

4-1-1953

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Recommended Citation

Katt, Arthur (1953) "Thinking Clearly on the RSV," *Concordia Theological Monthly*. Vol. 24, Article 23.
Available at: <https://scholar.csl.edu/ctm/vol24/iss1/23>

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Thinking Clearly on the RSV

By ARTHUR F. KATT

EVERY new translation of the Holy Bible has met with opposition. "Whenever a translation is made, the question of its authority as over against the authority of the original or of earlier translations naturally arises."¹ This was the experience of St. Jerome back in the 4th and 5th centuries, when he produced the Vulgate. "At first his translation was met with antagonism, and it was even declared to be heretical."² This was true particularly also of our beloved, time-honored King James Version. It took nearly half a century for it to find general acceptance, and quite a bit of the original translators' preface is devoted to its own defense in view of anticipated opposition. There we read: "Zeal to promote the common good, whether it be by devising anything ourselves, or revising that which hath been laboured by others, deserveth certainly much respect and esteem, but yet findeth but cold entertainment in the world. Was there ever anything projected, that savoured any way of newness or renewing, but the same endured many a storm of gainsaying, or opposition?"³ And so it is not to be wondered at that the new RSV is faring little better than its illustrious predecessor. Religious and secular newspapers and journals are full of it. Even a popular weekly magazine like *Look* in its issue of February 10 ran a leading article entitled "The Great Bible Controversy," highlighting particularly "the disputed 'Virgin Passage' from Isaiah 7:14." The criticism evoked by a new version is as such good and commendable. We are made to re-examine prooftexts once taken for granted and to make sure that they really say what we think they mean. Never before during our lifetime has the Virgin Birth been so strenuously defended as at present when it is feared to be endangered. The same applies to Job 19:26,27 and the resurrection of the body and various O.T. Messianic prophecies. That is all to the good, for not until we seem to be losing something do we tighten our grip. In many cases, moreover, the criticism is justified. No translation is perfect, since it is but a human attempt to present the divine Word. Nor does the RSV claim for itself perfection. Writes one of its translators: "No translation of the Bible is final, even though it may be more accurately translated in more understandable language than any preceding translation. It is with this in mind that we might use as the keynote . . . these words from the preface of the Bishop's Bible: 'No offence can justly be taken for this new labour, nothing prejudicing any other man's

judgment by this doing; nor yet hereby professing this to be so absolute a translation, as that hereafter might follow no other that might see that which as yet was not understood. . . . Who can doubt but that such things as remain yet unknown in the gospel, shall be hereafter made open to the latter wits of our posterity, to their clear understanding?"⁴

While every careful reader of the RSV should make comparisons with the KJV and, if possible, with the original text (in its best form), and feel free to note differences in rendition which in his opinion are not justified, yet the entire procedure should take place in the spirit which the Eighth Commandment requires. It is at this point that much of the present negative criticism of the RSV breaks down. We have read some longer reviews of the RSV whose authors were quite evidently on a witch hunt, "looking for faults" and most assuredly "finding" them, as is so well indicated by the KJV translators in their preface, quoted above. Is there any reason, for example, for demanding that the same Greek word ought always be rendered by the same English word, when words both Greek and English often have many shades of meaning to be determined by usage and context? Is there any good reason, to give an instance, why the bridesmaids in Jesus' parable of His second coming should continue to be called "ten virgins" in the RSV, a term no longer used in this fashion today, when we speak of wedding attendants, when the term "maidens" answers the purpose much better? Akin to the procedure of "looking for faults" is the practice of the reviewer who suspects the sincere purpose and impugns the honest motives of the translating scholars, sensing "liberalism" where it is evidently not intended, simply because the theology of some of the translators tends toward the liberal. Fair-minded, conservative scholars have assured us that the RSV translators on the whole have succeeded quite well in their avowed purpose of keeping their own theological views out of their translation and that surprisingly little "modernism" is found in the RSV. Its critics, for example, seem to find much more in the substitution of "you" for "Thou" in the case of Jesus, than needs to be assumed. If "Thou" is reserved for God when He is addressed in prayer (since some find it difficult to address God as "you"), it seems but logical that Jesus be addressed as "you" in His human appearance among men, especially by His parents, brethren, intimate disciples, as well as by countless people, His enemies, for example, who did not regard Him as being divine. It was part of His human experience to be treated as a "man," and His deity is by no means imperiled thereby. Again, to insist that every time some suppliant prostrated himself before Jesus in Oriental

