

PREFACE TO THE NRSV UPDATED EDITION

From the Society of Biblical Literature

Purpose of the Revision

First published in 1611, the *King James Version* slowly but steadily attained a well-deserved stature as the English language’s “Authorized Version” of the Scriptures. At the same time, the scholarly foundation that produced the *King James Version* shifted as new manuscripts came to light and philological understandings improved. As a result of these scholarly advances, the *Revised Standard Version* was authorized to improve the translation, based on more evidence of the original texts and early translations of the Bible, the meanings of its original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, as well as ancient translations into Arabic, Armenian, Coptic, Ethiopic, Georgian Greek, Syriac, and Latin), and changes to the English language itself. The forty years between the *Revised Standard Version* and the *New Revised Standard Version* likewise witnessed many developments in biblical scholarship, textual criticism, linguistics, and philology. The same has occurred over the last thirty years, including the publication of all the biblical texts discovered near the Dead Sea, and these developments warrant this update. As with its predecessors, the *NRSVue* can claim a well-known line from the 1611 preface to the *King James Version*: “We never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation . . . but to make a good one better.”

The National Council of Churches, which holds the copyright of the *New Revised Standard Version*, commissioned the Society of Biblical Literature to direct the *NRSVue* revision project thirty years after its original publication. The editors of this edition encourage readers to read the excellent prefaces to both the *Revised Standard Version* (1952) and the *New Revised Standard Version* (1989); some elements of the latter have been incorporated herein. This preface also outlines the process of the update and the mandate under which it was conducted.

Process of the Revision

The review managed by the Society of Biblical Literature included seven general editors and fifty-six book editors, with several general editors serving also as book editors. The general editors were divided into three teams: Old Testament (also known as the Hebrew Scriptures), Apocrypha (also known as the Deuterocanon), and the New Testament. In addition to the seven general editors, the National Council of Churches appointed two members of its Bible Translation and Utilization Advisory Committee to serve as liaisons to the committee of general editors appointed by the Society of Biblical Literature. Three members of the Society’s staff participated in and managed the project.

Beginning in 2017, each book of the Bible was assigned to one or more book editors. Over the course of two years (2018–2019), the book editors submitted their proposed updates to the general editors. Each of the three teams of general editors met at least once a month for two years (2019–2020) to review and discuss the proposed updates submitted by the book editors. The accepted updates were submitted to the National Council of Churches in 2021 for its final review and approval of what is now the *NRSVue*.

The *NRSVue* presents approximately 12,000 substantive edits and 20,000 total changes, which include alterations in grammar and punctuation.

Like its predecessors, this *NRSVue* has relied on the best results of modern discovery and scholarship. The mandate primarily focused on two types of revisions: text-critical and philological. The *New Revised Standard Version Updated Edition (NRSVue)* is not a new translation. While some stylistic improvements have been made, these were reserved for instances where the translation was awkward, unclear, or inaccurate. Other changes involve matters of consistency, grammar and punctuation, and general improvements that render the translation and notes more consistent and uniform.

Text-Critical Revisions

The role of text criticism in Bible translation is to establish a base text from which to translate, a text reconstructed from the earliest versions in the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek), as well as in ancient translations of the books of the Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament. Translators rely on scholarly critical editions of the Bible for their work. A typical text-critical resource establishes a text based on scholarly judgment of the preferred reading among the readings available, with important alternative readings provided in a detailed apparatus. Scholars follow well-established rules in their effort to determine one preferred or superior reading from among others, though this remains both art and science. The challenge of establishing the Hebrew and Aramaic text of the Old Testament is different from the corresponding challenge in the New Testament. For the New Testament, a large number of Greek manuscripts exist, preserving many variant forms of the text. Some of them were copied only two or three centuries later than the original composition of the books. While the Dead Sea Scrolls dramatically improved the resources for Old Testament textual criticism, most translations, including the *NRSVue*, still rely especially on a standardized form of the text established many centuries after the books were written.

The goal of the text-critical review was to evaluate whether or not to modify the textual basis for the revision. To this end, the text underlying the *New Revised Standard Version* was examined in the light of all available evidence, making use of new data, perspectives, and scholarly resources. The review occasionally resulted in a change to the translation itself or to the textual notes that have been an integral feature of the *New Revised Standard Version*.

