

THE REVISED STANDARD VERSION¹

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The publication on 30th September, 1952, simultaneously on both sides of the Atlantic, of this new edition of the Bible is without a doubt a most important event in the history of English biblical translation.

It is the result of fifteen years' work by a committee of American scholars, numbering thirty-two in all, assisted by an Advisory Board representing forty Protestant denominations in the United States. Many of the foremost biblical scholars of America have been concerned, and the story of their labours is one of remarkable co-operation between representatives of almost every shade of Protestant opinion in the land. A Jew was on the committee of the Old Testament side. The New Testament had been published in 1946, and with it an interesting booklet describing the methods of work and the principles involved. Now the Old Testament has been finished and the Bible published as a whole, but the corresponding book of introduction to the Old Testament was delayed until January, and this is the principal reason for the delayed appearance of this review, since it is obviously better to judge a translation in the light of the translators' own principles, and the committee is to be congratulated on having made this possible.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV) set out to be ultimately a revision of the Authorised Version (AV), or King James Version (KJV) as the Americans prefer to call it, of 1611, and to retain as much of the flavour of that version as the new principles allow. It was in 1870 that the Church of England decided to set about the revision of the text of the AV, and at the same time a group of American scholars were working in parallel. The result of these labours was the appearance in England of the Revised Version (RV), or as the Americans say the English Revised Version (ERV), the New Testament being published in 1881 and the complete Bible in 1885. The places where the American scholars diverged from the English were in each case recorded in an appendix. Certain matters of copyright prevented the appearance of the American text, with the English preferences in an appendix, until 1901. This text is known as the American Standard Version (ASV). In 1937 work began on the further revision which has produced the present text.

First of all it must be understood that biblical study and research has progressed far during the seventy years since the RV was made. In particular our knowledge of New Testament Greek has been greatly illuminated by the discovery of contemporary papyri, and similarly our knowledge of Hebrew has been deepened (specially with regard to some

¹ *The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version. (Nelson; 30s.)

notably obscure words, and to shades of meaning in known words) by the study of recently unearthed inscriptions, *ostraca* (inscribed potsherds), and evidence like that of the scrolls discovered in 1947. In the New Testament field the work of Greek textual criticism has moved far from the position of seventy years ago, and these things are reflected, albeit in small details only, in the new text. Archaeological excavation in Palestine during the last twenty years has contributed to the elucidation of several passages in the Old Testament, and the article in the *Introduction* on the subject is specially valuable. Similarly Palestinian Geography has made great strides in recent years. All these things have placed new tools in the hands of the revisers. Secondly, the scholars working on the RSV have been freer in their choice of words than were the framers of the RV. In 1870 the RV was to retain Elizabethan diction, only altering where improved knowledge called for a correction. The RSV has deliberately avoided all archaisms (even 'thou' except in the language of prayer), although shortlived neologisms have also been consistently eschewed. The result is a good, simple, literary English, with the fairly obvious good pedigree of the AV, but without the obsolete words which have come to obscure its meaning. An example of a prose passage and a poetical passage, with the AV and the Catholic Douay (Challoner) text in parallel, might be useful:

(1 Samuel (Kings) 24, 8-10)

RSV

AV

DOUAY

Afterward David also arose, and went out of the cave, and called after Saul, 'My lord the king!' And when Saul looked behind him, David bowed with his face to the earth, and did obeisance. And David said to Saul, 'Why do you listen to the words of men who say, "Behold, David seeks your hurt?"' Lo, this day your eyes have seen how the LORD gave you today into my hand in the cave. . . .'

David also arose afterward, and went out of the cave, and cried after Saul, saying, My lord the king. And when Saul looked behind him, David stooped with his face to the earth, and bowed himself. And David said to Saul, Wherefore hearest thou men's words, saying, Behold, David seeketh thy hurt? Behold, this day thine eyes have seen how that the LORD had delivered thee today into mine hand in the cave. . . .

And David also rose up after him: and going out of the cave cried after Saul, saying: My lord the king. And Saul looked behind him: and David bowing himself down to the ground, worshipped. And said to Saul, Why dost thou hear the words of men that say: David seeketh thy hurt? Behold this day thy eyes have seen, that the Lord hath delivered thee into my hand, in the cave. . . .

