

# New Revised Standard Version

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### B. NRSV: New Testament

In order to assess the standard of translation of the NRSV in the New Testament, I propose to look in some detail at a passage from Mark 1, and then to look at John 1. Unfortunately, there is no satisfactory way of assessment that can avoid detailed scrutiny and nit-picking! Then I will consider how a significant theme in Mark is handled, and some vivid points in John.

Most of the New Testament was written by people who knew Hebrew and probably also Aramaic. I will consider how far NRSV shows awareness of how to handle Hebraic idioms and style when translating into English. One or two problems of textual criticism will be noted, and then the style and readability of the translation will be illustrated and evaluated.

#### Mark 1:1-20

1:3 ...*the voice of one crying out in the wilderness...*

(i) As this phrase has no punctuation, it is not possible for a reader to be certain whether it means: someone crying, out in the wilderness

or: someone crying out, in the wilderness.

(ii) In current English 'crying' normally means 'weeping'. Also, 'someone' or 'somebody' is more natural than 'one'. The phrase could be expressed more clearly as: 'The voice of someone shouting in the wilderness.'

(iii) Incidentally, the translators of Isaiah 40:3 needed to meet with the translators of Mark 1:3. In Isaiah 40:3, they have paraphrased 'The voice of someone calling' as 'a voice cries'. Besides being a questionable translation, this needlessly destroys the parallel with Mark 1:3.

1:4 *John the baptizer **appeared** in the wilderness.*

There is nothing in the Greek to suggest that John's being in the wilderness was some kind of appearance. The Greek verb *egeneto* corresponds to the Hebrew *wayyehiy* and alerts us to the fact that a narrative is beginning, and tells us that John was in the wilderness or in the desert.

1:4 ...*a baptism of repentance...*

It is natural in English to speak of the baptism of a child, or of an adult. It is not natural to speak of the baptism of repentance. Here again the Greek is Hebraic. A 'repentance-baptism' will not do in English, so we have to consider whether 'baptism as a sign of repentance' or 'baptism for those who repented' will best convey the meaning. The Good News Bible recasts it as [preaching]. 'Turn away from your sins and be baptized,' [he told the people].

1:6 *John was clothed with camel's hair.*

He would have had difficulty covering his body with hair from camels. We need to translate the meaning of the Greek, not its words. 'John wore clothes woven from camel's hair.'

1:8 *I have baptized you with water...*

This is an accurate translation, but the footnote is not needed. The gospel writers use two expressions for 'with water'. One uses only the noun (in the instrumental case). The other used the Greek word 'en' in an instrumental sense that corresponds with the Hebrew use of 'b', a preposition that means 'in', 'through', or 'by means of' according to its context. So the footnote 'in water' is misleading.

1:9 *Nazareth of Galilee*

In English, we say 'London in England' to distinguish it from London in Ontario. We need, here, 'Nazareth in Galilee'.

1:10 *And just as he was coming up...*

Mark uses *kai euthus* very commonly to introduce the next event in a series of events, much as we use 'then'. It might be more natural in English to say, 'Then, as he came up...'. This would also avoid starting the sentence with 'And', which is more Hebraic than English in style. Mark does not elsewhere use *kai euthus* as 'And just as...'.

1:10 ...*descending like a dove...*

In what ways does a dove descend? The meaning would be clearer if the phrasing was altered to 'the Spirit, like a dove, descending (or, coming down) on him'.

1:13 ...*and the angels waited on him...*

This apparently simple sentence raises more than one question!

(i) Who are the angels? Does it imply 'all the angels'? This question does not arise in Mark's Hebraic style of Greek. In Hebrew narrative, where an angel entered the scene, it would be natural to say 'the angel' as it is not any-old-angel that comes but the specific angel who will feature in the story: 'and angels' would be a sufficient translation here.

(ii) What did it mean for them to 'wait on' him? If we listen to the story being read aloud, we first hear 'angels waited' and may for a millisecond wonder why they waited and how long. Then we discover they waited 'on him'. But how? Like waiters in a restaurant? Or what? Perhaps 'and angels cared for him' would better reflect the meaning of the Greek—they served, they attended to his needs.

1:15 ...*the time is fulfilled...*

(i) The Greek verb here is in a form parallel to that of '**has** come near' and might be better translated 'has been fulfilled'.

(ii) But what does it mean for time to be fulfilled? It is not natural meaningful English, so some translators have opted for 'The time has come'. But that omits the important idea of fulfilment. I think we need: 'The time of fulfilment has come.'

1:16 *As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee...*

It is easy to pass along the water in a bucket. But can one pass along a sea? So does it mean he passed the whole way along the sea? The problem is created by the translation. The Greek clearly says, 'As he **was going along beside** the Sea of Galilee.' NRSV introduces the idea of passing and at the same time has minimised the nature of the continuing action implied by the Greek verb by using 'passed' instead of 'passing'.

1:17 *I will make you fish for people...*

The nuances of the Greek are neglected. A different emphasis is introduced. More literally, the Greek says 'I will make you **become** fishers of people'. Jesus undertakes to do something for them, to teach and train them to become different—to become fishers of people. NRSV introduces the idea that Jesus will make them do something—he will make them fish for people. The task of translation is not normally conceived of as one in which different ideas can be introduced.