For the Old Testament, the team made use of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (2004–) for those books published to date and the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1977; ed. sec. emendata, 1983) for the remaining books. Both are editions of the Hebrew and Aramaic text as current early in the Christian era and fixed by Jewish scholars (the Masoretes) of the sixth to the ninth centuries. The vowel signs, which were added by the Masoretes, are accepted in the main, but where a more probable and convincing reading can be obtained by assuming different vowels, we adopted that reading. No notes are given in such cases because the vowel points are more recent and less reliably original than the consonants.

Departures from the consonantal text of the best manuscripts have been made only where it seems clear that errors in copying were introduced before the Masoretes standardized the Hebrew text. Most of the corrections adopted in the *NRSVue* are based on other ancient Hebrew manuscripts or on the ancient versions (translations into Greek, Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin), which were made prior to the time of the work of the Masoretes and which therefore may reflect earlier forms of the Hebrew text. In such instances a note specifies the manuscript, version, or versions attesting the correction and also gives a translation of the Masoretic Text.

Since the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Septuagint translation predate the Christian era, they present for certain books an earlier and more original version in the development of the texts. Each of the versions was considered authoritative by a community. This advance in textual scholarship is recent, however, so the *NRSVue*

retains for its translation the version presented by the Masoretic Text, whether it attests the earlier, parallel, or later version. The differences between these major versions are larger than can be added to the notes.

The *NRSVue* uses double brackets in the Old Testament in the same way the *New Revised Standard Version* did in the New Testament: to enclose passages that are now regarded to be later additions to the text but that have been retained because of their evident antiquity and their importance in the textual tradition. In short, the text-critical basis for the Old Testament is an improved Masoretic Text, which was the goal of the *New Revised Standard Version*. The Masoretic Text has been given preference where there is no scholarly consensus in favor of another reading or where the arguments are equivocal.

The *Revised Standard Version of the Bible* containing both the Old and New Testaments was published in 1952; a translation of the Apocrypha in the Old Testament followed in 1957. In 1977, this collection was issued in an expanded edition containing three additional texts considered canonical by Eastern Orthodox communions (3 and 4 Maccabees and Psalm 151). Thereafter the *Revised Standard Version* gained the distinction of being officially authorized for use by all major Christian churches: Protestant, Anglican, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox. The translation of the Apocrypha, therefore, is not peripheral but of equal import as the translation of the Old Testament and the New Testament. Indeed, some of the deuterocanonical books were originally written in Hebrew or Aramaic and were considered sacred texts by the early Jewish communities who first transmitted them and the later Christians who preserved them.

The *NRSVue* includes a considerable number of changes to the Apocrypha. Because there is no single critical edition for the books in this collection, the team made use of a number of texts. For most books the basic Greek text used was the edition of the Septuagint prepared by Alfred Rahlfs (Stuttgart, 1935). For several books the more recent volumes of the Göttingen Septuagint project were utilized. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint* (Oxford, 2009) also served as a resource to compare translations and evaluate critical texts for individual books.

For the book of Tobit, the *New Revised Standard Version* relied on the shorter Greek manuscript tradition; the *NRSVue* translated the longer Greek tradition (preserved in Codex Sinaiticus), while taking the Qumran manuscripts and other ancient witnesses into account. For the three Additions to Daniel, the Committee continued to use the Greek version attributed to Theodotion. Ecclesiasticus has an especially challenging textual history. The team generally followed the Greek text of Joseph Ziegler (and the versification in the Prologue), while giving particular consideration to the earliest Hebrew manuscripts from the Dead Sea region, with occasional recourse to the Syriac. The versification of 1 Esdras now follows Robert Hanhart's edition (Göttingen, 1974), which also brings the book into conformity with its usage in the Eastern Orthodox tradition. The basic text adopted in rendering 2 Esdras is the Latin version given in Robert Weber's *Biblia Sacra* (Stuttgart, 1971), with consultation of the Latin texts of R. L. Bensly (1895) and Bruno Violet (1910), as well as by taking into account the Syriac, Ethiopic, Arabic, Armenian, and Georgian versions. Since the Additions to the Book of Esther are disjointed and unintelligible as they stand in most editions of the Apocrypha, we provide them with their original context by translating the entirety of Greek Esther from Hanhart's edition (Göttingen, 1983). The versification of the Letter of Jeremiah now conforms to Ziegler's edition (Göttingen, 1957, 1976). The Septuagint's Psalm 151 is an abbreviated version of the Hebrew composition found in the 11QPsalms scroll. While the Greek remains the basis for the translation, the team also consulted that scroll.

