The New Revised Standard Version: A Preliminary Assessment

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Readers of an English version of the Bible are little aware of the prodigious efforts the volume they hold in their hands represents -- the patient toil of copyists, linguists, text critics, historians, archaeologists, interpreters, theologians, translators, and others without number. The hours invested by these laborers through the centuries have swollen to astronomical numbers, more than all those spent on the greatest of the pyramids of Egypt. These printed lines, these columned pages, bear silent witness to the "agony and the ecstasy," the "blood, toil, tears, and sweat," of thousands -- from obscure scribes and monks to men and women of genius whose names historians preserve in our collective memory. This alone should move one to "take and read" any carefully done version with a regard deeper than that accorded to other of humanity's grand achievements. Not least should this be done with the RSV, a version that stands in the venerable tradition of the Authorized (King James) Version (1611), and the American Standard Version of 1901, that has the endorsement of a broad ecumenical body of churches, and that has been the version of choice in academia.

For this reason, too, I undertake this requested assessment of the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) with a good deal of diffidence. Still, any translation of the Bible is a fallible human product -- as I am painfully aware from many years of working at it. The task demands expertise in many fields, and even our best collective knowledge at times fails us. But knowledge of ancient languages, cultures, and history, of textual, interpretation and translation traditions -- these are only the beginning, only the preparation. In light of these, judgments must be made, innumerable judgments. Over many of these judgments, translators agonize, deliberate, and debate. Other judgments are made on the dim periphery of consciousness. Still others, though made, remain below the level of awareness: judgments concerning the weight of textual evidence, the structures of narrative and poetry, the scanning of poetic lines, the subtleties of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and of English idiom, sound and rhythm; judgments involving compromises that cannot be avoided when semantic fields do not match (rarely do they match exactly) or when basic cultural concepts are incommensurate. And more. Faithful translation of ancient texts requires a vast fund of knowledge, but even more, countless judgments. Differences between modern English versions result primarily from different judgments made. Knowledge is largely public, and shared. Judgments are individual -- or, in the case of committee translations, peculiar to the
company of translators that collaborates. By the same token, any assessment of a version, such as is undertaken here, will reflect very personal judgments, and will be primarily an assessment of judgments -- the judgments embodied in the text and notes of the NRSV. Since this version is a revision, I will focus attention mainly on what is "new" in the NRSV.

Style

Readers of the NRSV will be pleased that at last their Bible "speaks" English, their English, English that is "direct and plain and meaningful to people today" (as the translation committee describes it) -- English without the heavy Hebraic "brogue" that made so much of the biblical text seem strange and awkward. Not all has been redone, of course -- a revision was commissioned, not a new translation. And the basic translation philosophy of the tradition has been followed; the committee's guiding maxim, we are told, was "as literal as possible, as free as necessary." Still, happily, enough freedom was taken to allow this English version to reflect -- for the most part -- common (and durable) English idiom. Let a few examples bear witness:

Gen. 22:8 RSV: Abraham said, "God will provide himself the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So they went both of them together.

NRSV: Abraham said, "God himself will provide the lamb for a burnt offering, my son." So the two of them walked on together.

Gen. 23:1 RSV: Sarah lived a hundred and twenty-seven years; these were the years of the life of Sarah.

NRSV: Sarah lived one hundred twenty-seven years; this was the length of Sarah's life.

Gen. 29:6 RSV: He said to them, "Is it well with him?" They said, "It is well; and see, Rachel his daughter is coming with the sheep!"

NRSV: He said to them, "Is it well with him?" "Yes," they replied, "and here is his daughter Rachel, coming with the sheep."

Gen. 37:5-7 RSV: Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they only hated him the more. He said
to them, "Hear this dream which I have dreamed: behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and lo, my sheaf arose and stood upright; and behold, your sheaves gathered round it, and bowed down to my sheaf."

NRSV: Once Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers, they hated him even more. He said to them, "Listen to this dream that I dreamed. There we were, binding sheaves in the field. Suddenly my sheaf rose and stood upright; then your sheaves gathered around it, and bowed down to my sheaf."

Deut. 29:23 RSV: -- the whole land brimstone and salt, and a burnt-out waste, unsown, and growing nothing, where no grass can sprout, an overthrow like that of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD overthrew in his anger and wrath --

NRSV: -- all its soil burned out by sulfur and salt, nothing planted, nothing sprouting, unable to support any vegetation, like the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, Admah and Zeboiim, which the LORD destroyed in his fierce anger --

Occasionally one finds transposition in the service of Englishing the Hebrew text -- even within the structure of poetic lines:

Ps. 35:26 RSV: Let them be put to shame and confusion altogether who rejoice at my calamity!
Let them be clothed with shame and dishonor who magnify themselves against me!

NRSV: Let all those who rejoice at my calamity be put to shame and confusion;
Let those who exalt themselves against me be clothed with shame and dishonor.

Ps. 70:3 RSV: Let them be appalled because of their shame who say, "Aha, Aha!"