1:19 *As he went a little farther*

(i) Greek participles have two very frequent basic forms, one indicating continuing action (e.g., as he was going) and the other, completed action (e.g., when he had gone). Here, Mark has 'having gone forward'. The NRSV translation comes as something of a shock!

(ii) 'When he had gone a little **further** on' would be a shade better than 'a little farther'. In a translation designed for public reading, it is as well to avoid anything that can be misheard. There is no place in this story for a little father!

**John's Gospel: Chapter 1**

The following is a selection of points, not a comprehensive discussion.

1:1-2 *In the beginning — in the beginning with God.*

These two verses form a very carefully crafted unit. The introductory 'In the beginning' and the central focus on 'God' are both brought together in the closure 'in the beginning with God'. It is a little gem in Hebraic style. It needs to be seen on the page as a unit. NRSV has no visible break until the end of verse 5.

1:14 *...the glory of the father's only son, full of grace and truth.*

Here it can seem as if the glory was full of grace and truth. In the Greek, it is clear that 'full of grace and truth' refers to the Word. I think that, to achieve a similar clarity, we need 'The Word became flesh and lived among us, full of grace and truth, and we have seen his glory...' .

1:17 *The law indeed was given through Moses*

(i) The Greek has *hoti ho nomos* which means 'for the Torah...'. NRSV seems to neglect the linking 'for'.

(ii) There is nothing in the Greek text that corresponds to 'indeed'.

(iii) 'The law' here does not mean Roman law, nor natural law, but specifically the 'Law of Moses', the teaching of Moses, the books Genesis to Deuteronomy. It is a technical term. It merits at least a capital letter: 'The Law'.

1:18 *It is God the only Son...who has made him known.*

There is a problem in this verse because Greek manuscripts do not all agree. Most manuscripts have 'the only son, who is in the father's bosom [i.e., intimately close], he has made him known'. This seems to make sense and to

fit the context. However, some early manuscripts (chiefly from Egypt) have ‘only God (or, the only God) who is in the father’s bosom, he has made him known’. This produces a logical problem! ‘No one has ever seen God. The only God he has made him known’ does not make sense.

In making a choice between readings that differ, we need to look (i) at the author’s normal usage and also (ii) the context and its literary structure.

(i) The word *monogenes* meaning ‘only’ in the sense of an only son occurs in John 3:16 and 3:18 in close connection with the thought of God as his father, and in both cases as an adjective describing the noun ‘son’. Here in 1:18, we have mention of the **father’s** bosom, so we would expect *monogenes* to refer to the son.

(ii) John 1:1-18 is carefully crafted throughout with a great deal of repetition and precise balance within each section. John 1:18 is the closure of the section beginning in verse 14. The section opens with ‘the glory of the only son who is from beside (the) father, full of **grace** and truth’, that is, ‘full of genuine real grace’. There is a central section about John the Baptist. Then a return to the main theme. In proper Hebraic style, the points in the opening are treated in reverse order—first grace, and then the only son. Balancing ‘full of grace’ (v. 14) we have ‘from his fullness we have all received grace’. The writer could hardly have shown more clearly that he was returning to the theme of verse 14; but to make it more abundantly clear he rounds off the sentence by repeating his reference to grace and truth. In verse 14, the reference to grace and truth immediately follows ‘the glory of the only son from beside (the) father’ (NRSV: glory as of a father’s son), so in verse 18, we naturally expect that element of the opening to be mentioned again. And so it is, according to the almost overwhelming evidence of the Greek manuscripts.

The main alternative, offered by a papyrus dated about 200 A.D. and four manuscripts (two of which were later corrected), is *monogenes theos* ‘only God’. Although *monogenes* with reference to a son clearly means ‘only’, it sounds rather like ‘only-begotten’. So some of the Greek theologians were glad to use ‘only-begotten God’ as a weapon against Arians. As we have seen, ‘only (or, the only) God’ hardly makes sense and destroys the careful parallelism with verse 14. Following any normal standards of criticism, I think it would be rejected as a scribal mistake, quite easy to make in an age when word endings

were sometimes shortened by a kind of semi-shorthand.

The NRSV has ‘God the only son’. It is hard to understand this translation, since manuscripts which have ‘God’ do not have ‘son’, and those which have ‘son’ do not have ‘God’. By combining both alternatives, they have produced an expression ‘God-the-son’ which may have a place in later Christian theology but has no place in the New Testament. The New Testament does speak of the one God as having a three-fold name, for baptism (Matt. 28:19) was into ‘the name (singular!) of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit’. But nowhere in all the manuscripts of the New Testament can we find the expression ‘God the Son’ or ‘God the Holy Spirit’.

Does it matter if the NRSV and some other translators have introduced into the New Testament a concept from later Christian theology? I think the answer has to be ‘Yes’; first because in translation it is necessary to take care to introduce nothing that is alien to the text being translated, and secondly because the expression ‘God the Son’ needlessly plays into the hands of those who accuse Christians of worshipping more than one God.