fashion he was always "worshipping" Jesus, and that the substitution of "knelt down" for "worshipped" in every case is tantamount to a denial of our Lord's deity, reveals ignorance of the various meanings of the 17th century English word "worship" (cp. Luke 14:10 and Webster) as well as of its Greek equivalent.

Or take the hotly disputed passage, Is. 7:14, for example. Had the critics contented themselves with stating that "young woman" is undesirable, unsatisfactory, inadequate, and that "virgin" is much to be preferred, we could and would go right down the line with them in our support, pleading with the RSV translators to consider making the change, which eventually they might be willing to do. But when the critics overshoot the mark and cry "false translation" or "inaccurate," then we feel constrained to come to the defense of the translators, for to translate "young woman" is certainly not false, nor even inaccurate. And when they go still further in their criticism and assert that the Virgin Birth is being denied, then every fair-minded person is bound to repudiate such an irresponsible statement, for the following three reasons: 1. to call a virgin a "young woman" is not tantamount to denying her virginity; 2. the translators themselves disclaim such denial when in the footnote they offer the alternative "or virgin," thus explaining the more general term "young woman"; 3. the N.T. proof-texts—the real *sedes doctrinae*—for the Virgin Birth (Matthew 1 and Luke 1) clearly read "virgin," and the same RSV translators render the Isaiah passage as quoted in the LXX "virgin," thus once more offering an explanation for the Hebrew "young woman." Dr. Luther Weigle, chairman of the RSV Committee, has repeatedly explained the committee's position, and is thus quoted in his latest expression on the matter; "His committee," the statement said, "had translated the Hebrew text in the case of the Old Testament and the Greek in the New Testament. The Hebrew text of Isaiah 7:14 uses the word 'almah,' which means 'young woman of marriageable age.' This word, he said, does not assert or deny the virginity of the young woman. Moreover, the Scriptural grounds for the Virgin Birth are stated clearly and unequivocally by the RSV at those points where the original Greek states them, Weigle said."⁵ This side of the picture the negative critics consistently fail to present. Nor is it noted by them how well, for example, the RSV renders the other important Messianic prophecy of Isaiah concerning the birth of Christ, Is. 9:6: "To us a child is born . . . and his name will be called . . . Mighty God!" definitely declaring the Christ Child's deity, which even Luther's translation fails to bring out, a prophecy, moreover, which certain other modern translators have altered beyond all recognition.

Translating is not everybody's business and is never an easy task, as Luther and all other translators have found. For best results it requires the highest scholarship of many translators over a long period of time, as Dr. May points out in his book:⁶ "An individual translation could have been made much more quickly; opportunity had to be given for discussion of all points brought up by the members. Sometimes several hours might be spent on a single verse." Speaking of the many modern language translations by individual acknowledged scholars during the twentieth century, May concludes: "Those that are the work of a single person represent ultimately the viewpoint of a single person."⁷ Luther may be regarded as an exception, although he too had his co-laborers. Thirty-two scholars labored for at least 15 years on the RSV.