NRSV: Let those who say, "Aha, Aha!" turn back because of their shame.
Most striking of all for many readers will be the (long overdue) abandon­ment of the quaint pronouns "thee" and "thou" in lines addressed to God, together with their archaic verbal forms that have long put the tongues of modern readers to the test. Some, out of mere nostalgia, will bemoan this as loss, but most will be relieved that they no longer need to negotiate (or explain to children) such lines as:

If thou triest my heart, if thou visitest me by night,
if thou testest me, thou wilt find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress. (Ps. 17:3)

And

Thou visitest the earth and waterest it,
Thou greatly enrichest it;

... thou providest their grain,
for so thou hast prepared it.
Thou waterest its furrows abundantly,

Thou crownest the year with thy bounty ... . (Ps. 65:9-11)

Now, without awkward lisping, they can read:

If you try my heart, if you visit me by night,
if you test me, you will find no wickedness in me;
my mouth does not transgress. (Ps. 17:3)

And

You visit the earth and water it,
you greatly enrich it;

... you provide the people with grain,
for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly,

... You crown the year with your bounty; ... (Ps. 65:9-11)

Along with these archaisms have gone a host of others: lest, dwell, lodge, lad, sepulchre, sojourn, hearken, tidings, requite, recompense, hind (doe), smite, slay, number (verb), provender, sluggard, ass (donkey), harlot, serpent, (go) forth, make haste -- to mention only a few. But why, one wonders, has "countenance" been retained in Genesis 4:5,6 (of Cain); 1 Samuel 1:18 (of
Hannah); Job 14:20 (of mortals); Psalm 10:4 (of the wicked); Numbers 6:26; Psalm 44:3; 80:16; 89:15; 90:8 (all of God); Proverbs 15:13 (of a happy person); Ecclesiastes 7:3 (of a sad person); Daniel 8:23 (of a king). One wonders the more when observing that Psalm 44:3; 89:15; 90:8 all speak of "the light of God's countenance" while in Proverbs 16:15, which should be a helpful interpretive parallel, the Hebrew idiom is rendered, "In the light of a king's face there is life" (and see Daniel 8:23).

Not every modern substitute has been aptly chosen. For "provender" one now finds "fodder" (Gen. 24:25, 32; 42:27; 43:24; Judg. 19:19; Job 6:5), but American farmers will question the wits of Jacob's sons, who go down to Egypt to buy grain (Gen. 42:1-5) but return with their sacks full of "coarsely chopped stalks and leaves of corn mixed with hay, straw, and other plants" (American Heritage Dictionary) -- what farmers commonly call "roughage." And what will they think of Isaiah 30:24, which tells them, "... the oxen and donkeys that till the ground will eat silage [the RSV: provender] which has been winnowed with shovel and forks," when the only "silage" they know is "fodder prepared by storing and fermenting green forage plants in a silo" (American Heritage Dictionary)? Clearly, all these references are to grain; the committee must not have consulted any sons or daughters of the soil to alert them to the language of agriculture -- or even have consulted a dictionary. Readers will also be jolted by the slangy "lazybones" that replaces "sluggard" in Proverbs 6:6, 9, especially since the committee informs them that the Old Testament is rendered in "more stately English" than the New Testament because it represents "the classic form of Hebrew" while the New Testament was written in "the more colloquial... koine Greek."

Considerable improvement in English style has been achieved by removing many Hebraisms. Some random examples: such appositional constructions as "David, the king," "Sarah, his wife," and "Jacob, his son," are now rendered "King David," "his wife Sarah," "his son Jacob"; the scores of "beholds" have been replaced by a variety of contextual renderings (or passed over in silence), while "Io," considerably reduced in number, has been reserved mainly for poetry; "called his name" is now "named"; "men of valor" is now (mostly) "warriors" (but strangely unchanged in 1 Sam. 16:18; 2 Kings 24:16); "he lifted up his eyes" is now "he looked up"; "the days of the years of" is now "the length of" or "the years of."

Some distinctly Hebraic idioms have been only partially removed, with no apparent reason for the inconsistency. To "strike with (fall by) the edge [Heb. "mouth"] of the sword" still stands in Joshua 6:21; 8:24; 10:30, 32, 35, 37, 39; 11:12, 14; Job 1:15, 17; Psalm 89:43; Jeremiah 21:7; Luke 21:24; Hebrew 11:34, while elsewhere one "puts to (falls by) the sword." To "know" (Heb. ydā') for sexual union has surprisingly been everywhere retained -- except in the book of Judges, where one finds "slept with" (11:39; 21:12), "have intercourse with" (19:22), "raped" (19:25). To thus set Judges apart lacks warrant, and it
obscures the intended parallel in Judges 19 between the perversity of the Gibeonites and that of the Sodomites.

Equally unwarranted is the failure to carry through the rendering of yd< as "choose" in Genesis 18:19 to 2 Samuel 7:20; Jeremiah 4:5; Amos 3:2 (in each case rendered "know") since in all these passages yd< refers to God's singling out persons, or Israel, for special purposes. And why should the same Hebrew phrase be rendered so variously as "animals of the field" (Gen. 2:19; Ezek. 31:6), "wild animals" (Gen. 3:14; Job 5:32; Ezek. 31:3), and "wild animals of the field" (Jer. 27:6); or the related phrase (but now with 2eres) so variously as "animal of the earth" (Gen. 9:2; Ezek. 29:5), "wild animals of the earth" (Gen. 12:24; 1 Sam. 17:46; Job 5:22; Ps. 79:2) and "beast of the earth" (Gen. 1:30)? This last is especially disconcerting since I have found "beast" nowhere else in either Testament except in two apocalyptic passages, Daniel 7:14 and 8:4.