*1:22 Who are you? Let us **have** an answer for those who sent us.*

Here the Greek says, if translated fairly literally, ‘Who are you?’—so that we may **give** an answer to the people who have sent us’. It is fairly typical of John’s style to leave a hiatus before ‘so that’. He has done it in verse 8: ‘He was not the light but so that he might bear witness to the light.’ NRSV translators rightly supply ‘he came’ before ‘so that’. The context indicates that ‘he came’ is the missing link. So they translate ‘but **he came** to testify to the light’. What is the missing link here in verse 22? The fact that they go on to say ‘What do you **say**’ suggests that the missing link is ‘Tell us’. So, we might translate as ‘Who are you? Tell us, so that we may give an answer to the people who sent us’.

Whatever we supply, the nuance is that they are under pressure to **give** an answer. The nuance of the NRSV translation is that they feel a need to **have** an answer.

*1:29 Here is the Lamb of God.*

The Greek word that has been translated as ‘Here is’, means ‘Look!’, and has the function of directing attention away towards what is indicated. As Jesus is

coming, John points towards him and says 'Look!'. It would be more natural to say, 'There is the Lamb of God'. 'There' like the Greek 'Look!' directs attention **away** from where John is. 'Here' directs attention **towards** the place where John is.

1:32-33 *I saw the Spirit descending from heaven like a dove, and **it** remained on him. I myself **did not know** him but the one who **sent me** to baptize with water **said** to me, 'He on whom you see the Spirit descend and remain is the one who baptizes with the Holy Spirit.'*

(i) NRSV follows the statement that John saw the Spirit descending on Jesus with a statement that seems to imply that at that point he still did not know about Jesus. Then comes a statement that God told him he would recognise the one who would baptize with the Spirit by seeing on whom the Spirit descended. This seems a rather odd sequence of events. A sign is not usually given at the time of an event or after it, but before it. John the Evangelist usually writes logically, so we need to examine the passage carefully. The verb in verse 33 is an all-purpose past tense form. According to its context it may be translated as 'I did not know' or 'I had not known'. The word translated 'said' normally does mean 'said', but can function as a past perfect, 'had said'. If we translate as 'I had not known him, but the one who sent me to baptize with water had said to me, "He on whom you see the spirit come down and remain on him is the one who baptizes with the Spirit"', then we have a translation that is true to the Greek and true to the context.

(ii) *and it remained on him*. Although in Greek the word for Spirit is neuter in gender, when John uses a pronoun to refer to the Spirit (John 16:13, 14) he does not use a neuter pronoun (it) but a masculine pronoun 'he'. This is a grammatically masculine pronoun, not a sexually male pronoun. What the switch from neuter noun to masculine pronoun does is to indicate the personality of the Spirit. The Spirit is not an 'it'. If the NRSV followed the Greek a little more closely and said, 'I saw the Spirit descending and remaining on him' there would be no need for the questionable 'it'.

(iii) *the one who baptizes*. The Greek word represented by 'who baptizes' is a participle 'baptizing'. John's Gospel is profoundly Hebraic. A similar Hebrew participle would translate as 'who baptizes' or as 'who will baptize', according to its context. It is worth considering whether '(he is) the one who will baptize with the Holy Spirit' might be a more appropriate translation here.

1:34 ...*this is the son of God*

The Greek word here translated 'this' is *ekeinos*. It can be translated, according to the context, as 'that' or as 'he'. Here we clearly need, 'He is the son of God.' The Greek for 'this' is not *ekeinos*.

1:48 *Nathaniel asked him, 'Where did you come to know me?'*

This seems an extraordinary translation. Greek has a word for 'where'. It is *pou*. Here the Greek text has *pothen*. According to its context, *pothen* means 'where from?' or 'How?'. When it means 'How' it has a nuance of surprise, similar to the English idiom 'How on earth?'.

The verb that NRSV translates as a past tense, 'did you come to know,' is in fact present tense 'do you know'. The natural English translation would be, 'How is it that you know me?' or 'How on earth do you know me so well?'

1:48 *Jesus answered, 'I saw you under the fig tree before Philip called you.'*

Here, perhaps thrown out by having translated *pothen* as 'where?' the NRSV puts the focus on place—'I saw you **under the fig tree**...'. The Greek text has, 'Before Philip called you, while you were under the fig tree, I saw you.' By beginning the sentence 'Before' it puts the focus on time.

The NRSV publishers claim that the resources of linguistic scholarship have been used. Linguists are sharp to notice where focus is to be found and how it is indicated. Here the focus on time raises the question, 'What was Nathaniel doing at the time?' The context suggests he was thinking about Jacob the **deceiver**, who became **Israel**, and his vision of the ladder going up to heaven. This is probably why he is so amazed when Jesus calls him a true Israel person (or descendant of **Israel**) in whom there is no **deceit**. What Jesus says reveals that Jesus was fully aware of Nathaniel's thoughts. The NRSV shift of focus from time to place is not only untrue to the Greek but probably makes it a little more difficult to see the underlying significance of the narrative.

1:51 *Very truly, I tell you...*

What is the difference between 'Truly' and 'Very truly'? What is the implied contrast to 'Very truly'? Would it be, 'Partly truly'? 'Very truly' is a strange expression. Here it represents the Hebrew 'Amen, amen'. The Hebrew words function to highlight a statement. 'Amen, amen I say to you' is more or less

equivalent to ‘Pay careful attention to what I am saying—it is very important’. Is ‘Very truly, I tell you’ the natural way to give such emphasis when using ‘the form of the English language that is most widely current in our day’? (p. xi).

