

Faculty Review of the Revised *NIV*

By John C. Jeske

The news that a new edition of the *New International Version* of the Bible is on the market may be disconcerting to some Bible readers. The question may suggest itself: “Does this mean that we’re going to have to get used to a new Bible every few years?”

Several things ought to be said in answer. The complete NIV Bible has now been in use for ten years. When the new translation was published in 1978, the New Testament contained revisions from the NIV-NT text which had been published separately five years earlier. It is only obvious that prolonged and widespread use by individual Bible readers and worship leaders will test a Bible translation for precision and clarity and ease of reading. In 1978, therefore, the NIV-NT had enjoyed the benefit of such a period of testing by large-scale use; the NIV-OT had not. The past ten years have offered the opportunity to give the NIV-OT a large-scale field testing. During this time many suggestions for changes were received, a number of them submitted by the faculty of Wisconsin Lutheran Seminary. The changes (in text and footnotes) made in response to suggestions are reflected in the most recent revision. These changes were studied recently by the WLS faculty and will be discussed in this article.

There is a second consideration which ought to be kept in mind when responding to the question: “Are we going to have to get used to a new Bible translation every few years?” For the first years after the *Authorized Version* was published in 1611, the translation was periodically reviewed and its language updated. Several generations later, however, the decision was made to freeze the translation. With the benefit of hindsight, one would have to conclude that that was a bad decision. That decision has caused Bible readers a lot of difficulty over the past several centuries.

The reason is obvious. English is a living language, changing constantly. When the Bible reader living in 1988 reads James 2:3 in the *Authorized Version* and sees the reference to a man wearing “gay clothing,” he recognizes immediately that “gay” has in our culture taken on a new and shockingly different meaning, one which the King James translators could not have dreamed of. Periodic revision of a Bible translation is therefore necessary to reflect changing word meanings and speech patterns in any living language. These don’t occur with such rapidity that a Bible translation should have to be revised every few years. But one would think that a review every 25 years would offer enough opportunity to update the translation. There is a sense in which the work of Bible translation is never completely finished. It is a matter of record that Luther kept on revising his translation of the German Bible down to the end of his life.

This past summer the seminary faculty studied all the revisions the NIV’s Committee on Bible Translation (CBT) made in the text of the NIV. The purpose of this report is to call attention to some of the more significant of these. The revised NIV text evaluated by the faculty is found in *The NIV Study Bible* (Zondervan) and the *Concordia Self-Study Bible*. Both of these volumes were reviewed a year ago in this journal (84:2, Spring 1987).

Many of the changes from the earlier edition are cosmetic and will never be noticed by the casual reader: hyphenating or de-hyphenating words; splitting or joining words; adding or deleting commas or semicolons; choosing a different word with little change in meaning; giving a spelling to certain place names that more closely resembles the Hebrew or Greek original.

The faculty study noted a number of positive trends in the revision. Most significant of these is a “tightening” of the translation, particularly in the New Testament. Many passages which in the earlier edition were paraphrased are now translated more literally. In Acts 2:38 “... so that your sins may be forgiven” is now “... for the forgiveness of your sins.” The reading “the one and only Son” (Jn 1:14 and 18) has been changed to “the One and Only” to bring it closer to the Greek. “I will be with you always” (Mt 28:20) now reads “I am with you always ...” “For as lightning comes from the east and flashes to the west ...” (Mt 24:27) has been changed to read, “For as lightning that comes from the east is visible in the west ...” The more literal translation makes the *tertium* of the passage clearer. “Clearly in the wrong” (Ga 2:11) replaces “in the wrong” as a more literal rendering of the Greek participle.

The “might turn out” of Job 13:16 has been changed to “will turn out,” a distinct improvement, since Job’s words are an expression of his faith and not a mere wish. A significant improvement recommended by the WLS faculty is in the translation of Hosea 13:9. The earlier version had read, “I will destroy you . . . ,” a reading possible only by emending the Hebrew text. The revised translation, “You are destroyed . . . ,” reflects the prophet’s emphasis that Israel itself is to blame for its destruction.