Troubling Inconsistencies

But such inconsistencies are not uncommon. Numbers, Deuteronomy, and Joshua all refer to cities of refuge where one who has accidentally caused another's death may find sanctuary. The Hebrew word for such victims of circumstance is everywhere the same, and all instances in Numbers and Joshua are rendered "slayer" d (except Jos. 20:3, "one who kills"), but Deuteronomy in all cases (4:42; 19:3, 4, 6) has the rare "homicide." In Genesis through Chronicles, where the Hebrew "river" refers to the Euphrates, the name is supplied in the text (with a footnote appended only to the first instance, Genesis 31:21: "Heb the river") -- except in Joshua 24:3, 14, 15, where "the River" follows a reference to "the Euphrates" in v.2. But thereafter, in Psalms, Isaiah, Micah, and Zechariah, the reading is consistently "the River" (without any notes) -- except in Isaiah 27:12 where a lonely "Euphrates" once again occurs. In Joshua (8:18, 26) the Hebrew kidôn is translated "sword," presumably on the basis of certain evidence from Qumran. But elsewhere the traditional "javelin" is retained (in Jer. 50:42: "spear"), and no footnotes indicate an alternative.

References to the "Pit" into which the dead descend (Heb. 'sahat, bê'er, bôr) are likewise treated variously. While most commonly "the Pit" is in upper case as a proper noun, there are exceptions: "the desolate pit" (Ps. 40:2[3]), "the lowest pit" (Ps. 55:23[24]), "the pit of destruction" (Isa. 38:17). The fact that in these instances a qualifier is present hardly justifies departing from proper noun form since the reference is the same. This also appears to have been the committee's judgment in rendering Zechariah 9:11, where one finds "the waterless Pit." Even more puzzling is the shift in Psalm 49:9(10) from the RSV, "the Pit" to the NRSV, "the grave," with a footnote, "Heb the pit." And to confound matters even more, the phrase yarkête bôr is rendered in Isaiah 14:15 as "the depths of the Pit," precisely as bôr tahûtôt in Psalm 88:6(7), while yarkête bôr in Ezekiel 32:23 is Englished as "the uttermost parts of the Pit." True,
Hebrew words and phrases from necessity of context must often be translated in various ways, but one cannot appeal to such necessity to warrant these discrepancies.

Jeremiah 50:42 (referred to above) illustrates another kind of inconsistency. That this verse is precisely parallel to 6:23 -- except for a slight variation in one pronoun (3rd. masc. sing., 3rd. masc. pl.) and a difference in the city referred to -- will hardly be suspected by readers of the NRSV. Compare these line by line:

6:23 They grasp the bow and the javelin, they are cruel and have no mercy, their sound is like the roaring sea; they ride on horses, equipped like a warrior for battle, against you, O daughter Zion!

50:42 They wield bow and spear, they are cruel and have no mercy. The sound of them is like the roaring sea; they ride upon horses, set in array as a warrior for battle, against you, O daughter Babylon!

Even more disconcerting are the unnecessary disparities between Old Testament renderings and New Testament allusions and quotations. In the Gospels Jesus frequently refers to himself as "the Son of Man," an apocalyptic title that most interpreters trace back to Daniel 7:13. But the NRSV readers will not find the phrase there. They will find rather "one like a human being" -- with a footnote informing them "Aram one like a son of man." No doubt, "human being" was chosen for the laudable purpose of reducing "sexism" in the Bible, but focus on that concern has compromised canonical unity. Would it not have been far better to render "one like a man," with the accompanying footnote? And why does the NRSV retain the RSV's "desolating sacrilege" in Matthew 24:15 and Mark 13:14, where allusion is made to "the abomination that desolates" in Daniel 9:27; 11:31; 12:11, and do so even though the Greek for "sacrilege" can rightly be translated "abomination," as it is in Luke 16:15; Revelation 17:4,5; 21:27?

Such lack of concern for the unity of the canon is reflected in many New Testament quotations of the Old. Consider only the following gleaned from Matthew. Matthew 4:15-16 quotes "what had been spoken through the prophet Isaiah" (9:1-2):

"Land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali;
on the road by the sea, across the Jordan, Galilee of the Gentiles --
the people who sat in darkness
have seen a great light,
and for those who sat in the region and shadow of death
light has dawned."

But when the reader turns to Isaiah he finds:

... the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali . . . , the way of the sea,
the land beyond the Jordan, Galilee of the nations.
The people who walked in darkness
have seen a great light;
Those who lived in a land of deep darkness -- 6
on them light has shined.

The Hebrew and Greek texts require some of these variations, of course, and
others are justifiable, such as "Gentiles" for "nations." But note: the asyndetic
"land of Zebulun, land of Naphtali" ignores the presence of kai; "on the road by
the sea" represents a Greek that could more economically have been rendered
"the way of the sea"; in the phrase "the land beyond the Jordan," the translators
of Isaiah could not have been echoed in Matthew; where the translators of
Matthew have employed "sat," they might just as faithfully have chosen lived";
where they chose "region" they might as faithfully have rendered "land"; and
their last line has gratuitously eliminated "on them" (Gk: autois). Moreover,
while readers of Matthew are presented the whole passage lined as poetry, they
discover that Isaiah 9:1 is rendered as prose.