One of the greatest difficulties in translating no doubt is that of drawing the exact line between translating and interpreting. In a certain sense translating is interpreting. Translation without interpretation is unthinkable. Thus the two terms are sometimes used interchangeably. A translation must give the meaning, and that is interpreting. But there is a point where translation stops and where the field of exegesis, or exposition (commonly called interpretation), begins. Irwin makes this clear: "The facts establish an agreed translation. Then, and then only, may the exegete and dogmatist busy himself with theological deductions from the thoughts of Biblical writers. The Bible translator is not an expositor."⁸ How extremely difficult it is at times to draw the proper line between translation and interpretation may best be illustrated by two examples of RSV translation which have evoked sharpest criticism for diametrically opposite reasons. They are the above-mentioned disputed O. T. passage, Is. 7:14, and the N. T. passage, 1 Tim. 3:2. In the Isaiah passage we have a linguistically accurate translation and no more, the Hebrew original meaning simply "young woman." Here we feel that the translators have not gone far enough, that the mere and bare translation is not adequate, and that the proper understanding of the passage, the context, and particularly Matthew 1, should have prompted the translators to interpret the general term more exactly and definitely by using the word "virgin." Our criticism of 1 Tim. 3:2 is aimed in the opposite direction. There we hold that the translators should have stopped with the general literal translation "husband of one wife," meaningless though it might thus appear without further comment, without attempting to inject into the text one of several possible interpretations. We here fault the translators with having become interpreters, and with giving us a wrong

or false interpretation, at that. Had the translators interpreted the passage the "right" way, according to our view, and said "having but one wife at one time" (or words to that effect), we probably would not find fault, although the translators in the opinion of others (e. g., those who favor the present RSV reading) would still have been guilty of adding interpretation to translation.

One more word on criticism. Much, if not most, criticism is of a negative sort, with little or no positive commendation to offset it. This is perhaps natural, but still unfair. My own first approach to the RSV was a negatively critical one, and within half a day I readily found fully a dozen cases where commonly used prooftexts are rendered in a different way, and I lost no time in bringing these to the attention of my conference. But as I began to read larger portions with recurring frequency, the many excellencies of the RSV began to show up, and the favorable impression grew and became overpowering. To list a dozen, or even half a hundred passages, which for some reason or other we do not like or consider inadequate, may present a seemingly formidable negative argument, but after all does not tell the whole story or show the other side.

A really fair criticism will begin with a recognition of the need of a new English translation. That need was felt fully a hundred years ago and again fifty years ago. To estimate that need fully one should consult the books of May and Weigle and the Introductions to the RSV and there read the overwhelming portrayal of changes which have taken place in the English language during the past 350 years. Unless this is done, many of the subtler changes in meaning will entirely escape him. Here is really an eye opener. And it is not only the continued use of obsolete and archaic words and phrases, but the whole matter of sentence structure which makes the reading of the KJV difficult. The former revisions (ERV and ARV) attempted to remove archaic words and phrases, but failed to get away from the literal Greek idiom of the KJV. These revisions rather became even more literal in their mistaken zeal for accuracy, with the result that the new revisions did not read well, but were more difficult of understanding in places. That is why these revisions failed to win general acceptance. Here is where the RSV scores most favorably. Not only the words and phrases, but also the style is thoroughly English (American) and modern, as anyone can learn who will but read connectedly larger portions of the RSV. Few of us had as yet realized to what great extent we preachers and teachers have by tradition and training become KJV Bible linguists and how much time we spend

in pulpit and class explaining English terms. And at that most of us take far too much for granted. To give but one example (which could be multiplied): I recently asked my junior catechumens what the word "suffer" in Jesus' famous dictum concerning children meant, and not one of them was able to tell me. Our children and young people do not readily understand the KJV when they try to read it. We ourselves do not fare so very much better. How many chapters of the KJV can we read fluently and with understanding at one time without tiring? Not many. It is not always because God's Word is really so very difficult or because our old Adam is fully to blame. God's Word is clear, and our new man delights in the Word of God, but an unclear version can becloud that clarity and dampen that delight. A clear, modern rendering can do much to restore both. A pastor who encountered difficulty reading just one chapter daily from the Epistles to his family in the KJV found that when he substituted Phillips' paraphrase, his family would not let him stop even after reading half a dozen chapters at a time.