The earlier translation of Jonah 3:3, “Nineveh was a large city; it took three days to go all through it,” was interpretive. The revision, “Nineveh was an important city—a visit required three days,” leaves open what it took three days to do, as does the Hebrew. The earlier translation of Christ’s words in Luke 21:19, “. . . By standing firm you will save yourselves,” has been revised to “By standing firm you will gain life.” Since κτάομαι means “to acquire,” the revision clearly is closer to the thought Christ was emphasizing. In 1 Timothy 1:9 the earlier reading “good men” has commendably been revised to “the righteous,” which is the meaning of δίκαιος.

A few additional examples of how the translation has been tightened are the following:

“Profane” (Lv 10:10) has been changed to “common.”

In Psalm 103:3-5, “my” has been changed to “your.”

“Console her” (Jr 48:17) has been changed to “mourn for her.”

Micah 7:9 has a change from “justice” to “righteousness.”

“Out of my sight” (Mk 8:33) has been changed to “Get behind me.”

In Luke 11:8 there is a change from “persistence” to “boldness; fn, or persistence.”

“Lived for a while” in John 1:14 now reads, “made his dwelling.” The emphasis of the Greek verb is on Christ’s presence, not on the length of his earthly stay.

“Place of atonement” (He 9:5) has been changed to “atonement cover,” with the footnote:

“Traditionally *the mercy seat*.”

Another type of revision that the faculty considers a welcome improvement is the addition of a footnote reflecting another possible translation, if the words of the original are either ambiguous or unclear. A footnote to Genesis 4:26 offers the variant reading “. . . to proclaim the name of the LORD” as an alternate to “. . . call on the name of the LORD.” The practice of prayer did not begin with Seth’s descendants, but public proclamation of the gospel did. A footnote to Genesis 6:3 supplies “corrupt” in place of “mortal” as the reason for God’s decision to send the flood. Additional examples of this type of footnote can be seen in Leviticus 6:18 and Jeremiah 2:16 and 48:41.

If a Hebrew or Greek phrase gave the original reader or hearer a choice, a contemporary translation ought to offer the 20th century reader the same choice. This is also the reason why the earlier translation of Luke 17:20, “The kingdom of God does not come visibly . . . ,” has been changed to “The kingdom of God does not come with your careful observation. . . .” The revised translation of μετὰ παρατηρήσεως is clearly an attempt to straddle, to carry over the ambiguity of the original into the receptor language.

Not all of the faculty’s impressions of the revised NIV were favorable, however. The faculty had previously noted that in the earlier edition there was a tendency to overcapitalize “spirit.” Although the revision shows some improvement here, the tendency is still there (eg., Ro 8:6; 1 Ti 3:16; 1 Pe 3:18).

The revision has a fair number of changes in the text-critical notes, and some of these are distinctly not improvements. The notes to John 5:4 and 7:53 and to Mark 16:9ff tend to give excessive weight to the Egyptian family of manuscripts over witnesses from all the other areas of the early church. This manuscript family is described as “most reliable,” “the best group of manuscripts,” while other families are characterized as “less important.” These are value judgments which the seminary faculty does not share. Textual evidence in each passage should be evaluated on its own merits instead of by the generalization: “This family is the best.” Not only has there been no improvement in the text-critical notes, in some instances there has been a deterioration.

Reference was made earlier in this article to helpful footnotes which call attention to alternate translations of the text. The faculty noted instances where this practice should have been followed but was not. In Hebrews 9:14, eg., the translation “. . . acts that lead to death” is not ambiguous, although the Greek text is. The translation “dead works,” preferably in the text or at least in a footnote, would have offered both options.

An unhelpful footnote has been added to 1 Peter 3:21. In this passage the translators rendered ἐπερώτημα, St. Peter's description of baptism, as "the pledge of a good conscience toward God." The term "pledge" could refer to God's promise to us in baptism, or to the claim which a good conscience has on God. Faith in the baptismal promise holds God to his word. Now the revised NIV adds to the word "pledge" the footnote: "Or *response*." It is very difficult to think of "response" as being anything other than a purely human reaction. Unfortunately, the note in the NIV *Study Bible* is unequivocal in favoring the reading of the footnote. An additional disappointment in this instance is that the *Concordia Self-Study Bible* ("the Lutheran NIV Study Bible") permitted this note to stand.