Similar unnecessary disparities are present in the lengthy quote of Isaiah
42:1-4 found in Matthew 12:18-21. There appears no reason why "with whom
my soul is well pleased" (Matt.) should not have precisely echoed "in whom my
soul delights (Isa.) or why the lines," . . . a bruised reed he will not break, / and
a dimly burning wick he will not quench" (Isa.) and "He will not break a bruised
reed / or quench a smoldering wick" (Matt.), should not have been precisely
identical. And why, one wonders, does Isaiah's "comprehend . . . understand
. . . the mind [Heb. "heart"] of this people . . . comprehend with their minds [Heb.
"heart"]" (6:9-10) come through in Matthew as "understand . . . perceive . . . this
people's heart . . . understand with their heart" (13:14-15)? What warrants the
gratuitous addition of "to speak" in Matthew's quotation (13:35) of Psalm 78:2?
And why would not the "marvelous (in our eyes)" of Psalm 118:23 be just as
acceptable as "amazing" in Matthew's quotation (21:42)?

A discrepancy of greater significance is found between the NRSV render-
ing of Genesis 2:24 and its New Testament quotations. In Genesis we read,
"Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and
they become one flesh." But Matthew 19:5 and Mark 10:7-8 (see also 1 Cor. 6:16) render the verbs precatively, "shall leave . . . be joined . . . shall become." Apparently the committee was of two minds as to the force of the statement, an appearance seemingly confirmed by Ephesians 5:31, where the same quotation is rendered in the indicative ("will") -- yet to none of these passages is a footnote appended acknowledging an alternative. For the general reading public it would have been far better if greater care had been exercised to conform quotations more carefully to their original sources wherever translation integrity allowed -- as in Matthew 4:4, 6, 7 (Deut. 8:3; Ps. 11-12; Deut. 6:16 respectively); 21:5 (Zech. 9:9); 22:37, 44 (Deut. 6:5; Ps. 118:1 respectively); and 23:39 (Ps. 118:26). The Old Testament and New Testament subcommittees, it seems, did not work in close cooperation.

Footnotes

Footnoting in the NRSV has been considerably expanded -- in Genesis from 109 to 180, in 1 and 2 Samuel from 174 to 268, in Matthew from 99 to 198. A comparison by categories (Text = text critical notes; Or = alternative renderings; Heb/Gk = literal renderings, or transliterations, of the Hebrew or Greek that underlays the translation; Cn = conjectural emendations; Unc = the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek is uncertain; Exp = various kinds of explanatory notes) yields the following. For Genesis, the RSV: Text 24, Or 20, Heb 23, Cn 2, Unc 0, Exp 40; the NRSV: Text 24, Or 34, Heb 43, Cn 5, Unc 13, Exp 61. For 1,2 Sam., the RSV: Text 96, Or 15, Heb 24, Cn 18, Unc 8, Exp 13; the NRSV: Text 150, Or 19, Heb 49, Cn 17, Unc 15, Exp 18. For Matthew, the RSV: Text 44, Or 29, Gk 22, Exp 4; the NRSV: Text 73, Or 57, Gk 63, Exp 8. The large increase in "Text" notes in Samuel results mainly from use of the Samuel manuscripts from Qumran; the increase in Heb/Gk notes results mainly from a policy of freer translation (for example, substitution of pronouns for nouns and nouns for pronouns, supplying words needed for clarity in English, and changes toward less "sexist" language).

Many will welcome this proliferation of footnotes, though I suspect that these will mostly be pastors (those trained in the original languages and in text criticism) and academicians. But I wonder if the translators have not forgotten whom their work primarily serves. A high percentage of the notes will be of little use to general readers, and many are more likely to puzzle than to enlighten. How are readers helped by informing them of nouns or pronouns substituted by their counterparts in the translation, or by the information that Hebrew/Greek "lacks" words that the translators have supplied for clarity? The presence of such notes suggests a general "literalness" of translation that the version in fact does not provide. Moreover, not every substitution has been noted, nor has every addition or subtraction. And what will readers make of the footnote proposal that, when "Abraham . . . took the knife to kül his son" (Gen.
it may rather have been "to slaughter" him? What will they do with the information that "he settled down" (Gen. 25:18) renders Hebrew *he fell*, that "first" (Gen. 25:33) renders Hebrew *today*, that "when Judah's time of mourning was over" (Gen. 38:12) renders Hebrew *when Judah was comforted*, that "Bow the knee!" (Gen. 41:43) renders "Abrek, apparently an Egyptian word similar in sound to the Hebrew word meaning to kneel."? In my judgment, a version for general use should keep footnotes to a minimum -- as few as possible, as many as necessary, to paraphrase the committee's maxim for its basic translation principle.

Strangely, the note last quoted lacks the expected introductory "Heb." But irregularities in the notes (I have checked only the Old Testament) are rather frequent: "Heb" should be deleted from the notes on Genesis 10:4; 2 Samuel 7:16 (where Mss and Gk should also be transposed); Psalm 31:6; 108:1; 143:9; 144:2; Jeremiah 23:39; notes on the following should have "MT" instead of "Heb": Genesis 36:2; Exodus 1:22; 5:5; 1 Samuel 2:33; 2 Samuel 6:5; 12:14; Ezekiel 3:15; 24:5; 48:11; and notes on 1 Chronicles 20:2; Proverbs 6:24 should have "Heb" instead of "MT."