I find it disturbing that in half a chapter of Mark and one chapter of John, there are so many points at which the NRSV translation needs to be called into question. I do not expect every point I make to be met with universal approval, but after more than fifty years of experience with classical languages and translation I do not think that everything I say is likely to be mistaken. I believe that there is a real cause for concern over the standards of translation to be found in the NRSV.

Let us now look at how the NRSV handles a prominent theme in Mark’s Gospel, and some very vivid points in John’s narrative. In Mark’s Gospel the theme of raising and rising is one that runs through the Gospel. We will trace its course and consider the implications for a translator of Mark.

#### Rising and Resurrection in Mark

Mark’s Gospel is a book that is carefully planned. One has only to study the resonances between the story of the healing of the man with the unclean spirit in Mark 1:23-27 and the story of the stilling of the storm in Mark 4:35-41 in the Greek text to become aware of how Mark uses key words and noticeable parallels.

At the conclusion of Mark’s Gospel, whatever the final ending, there is a highly dramatic moment when the women are told, ‘He rose. He is not here.’ When we read Mark attentively, we see that, by using the key word *egeiro* in four dramatic incidents, he has provided four signposts towards the climax of the resurrection.

In Mark 1:30-31, Peter’s mother-in-law is lying prostrate, unable to do anything. Mark says of Jesus, ‘Having come, he **raised** her, having grasped her hand.’ He uses two participles for his coming to her and for his taking her by the hand, so his spotlight is focussed on the verb ‘he raised’.

In Mark 2:3-12, there is the story of a paralysed man. Its climax is reached when the man rises to his feet and walks away. In this climax, Mark uses the

word for rising three times, thus producing a focus on it: verse 9, verse 11 (Rise up! or Get up!), and verse 12 (he rose, he got up). In verse 12, it is exactly the same form of the verb that he will use in the climax of the Gospel (16:6).

These two examples are comparatively low-key, as there is no link to the theme of death. But there is more to come.

In Mark 5:35-43, the message is brought to Jairus, 'Your daughter died!'. The climax comes when Jesus says to her *Talitha, koum*, which Mark immediately translates as, 'Little girl...rise!' Neither Matthew nor Luke include the Aramaic (or, Hebrew?) command. By doubling the account of the command, Mark produces a spotlight.

In Mark 9:14-27, there is the story of the man's son from whom an unclean spirit is cast out. At the climax (v. 26-27) he collapses inert on the ground 'like a corpse'. People say, 'He died,' or, 'He has died,' using the same word as in the message to Jairus. Mark continues, 'Then Jesus, having taken him by the hand, raised him and he stood up.' Notice the parallels to his account of the 'raising' of Peter's mother-in-law.

In these two stories there is a close link between death and rising. The four stories make a series—each giving a little more emphasis to the drama of the rising than the one before. How does NRSV handle this feature of Mark's Gospel?

In Mark 1:31 it says that Jesus **lifted her up**. One just hopes she was not too heavy! One wonders why they did not say, 'raised her to her feet'. In Mark 2:3-12, it has 'Stand up!', 'Stand up' and 'he stood up'. Here 'Rise up' or simply 'Rise' is not such natural English. But then, it is not the normal Greek word for 'Stand up'; so there is a case for putting 'Rise' and 'he rose' in our English translation. If 'Stand up' is used, since this is a significant point in Mark, there might at least be a footnote giving 'Rise' and 'he rose'.

In Mark 5:41, NRSV has 'Little girl, get up' rather than 'Little girl arise'. One can see why they chose 'get up', but not why they did not put a footnote. In Mark 9:27, which has close parallels with Mark 1:31, NRSV has, 'But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand.' Again, by

using two main verbs for the actions of Jesus, the NRSV produces a double focus where Mark has a single focus on 'he raised'. Moreover, Greek has a perfectly good word for 'he lifted up', but Mark does not use it here. NRSV, by using 'lifted up', not only distorts the action but obscures the link to resurrection. A time would soon come when people would say, either in sadness or in gloating triumph, 'He is dead.' Then will come the message, 'He rose,' or 'He has risen.'

What does NRSV do with the emphatic 'he rose' in Mark 16:6? It translates it as, 'He has been raised.' In Mark 2:12, NRSV has used an active verb to translate—'he stood up'. If here it is active, describing what the man did, why is it translated as passive in Mark 16:6? I remember talking to G. B. Caird in Oxford about fifteen years ago and among many interesting remarks he made was, 'I have a great deal of difficulty in persuading people that it means 'he rose', and not, 'he was raised'.

The task of translating biblical books is rendered fascinating and challenging by the frequent echoes and resonances of one story while another is being told. It means that often a translator cannot properly do the task without being aware how other incidents, in the same book or in other biblical books, have been translated. Here, in Mark, it is a matter of being aware of the links and resonances between five passages in Mark which touch on the theme of resurrection. It does not seem that the NRSV gives evidence of such awareness.