The proof of the version pudding is the eating, not merely the nibbling or sampling. To evaluate the RSV aright we must *read* it, read it in larger sections, read it all the way through. Surprises await the reader who tries it. He may find himself spellbound, like the man who began reading to his wife at midnight: both were held spellbound for fully twenty chapters of the RSV Old Testament. In a relatively short time some 300 to 400 chapters of O. T. history were read with understanding and delight. Former fragments became parts of a connected whole. To read the entire life story of each of the patriarchs in one sitting, to read the entire biography of Joseph at one time, to follow Moses from the ark of bulrushes to Mount Nebo in one grand sweep, to read as a connected whole the story of Joshua and the Conquest and the history of the Judges, to read the entire life of David, and the story of the building of the Temple, all this impresses one in unforgettable manner and opens up new vistas. The O. T. characters come to life in the RSV, the conversational portions become dramatic. Turning to the N. T., you find yourself reading St. Matthew's Gospel in an hour and a half. A young schoolteacher, home for the Christmas holidays, sits down one evening, becomes absorbed in the RSV, and reads 75 chapters before retiring, all 50 chapters of Genesis and 25 chapters of Exodus: "It reads like a novel, so fascinating!" A young couple receives the RSV for Christmas, and within two weeks she has read 40 chapters of Genesis, while he has proceeded from Genesis to Deuteronomy. A young woman has read Isaiah with

pleasure and is now reading Jeremiah. A young housewife with three small children in a few evenings reads all of Genesis. A primary teacher one day begins reading to her first-, second-, and third-graders the story of the Egyptian plagues; they beg her to continue until she has read all five chapters without stopping. A third-grader then asks permission to read some in the RSV in her spare time. The outstanding quality of the RSV is the fluency with which it can be read without needless stopping, its ability to sustain reader interest. This is due to the fact that the RSV, revision though it is, has not like earlier revisions of the KJV been content with piecemeal substitutions and simplifications, but has been freshly written in an interesting and absorbing style.

The make-up of the RSV is also most helpful in this direction. Proper paragraphing takes the place of disturbing and artificial verse fractures. Direct speech is set off with quotation marks, and poetry is set up in proper lines. The three-volume edition deserves particular praise and is certainly the most suitable for home use. Each volume is small and light, the type large, the pages not crowded. The lines run clear across the page as in other modern books. I am somewhat surprised that Bible makers have not found this solution before. Confronted with a fairly bulky book, they have hitherto either resorted to fine type hard on the eyes or else have produced a huge tome too heavy to hold. Why should tired people at the close of day, or the sick and the old, be inconvenienced by heavy or unattractive Bibles?

What, then, are we to do with the RSV? I'd say: *Read* it, study it, compare it! Then urge your people to read, *read!* There is perhaps no easier way to get your people to read the Bible than to encourage them to read the RSV. I hope this is made a prominent feature of the present Bible-reading campaign of Synod. All schemes to promote reading and study of the KJV are as nothing compared with the simple direction to read the RSV at home. That will take care of much that we wish to achieve. Our people will become a Bible-reading people once more, people who really know their Bibles from cover to cover. Our St. Louis Seminary exegetical departments might list on a book-mark a number of passages in which the KJV is to be given the preference in order to guide our people properly in reading. Let our people read both versions and make comparisons.—And what about the use of the RSV in public worship or class? It should be freely used together with and alongside the KJV. It should not displace the KJV, but neither should the KJV bar it. If certain Epistles or Gospels, correctly rendered, read more clearly and understandably from the

RSV, pastors and teachers should not hesitate to use the RSV. Many pastors have thus used the RSV N.T. for some years now, sometimes mentioning the version, sometimes not. Our people do not object to hearing a version they can more easily understand; they follow the lections with new interest. Such use can only be profitable and helpful.