Treatments of the *Tiqqune sopherim* are especially uneven. Twice one finds "Another ancient tradition reads" (Gen. 18:22; Job 32:3 -- where the readings are not adopted); twice, "Ancient Heb tradition" (Hos. 4:7; Hab. 1:12 -- where the readings are adopted); twice, "Another reading is . . ." (1 Sam. 3:13; Mal. 1:13 -- where the *Tiq soph* readings are adopted and the MT readings are indicated in the notes); once, "Ancient scribal tradition" (2 Sam. 12:14--where the *Tiq soph* is adopted and the MT reading placed in the note); once the *Tiq soph* is adopted but the note reads only "Heb his eye" (Zech. 2:8[12]); and once *Tiq soph* is adopted with no note at all (Job 7:20). Other *Tiq soph* readings arguably should have been noted (given the heavy notation policy of the NRSV): "your misery" (the misery you have burdened me with) Numbers 11:15; "my glory," Psalm 106:20 (cf. Ps. 4:2 -- which could better have been rendered: "How long, you people, will you exchange my Glorious One for a shameful thing"--see also Jer. 2:11; Hos. 4:7); "my glory," Jeremiah 2:11; "my nose" (adopted by many interpreters), Ezekiel 8:17; and "my glory, Hosea 4:7. One might have expected greater care in such matters.

**Controversial Renderings**

A full and balanced assessment of the NRSV cannot be achieved in the short span of a few weeks. Only after the version has been in the public domain long enough for scholars to examine it in detail will its general quality as a reliable version emerge. But certain renderings came immediately to my attention: In Genesis 1:1 the text of the RSV ("In the beginning God created") has now been added to the footnote, to be replaced by "In the beginning when God created," a rendering which has much to commend it. But to replace "and
the Spirit of God" (v. 2) with "while a wind from God" (note: Or while the spirit of God or while a mighty wind) is, I judge, unwarranted. "He will strike your head, and you will strike his heel" (Gen. 3:15) appears a happier solution to a difficult translation (and interpretation) problem than the RSV's "bruise . . . bruise." To retain "the sons of God" in Genesis 6:2,4 (in spite of high sensitivity to "sexist" language) is surely prudent because of the ambiguity of the reference. And to place "be blessed" in the text, consigning "bless themselves" to a footnote, in Genesis 12:3; 18:18; 28:14 (reversing the RSV) is the better judgment -- as is replacing "bless themselves" with "gain blessing for themselves" (no note) in Genesis 22:18; 26:4.

Obviously this is a very personal selection, and could be added to far beyond the limits allowable here. For example, the RSV's rendering of Psalm 8:1-2 is more defensible than that of the NRSV -- though I would render the lines: "You have set your glory above the heavens, from the mouths of babes and infants"; the NRSV's separation of Psalm 22:21 from the foregoing prayer and linking it with the following vow to praise is quite unjustified -- though I would read the Hebrew "answered" as a precative perfect and render the line: "rescue me from the horns of the wild oxen." The NRSV's treatment of Amos 1:11 is similarly unconvincing: "... he maintained his anger perpetually [assigning the RSV's reading to a note: "Syr Vg: Heb and his anger tore . . . "] / and kept his wrath forever" (note: "Gk Syr: Heb and his wrath kept"). In the first place, to emend the text (trp to ntr) does not seem necessary in view of similar language in Job 16:9. But if one does emend to ntr, it is more likely that its sense would be the same as that ascribed it in Nahum 1:2 ("rages") and Jeremiah 3:5 ("be angry") -- presumably a cognate of Akkadian nadaru. As for the parallel verb smr, it could better have been read as having the sense ascribed it in Jeremiah 3:5 (in parallel with ntr), viz., "be indignant" (presumably a cognate of Akkadian samaru). So (accepting the questionable emendation) the line should have been rendered "His anger smoldered perpetually, / and his wrath raged forever".

But enough of such instances. Other translation decisions have had more pervasive consequences -- and will be more controversial. There is "offerings (sacrifices) of well being" for traditional "peace offerings." The Hebrew word is notoriously difficult, and no consensus has emerged as to how it should be rendered. But among all the proposals I have seen, this one is eccentric. Would it not have been better to retain the RSV's traditional "peace offering" and leave more precise proposals to commentators? There is "dome" for the RSV's traditional "firmament." Granted that "firmament" is unintelligible to most readers and that some alternative is desirable, one may still ask if "dome" is what the ancient Hebrews thought of when they referred to the sky as a רָעַ֛יָּ֖ם. Did they even have the architectural concept of a dome?