#### Vivid Points in John

None of the Gospel accounts is more vivid than the Gospel of John. I will look at three particularly vivid touches, in 4:6, 13:25 and 20:16.

**John 4:6.** Jesus, exhausted by his journey, sits at the well. John says, 'Jesus sat **thus** at the well', using the word *houtos*, 'thus', 'like this'. NRSV has 'Jesus, tired out by his journey, was sitting by the well'.

**John 13:26.** Jesus announces that one of them will betray him. Simon Peter signals to the disciple closest to Jesus: 'Ask who it is!' (v. 21-24). The narrative continues, 'So, leaning across (or, up) **like this** onto the breast of Jesus, he said to him, "Lord, who is it?".' Again, the *houtos* adds a vivid touch. One can sense the storyteller moving his body to illustrate how it was done. NRSV

translates, ‘So, while reclining next to Jesus, he asked him, “Lord, who is it?”.’ Again, the translation does not reflect the vividness of *houtos*. There is a further puzzle. In verse 23, the narrative has said that the beloved disciple was reclining—a ‘continuing action’ participle. In verse 25, a different participle is used—a ‘single action’ participle, indicating a single movement from being beside Jesus (v. 23) to being even closer: ‘on his chest’, as he whispers his question. It is hard to see how the NRSV can arrive at ‘while reclining’, which would be as in verse 23 when the narrative indicates a single action.

**John 20:16.** NRSV: *Jesus said to her, “Mary!”*. In the narrative, Mary Magdalene has been ‘Mary’. This is the Greek form of her name (Maria). At this dramatic point in the story, Jesus speaks her name in such a well-known way that she instantly knows the speaker is Jesus. John records Jesus as saying ‘Mariam’. This is a Hebraic form of the name, a variant of Miriam. This vivid intimate touch is not reflected in NRSV (nor in most English translations!).

#### Hebraic Idioms—Introduction

I began my career as a lover of classical Greek. When I came to New Testament Greek, I assumed I could take it in my stride. In the last twelve years, while I have been concentrating on biblical Hebrew, I have come to see my need to understand Hebrew language, literature and culture in order to understand New Testament Greek more accurately. In reading the NRSV, I have often been disappointed to find that, where the Greek expressions are particularly Hebraic, the translators seem ill-at-ease in their attempts to find a ‘current English’ equivalent. Let us consider a small sample of relevant verses covering both minor and major issues.

Mark 1:14-15. *Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God and saying, ‘The time is fulfilled.’*

This ‘and’ in the NRSV suggests that Jesus did two things: (a) he proclaimed the good news, and (b) he said, ‘The time of fulfilment has come.’ But in Hebrew, where spoken words are reported, it is normal to use two verbs with a linking word between. The ‘all-purpose’ linking word can most often be translated as ‘and’, but sometimes must be translated as ‘but’, ‘so’, ‘then’, ‘for’ etc. In some cases it cannot be translated properly into English. Readers of traditional English translations will know the expression, ‘He answered and said.’ They may even be so familiar with it that they do not stop to reflect

about it. In normal English the ‘and’ would add on a second action as in ‘he came in and sat down’. But the Hebrew expression does not indicate two actions but two aspects of a single action. We might say, ‘In reply, he said’, but not ‘he replied and said’. Here in Mark, the proclaiming of the good news and the saying, ‘The time of fulfilment has come’ are not two separate actions. We could translate thus: *Jesus came into Galilee proclaiming the good news of God. ‘The time of fulfilment has come,’ he said.*

**1 John 1:6.** *If we say that we have fellowship with him while we are walking in the darkness, we lie and do not do what is true.*

What does it mean to say in English ‘We do not do what is true’ or ‘We do not do the truth?’ I am not sure. It is not an English idiom. Nor do I think it is a genuinely Greek one. The Greek word ‘truth’ here seems to represent a Hebrew word with a wider meaning that embraces trustworthiness and honesty. So ‘to do what is true’ should mean to act in an honest, genuine and straightforward way. Perhaps the nearest real English equivalent for ‘we are not doing the truth’ might be ‘we are acting hypocritically’.

Notice, in passing, that because NRSV does not use direct speech, it obscures the link between ‘If’ and ‘we are walking in the darkness’, while at the same time making it impossible to see where the spoken statement ends. It is clearer if direct speech is used: If we say, ‘We have fellowship with him’, while we are walking in the darkness. To express the same meaning in indirect speech we should probably need: *If, while we are walking in the darkness we should say that we have fellowship with him....’*

**1 John 3:18.** *Little children, let us love, not in word **or** speech, but in truth **and** action.*

Hebrew style is to put ideas side by side and let the listener or reader see how they are related. In English we are more inclined to combine ideas, showing the relationship.

In 1 John 3:18, ‘not in word and speech’, or rather, ‘**not by word and tongue**’ does not represent two alternative ideas (There is no ‘or’). It is a single idea: ‘not by words spoken by our tongues’, or better, ‘not just by the words we say’. Similarly, ‘by action and truth’ expresses a single idea. (I am not sure why NRSV inverted the order to put the focus on truth). The word ‘truth’ implies

reality and genuineness (see note on 1 John 1:6). So it describes the required action as being real and genuine. So, in 1 John 3:18, what is required is that we show our love not just by the words we say, but by the reality of our actions.