For the New Testament, the team based its work on three recent editions of the Greek New Testament: (1) *The Greek New Testament*, 5th revised edition (United Bible Societies, 2014); (2) *The Greek New Tes-*

tament: SBL Edition (Society of Biblical Literature and Logos Bible Software, 2010); and, (3) for Acts and the Catholic Letters, *Novum Testamentum Graecum: Editio Critica Maior* (Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2013, 2017). Occasionally these editions differ in regard to text or punctuation; in such cases the team followed the reading best supported by a combination of both traditional and more recent approaches and considerations. As in the original *NRSV*, double brackets are used to enclose a few passages that are generally regarded to be later additions to the text but that have been retained because of their antiquity and importance in the textual tradition. Here and there in the notes the phrase “Other ancient authorities read” identifies alternative readings preserved by Greek manuscripts and early versions. In both Testaments, other possible translations of the text are indicated by the word “Or.”

Textual criticism continues to evolve. Not only have additional manuscripts become available, but some of the goals and methodology have changed over the last several decades. This is more the case for reconstructing the books of the Old Testament and Apocrypha, but it is generally true for the entire enterprise. In the *NRSVue*, care was taken not to push too far ahead of the existing critical editions or to turn the translation itself and its notes into a critical edition. Nevertheless, a careful reader will notice in general a more generous use of the notes for alternative readings. The editors hope that this work will serve translators in the future.

Philological Revisions

Deciphering the meanings of the Bible’s ancient languages involves a host of efforts: the study of the languages themselves, the comparative study of cognate languages from the ancient Near East and the Greco-Roman world, the disciplines of philology and linguistics, and the historical study of the social, cultural, and economic contexts in which the Bible was written. The *NRSVue* took special care not to use terms in ways that are historically or theologically anachronistic, though, as in every translation, anachronism is unavoidable.

The *NRSVue* continues and improves the effort to eliminate masculine-oriented language when it can be done without altering passages that reflect the historical situation of ancient patriarchal culture. This goal is to provide a historically accurate and acceptable rendering without using contrived English. Only occasionally has the pronoun “he” or “him” or other gendered language been retained in passages where the reference may have been to a woman as well as to a man, for example, in several legal texts in Leviticus and Deuteronomy. In such instances of formal, legal language, the options of either putting the passage in the plural or of introducing additional nouns to avoid masculine pronouns in English could easily obscure the historical background to and literary character of the original. In the vast majority of cases, however, inclusiveness has been attained by simple rephrasing or by introducing plural forms when this does not distort meaning.

The *NRSVue* also continues the well-established practice of using in the Old Testament the word LORD (or, in certain cases, GOD). This represents the traditional way that English versions render the Divine Name, the “Tetragrammaton” (see the notes on Exodus 3.14, 15), following the precedent of the ancient Greek and Latin translators and the long-established practice in the reading of the Hebrew Scriptures in the synagogue.

The Future of Revisions and a Virtue of This Translation

The *NRSVue* represents a base text that was produced from a variety of textual witnesses, a text that was not used by any one community but combines readings from several of them. This, however, may well be a model and a reminder to us today: it results in a text that can be used across both Jewish and Christian

traditions and in all their diverse communities. Indeed, this model stretches back to 1611, the origin of this edition. The translators of the *King James Version* took into account all of the preceding English versions and owed something to each of them. In 1977 the *Revised Standard Version* incorporated books that permitted it to become officially authorized by all the major Christian churches, and the use of the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Scriptures reflects the use of that text in synagogues. Beginning with the Revised Standard Version Bible Committee, the translation teams became both ecumenical and interfaith. The process that produced this translation of the Bible represents an ideal and a virtue. It is a Bible produced by consensus that can be used among and across pluralistic communities in contexts both academic and religious.

In the future, new text-critical resources will become available, the methodology and goals of textual criticism may change, translation theory may evolve, and the need to reflect contemporary language will be constant. In short, efforts to update the translation of the Bible will continue. As they do, it is the hope of the Society of Biblical Literature that this translation will continue to be produced by a diverse team and for diverse readers.