Then there is the decision to replace the RSV's "servant" (Greek doulos) with "slave" throughout the New Testament -- with one systematic exception.
In Acts, the Epistles, and Revelation, the apostles do not identify themselves or call believers the "slaves" of God or of the Lord Jesus Christ; they are, rather, their "servants." Yet the girl with "a spirit of divination" is allowed to call Paul and Silas "slaves of the Most High God" (Acts 16:17), and in his Epistle to the Ephesians Paul exhorts "slaves" who believe to serve their earthly masters "as slaves of Christ" (6:6), and to the Romans he writes that those who are in Christ are "slaves of righteousness" (6:18-19) and are "enslaved to God" (6:22). To render doulos generally as "slave," in distinction from pais / paidiskê, may be a translation gain (though these too are rendered "slave" in Luke 12:45; 15:26; Acts 16:16; Gal. 4:22, 30, 31), but the systematic differentiation thought necessary sets up a distinction in English that strikes me as introducing a distortion worse than the use of "servant" throughout. Are not the connotations of "servant" broader than those of "slave," the former encompassing the latter but not vice versa?

The policy has, moreover, led to certain anomalies in the Gospels. In Luke the aged Simeon prays to God, "Master [Gk: despôtês], now you are dismissing your servant in peace" (2:29), but elsewhere despôtês in the vocative is rendered "Sovereign Lord" (Acts 4:24; Rev. 6:10). One can only surmise that in Luke "master" was thought to be the preferred complement to "servant." But why should Simeon address God as "Master" whereas the disciples and the souls of the martyrs use the exalted title "Sovereign Lord"? And as for why the Greek doulos should be rendered "slave" in Matthew 10:24-25, but "servants" in John 13:16 and 15:20, I could find no reason other than that in the context in John (15:15) Jesus says, "I do not call you servants [douloi] any longer because the servant [doulos] does not know what the [Gk: "his" -- too "sexist"?] master is doing."

A similar policy decision -- with similar consequences -- is represented by the rendering of the Greek Christos as the "Messiah" in place of the RSV's the "Christ" in those places (with some exceptions) where a definite article is attached. This decision mystifies me. The New Testament authors wrote to proclaim Jesus as Christ and Lord -- as "the Lord Jesus Christ" / "Jesus Christ the Lord," as commonly in the Epistles. To do so, they consistently employed the Greek Christos -- and their language has become the language of Christianity. To replace the traditional transliteration of Greek Christos with a transliteration of the Hebraic Mâsiyahu transgresses the boundary between translation and rewriting, and creates for most readers a puzzling disparity within the New Testament witness. It has, moreover, resulted in such anomalies as: (1) while Matthew begins with "An account of the genealogy of Jesus the Messiah, the son of David" (1:1 -- no article in the Gk) and later has Peter confess that Jesus is "the Messiah, the Son of the living God" (16:16), Mark begins with "The beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (1:1) and later has Jesus describe his disciples as those who "bear the name of Christ" (9:41, -- all other instances "Messiah"); (2) the prologue to John's Gospel introduces the
reader to "Jesus Christ" (1:17) and later has Jesus refer to himself as "Jesus Christ" (17:3), while in 4:25 the Samaritan woman is reported to have confessed, "I know that Messiah [Gk: Messias] is coming," to which the author adds, "who is the Christ" [Gk: Christos]; (3) Acts fluctuates between "Messiah" (16t.) and "Christ" (12t.); (4) in the Epistles a lonely "Messiah" suddenly appears in Romans 9:5 -- though Hebrews 11:26 has "the Christ" -- and in Revelation it reappears twice more (11:15; 12:10). The general reader's bewilderment over such language disparity will only increase upon discovering that, on the one hand, when the New Testament authors thought it helpful to transliterate the Hebrew/Aramaic 9 for their readers, they did so (see Matt. 1:23; 5:22; 27:46; Mark. 5:41; 14:36; 18:34; John. 4:25; 5:2; 19:13; 20:16; Rom. 8:15; 1 Cor. 16:22; Gal. 4:6; Heb. 9:4; Rev. 2:17; 9:11; 16:16; 19:1, 3, 4, 6 -- not to mention the many "amens"), and, on the other hand, the Old Testament contains not one instance of "Messiah."

Inclusive Language

Perhaps no feature of the NRSV will be more immediately or more scrupulously canvassed than its efforts to overcome "the inherent [sexual] bias of the English language." Readers will find that by and large this has been thoroughly and judiciously achieved. But the committee has gone well beyond that effort; it has taken great pains to undo also the sexual bias of the original languages and to conceal the male domination of social structures in the related cultures. Those who read with a "single-issue" critical eye will likely for the most part be pleased. Others will be less sanguine in their responses. That Israel's "fathers" are here "ancestors"; that my/his/our/your/their "brothers" (except when specific) are here my/his ... kin, kindred, people, fellows, the members of his/the community; that generic "man" when singular is here a person, mortal, human, an individual, some/anyone -- these are surely appropriate renderings. Similarly, to pluralize such expressions as "Happy is the man who" (Ps. 1:1) to "Happy are those who," "What is man" (8:4) to "What are human beings," "Do not let man prevail" (10:19) to "Do not let mortals prevail," "The fool says in his heart" (Ps. 14:1) to "Fools say in their hearts," "for he sees that his [the wicked's] day is coming" (Ps. 37:13) to "For he sees that their day is coming," is unexceptionable -- though this device blurs somewhat the sharper focus of the original.

But zeal to achieve sex-neutral language sometimes has had unhappy consequences. I list but a few examples. As a wisdom psalm, Psalm 37 characteristically speaks of the "righteous" and the "wicked" in third person terms, but in vv. 23-24 we suddenly meet first person lines:

Our steps are made firm by the LORD,
when he delights in our way;
though we stumble, we shall not fall headlong, 
for the LORD holds us by the hand.