Note also that the underlying negative–positive contrast is typically Hebraic. It does not deny the value of loving words but expresses the much greater value of loving action.

**Luke 10:5-6.** ...*first say, ‘Peace to this house!’ and if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest upon that person.*

Here, there are a number of problems related to the difficulty of representing Hebraic customs in English words, and to the question of what is meant by ‘a son of peace’.

(i) ‘Peace’ is a difficult word, partly because it has function as well as meaning. It functions as a greeting, as the Hebrew ‘shalom’, to establish a warm and friendly relationship. In meaning, it embraces ideas of health and welfare as well as peace.

(ii) ‘house’: the word, according to its context means ‘house’, ‘family’, or ‘household’. Here, the greeting is obviously to the family, or household.

(iii) The expression ‘a son of peace’, translated in NRSV as ‘one who shares in peace’ is typically Hebraic. It refers to someone whose nature and character expresses ‘shalom’—to someone who is warmly welcoming. If we want to retain the word ‘Peace’ in our translation, then we need to add something that expresses its function as a word of welcome, as a word establishing a relationship. Perhaps something like this: ...*first greet them warmly. Say, ‘Peace to this family’. And if anyone there makes you welcome, your peace will rest on them; but if not, it will return to you.*

It will not do to say that to have more than ‘Peace to this family’ is to create a paraphrase rather than to translate; for a merely literal translation fails to express the true meaning of the Greek since it does not adequately reflect the function of ‘Peace’ (or ‘shalom’) as a word of warm greeting.

**Luke 12:19.** *And I will say to my soul, ‘soul, you have ample goods...*

(i) A little point. To begin a sentence with ‘And’ reflects good Hebraic style and

poor English style. A linking ‘Then’ would surely reflect ‘current English’ better.

(ii) To my soul, ‘soul...’. What exactly would this mean in current English? I cannot recall that I have ever addressed any comments to my soul. The underlying Hebrew word embraces ideas concerning breath, inner being, mind, person and self. To address one’s ‘nephesh’ is to speak to oneself. NRSV has chosen an unusual expression, where all that is needed is, ‘Then I will say to myself...’.

I turn now to a translational problem where it is not only necessary to know the meaning of the Hebrew words and ideas that underlie the Greek text, but to be aware of the Hebrew poetic and proverbial style. It is a style full of parallelisms. There are various strategies available to avoid monotony. One is to shorten a second and parallel line by missing out a unit of meaning, where it can be supplied from the first line.

**Luke 11:17.** First a fairly literal translation starting from the rabbi’s words:  
 Every kingdom                    against itself            divided    becomes desolate  
 and    a family                    against a family            falls.

We can see that the missing unit is ‘divided’. Also, because the parallel to ‘family’ is ‘kingdom’, we can see the reference is to a ruling family. Thus the meaning is—

Every kingdom                    split by rebellion    becomes devastated  
 and    a ruling family            split by rebellion    collapses.

Let us see how it is translated in the NRSV.

**Luke 11:17.** NRSV *Every kingdom divided against itself becomes a desert, and house falls upon house.*

In the first line, they have neglected to study the final verb’s usage in the Septuagint and the book of Revelation. Seeing that it is related to the noun for ‘desert’, they have translated it as ‘becomes a desert’. It is a verb appropriate to a land made desolate by war and the removal of its population into exile. In NRSV, in Revelation 17:16, it is understood as meaning ‘made desolate’. In Revelation 18:17, with reference to the destruction of Babylon, it is translated as ‘has been laid waste’. One wonders why this knowledge was not used in translating Luke 11:17.

In the second line, the preposition, properly translated in the first line as ‘against’, has been wrenched out of its parallelism and translated as ‘on’. So, instead of a second picture relevant to the question of a power acting against its own interest, they have conjured up a picture of two houses on a mountain slope, and one falling on another. In my introductory words, I have referred to Jesus as a rabbi, for, unless we see that Jesus was heir to a long tradition of Hebrew literature and teaching methods, we are likely to have difficulty in interpreting some of his words and those of his followers.

### Textual Problems

There are many manuscripts of the New Testament. They are not identical. Often we cannot be certain, in matters of detail, what the correct text should be. But sometimes, careful linguistic and literary research can shed light on difficult problems. We have discussed one such problem in John 1:18. I will add two more.

#### 1 John 1:4. ‘your joy’ or ‘our joy’?

In 1 John 1:4, some manuscripts have a text which means: **We write these things so that your joy may be full.** Some other manuscripts have a text which means: **We write these things so that our joy may be full.**

How can we decide between them? Let us consider the one slightly unusual feature of the sentence. It has a verb which means ‘we write’. This ‘we write’ verb is followed by the pronoun ‘we’. This kind of added pronoun makes the **we** emphatic. It is used in places where there is a contrast with another person or group. Thus, after the emphatic **We** it is to be expected that there will be mention of a contrasted group. This means that ‘We write these things so that your joy may be full’, is the reading we should prefer. So much for the words and their usage. Now let us look at the author’s style in similar passages. We will look in the Johannine literature—the Gospel and the Epistles, for whether or not they have a common author, they have a common style. On every occasion that the purpose of Jesus in speaking, or of John in writing, is mentioned there is always mention of those who will hear what is said or read what is written. See, for example, John 15:11, ‘I have told you this so that my joy may be in **you** and that **your joy** may be full.’ (John may have had these words in mind as he wrote his letter). Thus, the usage in parallel passages adds weight to the main reason for choosing to follow the majority of manuscripts which have ‘so that your joy may be full’.