(Isaiah 53, 1-3)

RSV	AV	DOUAY
Who has believed what we have heard? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?	Who hath believed our report, and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?	Who hath believed our report? and to whom is the arm of the LORD revealed?
For he grew up before him like a young plant, And like a root out of dry ground; he had no form or comeliness that we should look at him, and no beauty that we should desire him.	For he shall grow up before him as a tender plant, and as a root out of a dry ground: he hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him.	And he shall grow up as a tender plant before him, and as a root out of a thirsty ground: there is no beauty in him, nor comeliness: and we have seen him, and there was no sightliness, that we should be desirous of him.
He was despised and rejected ^a by men; A man of sorrows, ^b and acquainted with grief. ^c . . .	He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief . . .	Despised, and the most abject of men, a man of sorrows, and acquainted with infirmity. . . .
^a Or forsaken	^b Or pains	^c Or sickness

The two passages quoted serve to show how close the new version is to the AV, and incidentally how close Challoner's text often is to it. They also illustrate the use of footnotes for alternative renderings. Another important use of footnotes in the RSV is to indicate passages where the regular Hebrew text has been abandoned and another reading substituted. The ancient versions have frequently been used and this is then noted, with the rejected Hebrew. For example on Zach. 14, 5 'him', the note reads 'Gk Syr Vg Tg: Heb *you*', or on 14, 6 'Compare Gk Syr Vg Tg: Heb uncertain'. If a conjectural emendation is followed, as in Zach. 9, 1, 'the cities of Aram', the note reads 'Cn: Heb *the eye of Adam* (or *man*)'—Cn standing for 'correction'. These critical notes are masterpieces of lucid compression.

Some critical readings will perhaps be disputed, but emendations are used with considerable reserve. In general, it may be said that we have in this text a thoroughly reliable guide to the meaning of the original Hebrew as far as it has been ascertained, and similarly of the Greek in the New Testament. No form of prejudice has influenced the revisers (except perhaps the traditional Protestant rendering 'wife' in 1 Cor. 9, 5), and the work has been approached with the spirit of piety as well as scholarship. The committee's intention was to provide a text suitable not only for private reading but also for public reading in church,

and thus a dignified style has been maintained, directly related to the AV. No English reader need fear to find any idioms which he might regard as uncomfortably transatlantic. The spelling of 'labor', etc., is of course American.

Messrs Nelson gave the book wide publicity before it appeared, and nearly a million copies were ordered even before publication, and this figure has probably been well surpassed by now. The paper and printing are beyond reproach and lay-out of the type (in verse form for verse sections of the Old Testament) is pleasant to the eye. The strong cloth binding is chastely adorned and the paper jacket is of the graceful kind we have learned to expect from Nelson.



REVIEWS

THE MISSIONARY SPIRIT IN PARISH LIFE. By the Abbé Michonneau. (Mercier Press; 12s. 6d.)

The name of the author will possibly give people the impression that this book is dealing with ingenious devices, paraliturgy and the like, for running a modern city parish. In other words, they will quite probably think it is a continuation of the well-known book, *Revolution in a City Parish*. In reality, it is a book for priests and the priestly spirit in our modern town missions. Abbé Michonneau tells us he had his fears that priests reading his earlier book may have missed the main point, and persuaded themselves it was all a question of the right method. For the earlier book was meant to treat of the spirit rather than of method. I suppose this is a common form of escapism, to console oneself for one's failures by attributing them to a wrong method, and to delude oneself that a change of method will put everything right.

The present book is an appeal to priests to face realities. If all is not right with the Church's apostolate, we priests must shoulder some of the blame. Why are the effects of our labours so limited? Do we lack priestly virtues, or do we grasp them imperfectly and fail to apply them to the right tasks? Father Michonneau recalls a saying of Cardinal Suhard: 'We have too many administrators; too many administrators and not enough priests'. Can it be that many priests are zealous and active and pray, and yet are failing to do their first priestly work?

First and foremost, we must be priestly. This is the first thing the faithful expect of us. They do not expect us to be business-men. But they do expect us to be ready any time to take a personal interest in the men and women in trouble who come to us for spiritual help or encouragement. The reason for this new book is to tackle this question realistically,