Compare the RSV:

The steps of a man are from the LORD, 
and he establishes him in whose way he delights; 
though he fall, he shall not be cast headlong, 
for the LORD is the stay of his hand.

Here (though the language has been greatly improved in other respects) the stylistic integrity of the psalm has been joltingly shattered. Or consider the shift from "my son/sons" in Proverbs to "my child/children." On the one hand, the "son/sons" addressed in Proverbs are not children. To ignore this sometimes has strange results, as in the incongruous observation

A child who gathers in summer is provident, 
but a child who sleeps in harvest brings shame. (10:5) 10

On the other hand, those addressed in chapters 1-8 are unmistakably "sons," as is evident from the warnings against gaining wealth by joining with cutthroats (1:8-19) or satisfying sexual urges by yielding to the enticements of "loose" women (2:16-19; 5:1-14; 6:24-35; 7:1-27). And surely it is a "son" who is exhorted to "drink water from your own cistern / . . . rejoice in the wife of your youth / . . . . May her breasts satisfy you at all times . . ." (5:15-19). More subtly, the enticements of Lady Wisdom and Lady Folly lose much of their rhetorical force when they are depicted as appeals to "children" rather than to "sons" on the threshold of their manhood.

I note but a few additional examples that are equally problematic. The conventional imagery for deep sorrow is surely better rendered in Amos 8:10, "like the mourning for an only son," than in Jer. 6:26 and Zech. 12:10, "as for an only child," 11 especially in view of the social status and function of sons in Israel, particularly the firstborn son. Note the discrepancy that results in Jeremiah between 6:26 ("mourn as for an only child" -- instead of "only son") and 20:15 ("Cursed be the man / who brought the news to my father, saying, / 'A child is born to you, a son,' / making him very glad.").), 31:9 ("I have become a father to Israel, / and Ephraim is my firstborn" [Heb adds "son"]), and vs. 20 ("Is Ephraim my dear son? / Is he the child I delight in?"). In Gal. 4:4-7 we now read:

But when the fullness of time had come, God sent his Son, . . . 
so that we might receive adoption as children [Gk "sons"].
And because you are children [Gk "sons"], God has sent the Spirit of his Son into our hearts, crying, "Abba! Father!" So
you are no longer a slave but a child [Gk "son"], and if a child [Gk "son"] then also an heir, through God. (No footnotes on the Greek words for "son" or "sons.")

Here the clearly intended parallelism between "Son" and "sons(s)" is obscured, and the final sentence will call for a double read since it posits on the face of it an anomalous contrast between "slave" and "child" -- "child" without a possessive pronoun (my/his) or qualifying phrase (such as "of God") connotes no relationship but only refers to a stage of development (between birth and puberty).

A striking illustration of how a single-minded search for sex-neutral language can lead to inept and unidiomatic English is to be found in the systematic rendering of the Hebrew phrase "son of man" (in the vocative) as "mortal." While "mortal" is appropriate enough in the context of Psalms 8:4 and 144:3, and even in that of the vocative found in Psalm 90:3 ("Turn back [to dust], you mortals"), it is much less so for the vocatives in Ezekiel (90 plus times) and Daniel (8:17). When in these books God addresses his servants as "son of man," it is their humanity, not their mortality, that is in focus. Yet, since "mortal" as here used (vocative) is so uncommon in current English, it is the connotations of "mortal" that will initially register on most readers. How much more natural and connotatively appropriate would have been "O man," since in both cases (Ezekiel, Daniel) those addressed were men.

Another systematic rendition raises questions of a different sort. In the New Testament, whenever Greek "brothers" refers to a gathering, community, or congregation that includes both men and women, the NRSV expands the reading to "brothers and sisters." Is it warranted, many will ask, to rewrite the New Testament documents in order to make them "acceptable" today for liturgical reading? The committee itself may have had some doubts since in each case it has appended a footnote, "Gk brothers." For myself, I am ambivalent. But perhaps it would have been better in a "standard" translation to have relegated the expansion to a "That is" explanatory footnote.

Finally, I am at a loss to understand why generic "man" is used in Genesis 2:7 ("then the LORD God formed man from the dust of the ground") with "formed a man" as an alternative. This is the only generic use of "man" I have found in the NRSV, and the alternative appears contextually innocent.

Additions to the Text

Space fails for critical assessments of many matters -- punctuation, paragraphing, use of quotation marks, layout, subtitles (this last, we are told, is not the work of the committee) and more -- but this review would be incomplete without noting the additions to the text that have been included on the basis of manuscript evidence. Often these are only a word or phrase (especially in 1 and
2 Sam.), but more substantial additions do occur: a poetic line in Deuteronomy 32:43, a clause in 1 Samuel 4:1, six and a half lines of narrative in 1 Samuel 10:27, two lines of narrative in 1 Samuel 29:10, a sentence in 2 Samuel 13:21, and a short sentence in v. 27. Further, Matthew 12:47; 21:44; Luke 22:19b-20; 24:40 have now all been placed back into the text (with appropriate notes); the long ending of Mark is restored to full text size and placed in brackets (a note provides an additional nine lines that "other ancient authorities add, in whole or in part," after v. 14 -- the short ending of Mark is no longer provided in the notes); and John 7:53-8:11 is now treated similarly.14

Here must be noted also the inclusion of the Deuterocanonical books of the Roman Catholic canon (the so-called Apocrypha, including a translation of the whole Greek text of Esther) and, in addition, 1 and 2 Esdras, The Prayer of Manasseh, Psalm 151, and 3 and 4 Maccabees. These have all been bound with the books of the Protestant canon so that the NRSV can serve as a fully ecumenical Bible -- for Protestant and Catholic, for East and West.