NRSV reflects those manuscripts which have ‘our joy’. By making this choice, they leave the emphatic **we** hanging in the air with no proper contrast.

**Mark 15:8.** Did the people ‘come up’ or ‘shout out’ ?

In Mark 15:8, a very small number of manuscripts start the verse ‘and having gone up, the crowd began to ask’. Most manuscripts have ‘and shouting out, the crowd began to ask’.

Numbers of manuscripts are not of decisive importance. If a mistake has been made, it will never become correct, however many times it is copied. In a similar way, the age of a manuscript is never, by itself, of decisive importance. We all make occasional mistakes in any extended piece of copying—so did ancient scribes. If a mistake was made in 70 A.D. it would still be a mistake if it was found in the very earliest manuscripts we have.

If two readings seem to have reasonable manuscript support, what can we do?

(i) One thing is to look carefully at the context. (ii) Another thing is to note whether both readings use words in a way that is normal.

(i) The context of Mark 15:8.

In verse 13, it is said that the crowd shouted out **again**. The Greek word for ‘again’ is *palin*. When we study every other passage in Mark in which *palin* occurs, we find that there is something in the narrative to which the *palin* refers back. If, in Mark 15:8, Mark wrote ‘shouting out’, there is something for *palin* in 15:13 to refer back to. If he wrote ‘having come up’, there is nothing for the *palin* of 15:13 to refer back to, which would be out of character.

(ii) Word usage and Mark 15:8.

The word for ‘going up’ or ‘coming up’ is one that Mark uses several times. In every other place that Mark uses it, it is immediately followed by a preposition of movement such as ‘towards’, or ‘into’, or ‘to’. And, for going to a person to speak to them, he uses a different verb, not ‘going up’, but ‘going to’. So, if Mark used the verb ‘going up’ in 15:87 he used it in an uncharacteristic way. A study of word usage confirms what we have seen by studying the context. It is as certain as we can ever expect it to be that Mark wrote ‘shouting out’ in 15:8.

NRSV chooses to follow the small number of manuscripts that start the verse ‘and **coming up** the crowd began to ask’. But they do not translate ‘coming up’.

They have ‘So the crowd came and began to ask...’. They then found themselves with nothing for the *palin* in 15:13 to refer back to. So, instead of translating it properly as ‘they shouted **again**’, they put ‘They shouted **back**’, thus producing a different meaning for *palin* that is not found elsewhere in Mark—and, so far as my knowledge goes, it is not a natural use for *palin*. In 15:8, we need the Greek word for ‘shouting out’. We can account for ‘going up’ in some manuscripts. The word for ‘shouting out’ is *anaboesas*. The word for ‘going up’ is *anabas* which can be written by leaving out three letters from *anaboesas*. Recently, in copying some passages for my students, I discovered to my cost how easy it is to leave out a letter or letters from a word.

### Style, Readability and Clarity

Besides careful attention to meaning, emphasis and nuances, a translator must use an appropriate style for each book and each passage. If a narrative is vivid and flows easily in Greek, it must be vivid and flow easily in any translation.

The words of a peasant should not sound like the words of a court official. An excited woman should not speak in the measured tones of a philosopher. Style needs to be fitted to each changing context.

Besides being a book to be translated, the Bible is a book that is read publicly. It must, therefore, be easy for a reader to read aloud. It must be as clear when it is heard, as it is when seen on the page. Let us look at some passages in the NRSV.

#### Luke 7:39-43 NRSV

<sup>39</sup>Now when the Pharisee who had invited him saw it, he said to himself, ‘If this man were a prophet, he would have known who and what kind of woman this is who is touching him—that she is a sinner.’ <sup>40</sup>Jesus spoke up and said to him, ‘Simon, I have something to say to you’. ‘Teacher’, he replied, ‘Speak.’ <sup>41</sup>‘A certain creditor had two debtors; one owed five hundred denarii, and the other fifty.’ <sup>42</sup>‘When they could not pay, he cancelled the debts for both of them. Now which one of them will love him more?’ <sup>43</sup>Simon answered, ‘I suppose the one for whom he cancelled the greater debt.’ And Jesus said to him, ‘You have judged rightly.’

Consider the style. Here is a story about a money-lender. Money-lenders can

hound their victims, dispossess them, throw them into prison. NRSV takes us into a business world of a creditor and the cancellation of debts. The story concerns a huge debt—one man owes about £20,000, and the other owes about £2,000. NRSV leaves the **hearer** knowing only that one debt was 500 denarii—which is fairly meaningless. The hearer cannot see the footnote which says that a denarius is a day's wage, let alone calculate in a flash what a man would earn today in 500 working days. The story would be long finished before the sum was worked out. So, the enormous impact of 500 denarii is lost. Is the somewhat ponderous, 'And Jesus said to him, "You have judged rightly."' a fitting end to a story full of surprise, told in a fraught context? Or, do we need something with more punch?

