony.”

1 Cor 5:5—“Jesus” is omitted after “Lord.”

1 Cor 7:15—The NRSV replaces “us” with “you.”

1 Cor 10:9—The NRSV replaces “the Lord” with “Christ.”

1 Cor 13:3—The NRSV has “so that I may boast” instead of “to be burned.”

2 Cor 3:2—“Your hearts” has become “our hearts.”

2 Cor 8:7—“Our love for you” has replaced “your love for us.”

Gal 1:3—The NRSV connects the word “our” with “Father” instead of with “Lord Jesus Christ.”

Gal 4:28—“You” replaces “we.”

Gal 6:2—The indicative mood replaces the imperative in the second clause.

Eph 1:1—The words “in Ephesus” have been introduced into the text.

Eph 4:8—The NRSV omits “and.”

Phil 1:14—The NRSV omits “of God” after “word.”

Phil 3:3—The NRSV has “in the Spirit of God” instead of “God in spirit.”

Col 1:7—The NRSV has “on your behalf” instead of “on our behalf.”

Heb 1:12—The expression “like clothing,” previously omitted, has been added.

Heb 4:2—The NRSV has “because they were not united by faith with those who listened” instead of “because it did not meet with faith in the hearers.”

Heb 6:2—"With" is omitted before "instruction."

Heb 11:11—The RSV has Sarah as the subject, but the NRSV makes Abraham the subject, using masculine pronouns to point to the same subject as in vv. 8-10.

Heb 13:21—The NRSV has "working among us" instead of "working in you."

Jas 1:12—The NRSV has "the Lord" instead of "God."

1 Pet 3:18—The NRSV has "suffered" instead of "died."

1 Pet 5:2a—The NRSV adds "exercising the oversight."

1 Pet 5:2b—The NRSV adds "as God would have you do it."

2 Pet 2:4—The NRSV has "chains" instead of "pits."

2 John 8—"You have worked" has been changed to "we have worked."

Jude 5—The NRSV has "the Lord" instead of "he."

Jude 22—The NRSV has "have mercy on" instead of "convince."

Rev 15:3—The NRSV has "nations" instead of "ages."

### 3. *Revisions Made Due to Ambiguities in the Original Languages*

Some interesting changes also have been made in ambiguous passages—that is, passages which have used the same Hebrew or Greek text but can be translated in different ways. This may be due either to the fact that a word can be understood in two different ways or to different punctuation possibilities.

#### *Punctuation-related Changes*

One classic example of this is Rom 9:5, where a difference in punctuation either identifies Jesus Christ as God or makes a distinction between the two. In the RSV the text reads: "to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen." The NRSV reads: "to them belong the patriarchs, and from them, according to the flesh, comes the Messiah, who is over all, God blessed forever. Amen." Notice the difference in punctuation and the difference in meaning that it makes.

Another such passage is John 1:3-4. The expression "that was made" (RSV) or "what has come into being" (NRSV) can be connected either with the previous clause, as in the RSV, or with the next clause, as in the NRSV. Notice the theological difference in meaning. The RSV renders the passage as "without him was not

anything made that was made. In him was life." The NRSV translates the same text as "without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being in him was life."

### *Meaning-related Changes*

Examples of passages changed in the NRSV due to the ambiguity of the meaning of the original (rather than to the possibilities of punctuation) are the following:

Gen 1:2—The RSV has "the Spirit of God was moving over the face of the waters," while the NRSV has "a wind from God swept over the face of the waters." Here the problem is the ambiguous Hebrew word *ruach*, which could mean either "spirit," "breath," or "wind."

Ps 45:6—The RSV has "your divine throne endures for ever and ever," but the NRSV has translated it as "your throne, O God, endures forever and ever." (Cf. Heb 1:8.)

Matt 1:1, 16-18—Here and elsewhere, where the Greek word *christos* is not a name but a title, "Messiah" is used instead of "Christ."

Matt 2:2, 8, 11—Referring to the visit of the wise men, the RSV translated the word *proskyneō* as "worship," but the NRSV translates it as "pay homage to." This is hardly due to current English usage.

Matt 2:16—In the NRSV the ones that Herod killed are referred to simply as "children," while the RSV had "male children." The word *pais* could be either male or female. Though this word has the masculine article, the fact that it is plural permits ambiguity as to gender because the masculine plural is used when both genders are included. However, the RSV rendering, while interpretive, is to be assumed, since Herod was intent on eliminating a possible rival king.

1 Cor 7:16—The issue here is Paul's view of the likelihood of a spouse saving her or his partner should she or he remain in the relationship. Notice the difference. The RSV follows: "Wife, how do you know whether you will save your husband? Husband, how do you know whether you will save your wife?" The NRSV: "Wife, for all you know, you might save your husband. Husband, for all you know, you might save your wife."

1 Thess 4:4—The Greek word *skeuos* could refer here to either one's own wife or one's own body in a figurative sense, al-

though its basic meaning is “thing,” “object,” or (most often in the NT) “vessel.” The RSV interpreted it as “wife,” but the NRSV uses “body.”

Heb 2:7-9—There are several interesting things about this passage as it is translated in the NRSV. First is the fact that because the translators sought to avoid masculine-oriented language, they translated “man” as “human beings” and “son of man” as “mortals.” With “man” and “son of man,” the passage was sufficiently ambiguous to leave open the possibility that the author had in mind Jesus Christ specifically as the “son of man.” The NRSV has removed that possibility. In Psalm 8 the passage seems to refer to the human race in general; but with the masculine singular term “son of man,” which Jesus used to refer to himself, a NT writer could treat this passage as a messianic prophecy.

#### 4. *Conclusion*

In conclusion, the NRSV loses some of its more literal translation by its removal of male-oriented language, but it will gain by this more inclusive language in Bible translation. Readers will also benefit from its current English usage. In most cases, textual changes and changes in ambiguous translations make the NRSV more acceptable for conservative readers. There will always be differences of opinion over the selection of readings and over the best translation of ambiguous passages. In some cases I would disagree with the choices of the NRSV committee.

While this revision is an improvement over the RSV, I believe that this version should no longer be revised but that it should become a fresh translation, as were the NEB, JB, and NIV. Then it can be further revised as they have been or will be. It is ironical that the culturally conservative British have gone to a fresh translation of their own “English” Bible, while the culturally liberal Americans are continuing the tradition of the KJV, which comes from the British.