**Conclusion**

The assessment I have offered here is clearly limited and one-sided. Time has not allowed a close study of the bulk of the text. As a translator I have brought to my examination a nose for potential trouble spots. Others would have selectively looked elsewhere and written quite different reviews. More mature evaluations can only come after this version has been in hand for some years. I must acknowledge that my initial reaction upon reading large blocks of the text was one of great appreciation for the improved style -- the washing out of all those cumbersome Hebraisms and archaisms. Moreover, the best of the translation tradition in which the NRSV stands has been preserved. But when I began to follow my nose and concentrate on certain details, I grew increasingly disappointed. The criticisms I have registered above document that disappointment.

How will the NRSV be received? I make bold to speculate. By ecclesiastics in ecumenical churches and by ecumenical academicians, with high praise. By feminists, generally with enthusiasm. By "evangelicals," not very widely -- if only because of the inclusion of the non-canonical writings. But many renderings and some text critical decisions will also evoke their objections. In general the NRSV will be more controversial than its predecessor. As the committee acknowledges, "No translation is perfect or is acceptable to all groups of readers." But the NRSV could have become acceptable to a broader ecumenical body of Christian believers if the revisors had kept the sensibilities of "evangelicals" in mind as assiduously as they did those of feminists, if they had exercised greater care in conforming inner biblical parallels and quotations, and if the non-canonical writings were bound separately in a matching volume.
ENDNOTES

1 The "and" in such compound numbers has been systematically eliminated, though a few have slipped through the revisors' screen; see, for example, Gen. 5:13: "eight hundred and forty," and v. 14: "nine hundred and ten." Also 1 Sam. 13:1?

2 Revising a text has its own special pitfalls. With an eye to removing awkwardness one can be blind to inadvertent ambiguities, as in the NRSV's "plants yielding seed of every kind" (Gen. 1:12).

3 In Luke 1:4, "know her sexually."

4 From the RSV "manslayer," with the reference to "man" excised, presumably to remove this token of English sexist prejudice. But why retain "slayer" when the verb "to slay" has been put to rest as archaic?

5 See also Rev. 1:13; 14:14 where the NRSV now has "one like the Son of Man" (the RSV: "one like a son of man," as in Dan. 7:13).

6 Without the footnote "Or the shadow of death, as at Ps. 23:4.

7 Heb. 2:6-7 has obviously been conformed to Ps. 8:4-5. But why the notes on v. 6a, "Gk what is man that you are mindful of him?" and in v. 6b, "Gk or the son of man that you care for him?" Surely the English of the text here is as good a rendering of the Greek as the English rendering of the Hebrew of Ps. 8. General readers (for whom these notes are clearly intended) will be even more puzzled by the additional note, "In the Hebrew of Psalm 8:4-6 both man and son of man refer to all humankind" -- puzzled because at Ps. 8:4 they find no note on "humankind" which renders "man," Heb. ἄνθρωπος).

8 The same form remains "bless themselves" in Deut. 29:19(18), is newly rendered "be blessed" (with the alternative in a note) in Jer. 4:2; Ps. 72:17, and is changed from "blesses himself" to "invokes a blessing" (no note) in Isa. 65:16.

9 When the Greek text says hebraizō, would it not have been better to render "Aramaic" than to force readers to discover in a footnote that "Hebrew" really refers to Aramaic (John 5:2; 19:13,17,20; 20:16; Acts 21:40; 22:2; 26:24)?

10 See also Mal. 3:17.

11 Why this difference in renderings?

12 See also Rom. 8:14-17,23. In these New Testament passages "child" and "heir" are associated while Jer. 49:1 carefully associates "sons" (not "children") and "heir." Does this reflect some supposed difference in inheritance practices between ancient Israel and the Greco-Roman world? But see Matt. 21:38; Mark 12:6-7; Luke 12:13; 15:11-13,31; 20:13-14.

13 Though it has become common practice, to insert subtitles in the biblical text is inherently a dubious business. For unwary readers it creates the impression that the authors of the biblical documents, even of the narrative books, composed their writings with the kind of topical focus we expect in essays, and hence tends to distort readers' perception of the kinds of texts they are reading. It also superimposes a layer of interpretation on the text that inevitably influences how the text is read. When subtitles are inserted, they should be kept to a minimum, should be as
neutral as possible, and should be printed inconspicuously in a subdued typeface. The copy of the NRSV I have in hand transgresses these guidelines. In it the Gospel of Matthew, for example, contains 156 subtitles (the NIV 117; The Revised English Bible 20 – this last much more to my liking). More disturbingly, because of the space given them, their center-column placement, and the bold typeface in which they are printed, they visually dominate the text.

Luke 23:34a has also been placed in brackets.