Consider also the problems for the reader. Verse 29 is one long sentence. Try reading it aloud. Can you integrate the final '—that she is a sinner' meaningfully into the sentence? Can you control your breath and maintain the pitch required to keep the sentence a unity? At the end of verse 41, can you make 'Teacher,' he replied, 'Speak.' sound natural? Does it flow—or does it make the narrative sound bitty? With no paragraph spacing after 'Speak,' can you avoid carrying on the flow into the next words: 'Speak—a certain creditor'? When you get to 'owed 500 denarii and the other fifty' can you be sure it won't sound as if the total money the man owed was 550 denarii? In verse 42, do you know whether to stress 'Now' or 'which' at the start of the second sentence? Your choice will decide the precise meaning. There is no precise meaning indicated by the printed words.

Let us try to translate it so that it is easier to read meaningfully. Along the way, I will try to correct certain inaccuracies of meaning and focus in the NRSV translation. I will accept the NRSV choice of denarii, though it might not be my own, and try to show how the impact of 500 denarii can be hinted at without relying on the footnote that a listener cannot see. This is a dramatic story. There is an enormous debt. There is an extraordinary money-lender who acts kindly. I will try to help the reader to tell it dramatically.

*The Pharisee who had invited him saw what was going on. He thought, 'If this man really was a prophet, he would know about this woman who is touching him—he would know what sort of a sinful life she lives! Jesus responded to this by saying, 'Simon, there is something I want to tell you.' 'Teacher,' he said,*

*'Please tell me.'*

*Jesus said, 'There were two men who owed money to a money-lender. One of them owed a huge amount—five hundred denarii! The other owed him fifty denarii. As they had nothing with which to repay him, he kindly cancelled the debts for both of them. So, which of them will love him most?' 'I guess it would be the one to whom he forgave the bigger debt,' Simon replied. 'You are right,' said Jesus.*

Note that, at the beginning of the story, Jesus puts the focus clearly on the two men by mentioning them first. It is they who will be in focus at the end. NRSV puts an initial focus on the 'creditor' by beginning its story with the words, 'A certain creditor....'

Now, consider the NRSV translation again. Does it reflect the dramatic impact of the story or slightly deaden it? Does it help a reader to retell it dramatically? Does it support the claim that the NRSV is ideal for public reading?

Now try reading Romans 1:1-7 aloud to an audience. In NRSV it is all one long sentence. Greek lends itself to long sentences more easily than English. In *Learn New Testament Greek*, lesson 46, I have suggested ways of putting Romans 1:1-7 into three paragraphs, or into five short paragraphs. If you have access to a copy, try reading them aloud.

When you are reading the NRSV version, consider how you can sustain your reading so that it is experienced as a single sentence. Consider also whether you can make it sound like the beginning of a letter. Give some attention also to how you will handle the words '...for the sake of his name, including yourselves...'

If this has whetted your appetite for reading long sentences, move on to the NRSV version of 1 John 1:1-3. If this has whetted your appetite for reading puzzles, round off your feast with an Old Testament puzzle. Try Job 28:3. *Miners...search out to the farthest bound the ore in gloom and deep darkness.*

Will you read it so as to suggest, as best you can, that the miners are in gloom and in deep darkness as they search, or so as to suggest that the ore is hidden in gloom and deep darkness?

In the rural area where I live, there are a number of small churches. Some of them have recently started to use the NRSV during their services. So far the only comment I have heard is, 'It doesn't read well.' I hope that in these brief comments, I have indicated some of the reasons why it doesn't read well.

#### New Testament Conclusion

We have looked at some New Testament passages to assess the standard of accuracy of the NRSV translation; we have looked at how a theme in Mark is handled and some vivid touches in John. We have considered how Hebraic idiom and style is handled and a few problems of textual criticism. In each area, we have found cause for disappointment and serious concern. We have also had to call in question its suitability for reading aloud.

#### The NRSV: General Conclusion

We have examined the claims made by the publishers that good advantage has been taken of advances in biblical studies. The claims have been made publicly. It seems right that they should be discussed publicly. My own opinion is that they do not stand up to careful scrutiny. If you think otherwise, I hope you will let your views be known.

If you are involved in choosing a Bible translation as a basis for study or for reading in services, I hope you will make your own careful assessment of what is available. Seek to make your examination at least as thorough and wide-ranging as this one has been. Do not be deceived by a publisher's blurb—all publishers want you to conclude that their product is the best. Do not be over-much influenced by what some scholar has said. Many reviews of books show little evidence that a detailed scrutiny has been undertaken.

If you are involved in Bible translation, I hope this short study will show you that **any** translation you use as a guide must be used with great caution. I hope you will see that the only sensible equipment for the task is a sound knowledge and extensive experience of the Hebrew and Greek in which the books were written—and that Hebrew is needed for understanding the New Testament! This needs to be allied to a sensitive awareness of your own literary heritage and current usage.

To scholars, I apologise that I have used so few Greek and Hebrew words. To

those that are not scholars, I apologise for having felt the need to use some. To everyone, I express the hope that you may find Bible translations that convey its message and meaning accurately, beautifully and understandably.

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