When it reviewed the revised NIV, however, the faculty's greatest concern was not with unfortunate text-critical notes or with footnotes. Of far greater concern were unfortunate translations in the earlier edition which were not corrected.

Jeremiah 23:5 prophesies that the Messianic King will "do what is just and right in the land." The Hebrew, however, says he will "establish justice and righteousness on earth." Since this is Messianic prophecy, we hold that the passage asserts the gospel understanding of "justice and righteousness," not the legal understanding of those terms. Jeremiah was not referring to the fact that Christ advocated moral conduct but was pointing to his saving work, a fact obscured by the NIV translation.

The faculty has previously documented its conviction that the earlier edition of the NIV translated Matthew 5:32 poorly (cf. *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly*, 79:1, Winter 1982, pp 51–53). The earlier version read: "Anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to commit adultery, and anyone who marries a woman so divorced commits adultery." In both halves of the verse the verbs are translated as though they were active ("... causes her to commit adultery ... commits adultery"). In the first half of the verse, however, the infinitive (μοιχευθῆναι) is in fact passive. In the second half of the verse the verb (μοιχᾶται) could be middle or passive. The context suggests that it also is to be translated as a passive. In verse 32a as translated originally in the NIV the wife divorced unjustly and in 32b her second husband are both said to be guilty before God when in fact neither is. The guilt is the husband's who divorced his wife for an unscriptural reason. The revised translation of the passage reads, "... anyone who divorces his wife, except for marital unfaithfulness, causes her to become an adulteress, and anyone who marries the divorced woman commits adultery." This is no better than the earlier rendering and again fails to reflect the sense of the original. Both could easily burden consciences. 1 Corinthians 7:15 makes it clear that the wife who is deserted is not guilty of adultery if she divorces her husband. The passage should be translated: "... causes her to be regarded as an adulteress; and anyone who marries a divorced woman is looked upon as an adulterer."

The earlier translation of Acts 3:21, which was poor, is not corrected in the revision. "(Christ) must remain in heaven ..." is not a translation of the Greek, but a loose and tendentious paraphrase. Δέχομαι does not mean "remain." Reformed theologians have misused this passage to defend the proposition that Christ is not truly present in the Lord's Supper. One might have hoped for at least a footnote with the literal translation.

In the faculty's view, the translation of 1 Corinthians 7:39 ("... but he must belong to the Lord") is too interpretive, yet it was retained in the revision. The translation assumes that μόνον ἐν κυρίῳ modifies the new spouse, and it forecloses the option that the phrase may modify the woman's action of remarrying, which should be done in the fear of God.

In 1 Corinthians 11:16 the revision retains the unfortunate earlier translation, "...we have no other practice." It is illegitimate to translate τοιαύτην as if it were ἐτέραν.

The casual reader of Romans 9:22f in the NIV is likely to assume that the two phrases "prepared for destruction" and "prepared in advance for glory" are parallel in the original, that the same Greek verbs are used to describe the two groups of people. The text, however, does not say that God prepared certain people for destruction; as a result of their unbelief they were ripe for destruction. The translation is not a good one.

In Colossians 2:12 both the earlier and the revised NIV, "... raised with him through your faith in the power of God," don't quite say what the Greek says. Both represent the apostle's point of emphasis as being on the content of faith, rather than on the miracle of faith ("... through faith worked by the power of God"). The Scriptures nowhere else teach that sinners are saved by faith in the power of God.

Ten years ago the seminary faculty expressed its opinion that the NIV is a contemporary Bible translation which, although not a perfect translation, is one which may be used with a high degree of confidence. The faculty reaffirmed this opinion after its recent study of the revised NIV. The faculty remains convinced that for all-around use—in private devotions, in programs of Christian education and for worship—the NIV is the best contemporary translation we have. The advantages of using this translation in preference to the *Authorized Version* far outweigh its flaws, which are relatively few.

What this review shows again is the importance of a pastor's personal study of the original text. In his ministry of the Word, the pastor dare never content himself with working only with secondary resources, but must work with the primary ones. If he is to step before people and announce, "This is what the Lord says," his own study of Hebrew and Greek vocabulary and syntax is absolutely indispensable. Other than biblical exegesis, there is no foundation for biblical preaching and teaching.