But are we, then, to adopt the RSV and reject the KJV? By no means. The RSV may never displace the KJV. That remains to be seen. It is now on trial and probation and must approve itself if it is to find a permanent place in the Church. The KJV may ultimately fall into disuse as have the English versions which preceded it, but it will never be rejected or repudiated. It will retain its honored place as the most famous English Bible. Nor are we ready to adopt the RSV in any official capacity. That will not be done now, nor for a long time to come, perhaps never. Both versions will probably have their use and place in the Church for many years to come. If a congregation by majority vote were to fully replace the KJV by the RSV, the pastor would probably have to protest. If on the other hand a congregation by majority vote were to forbid every use of the RSV in public worship, the pastor would probably also have to protest. There will be and need be no adopting or rejecting of either RSV or KJV by Synod, officials, faculties, conferences, or congregations. The use of both versions should be tolerated and encouraged. If thus the use of versions is left to the good judgment of pastors and teachers, without arbitrary commands or prohibitions, one version will shed light on the other.

Our people will not become confused, as some fear, unless we pastors and teachers ourselves confuse them by arousing undue suspicions. Our people are not unaccustomed to the simultaneous use of two Bible versions. For half a century now most of our congregations have been bilingual, and fully half of our present members have listened to German sermons as well as English. Many of those who were formerly used to reading their Bibles in German later learned to read them also in English. Thus they were confronted with two texts, which, quite apart from the difference in language, were not always the same. It is well known that while the KJV follows the original Greek and Hebrew pretty closely, Luther's translation is often much freer in his attempt to reproduce the text in German idiom. (While the KJV has Jesus say: "Out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh," Matt. 12:34, Luther's apt paraphrase reads: "Wes das Herz voll ist, des geht der Mund ueber," retaining but two words

of the original, "heart" and "mouth." Or take the passage Job 19:25, 26 as rendered by KJV and by Luther. While the meaning is largely the same, the wording itself is quite different.) Yet such differences did not disturb our people, nor will differences in English versions.

But what about our catechism and hymnal? Will they not have to be changed to bring them in conformity with the RSV? Not until such a time as Synod itself shall decide it, and that may not be for a long time to come. Since the KJV will long be used in our churches, so likely, too, the catechism with its KJV passages. And as for the hymnal, such portions as the Introits, Graduals, and Psalms need never be changed unless Synod itself someday should decide to do so. Why cannot two versions of the sacred text be used side by side? The Protestant Episcopal Church, both in England and in America, makes liturgical use of the Psalms in much greater measure than we do, yet for many centuries it retained in its *Book of Common Prayer* (used with hymnal by all worshipers) a version of the Psalms, antedating the KJV, while using the KJV Psalter in its Bible for reading, instruction, and sermonizing. It did not seem to confuse people to use two versions of the Psalter simultaneously for centuries, although the change to one version could easily have been made. To this day we use the "Prayer Book Version" of the Lord's Prayer (with "trespasses") instead of the later version as given in the KJV. Our old hymnal (Hymn 574) contained the "Prayer Book Version" of Psalm 130 (*De Profundis*), quite different from that now found in the new hymnal (Hymn 664). We might well have retained this quaint version of the Psalm; why not? — Need we restrict ourselves to but one English version of Luther's "A Mighty Fortress," or could we not with profit enrich our spiritual lives by acquainting ourselves also with the other two famous versions by Carlyle and Hedge? But that's something else again.

Let's read and study and use the RSV. It was not produced in a year, as one of our reviewers has said; let's not dispose of it in a year. "What's good in it should be made use of, and what's not so good in it should be improved." The RSV Committee has not proved itself unamenable to suggestions, some eighty changes having been made in the N. T. from 1946 to 1952. Let us be truly grateful to these gifted men who labored long and with success to give us this new translation. Let us humbly thank God for the RSV and for the light it sheds on His Holy Word!

Shaker Heights, Ohio

FOOTNOTES

1. Herbert Gordon May, *Our English Bible in the Making* (Philadelphia, the Westminster Press, 1952, \$2.75), p. 10.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 13.
3. Preface to the King James Bible, "The Translators to the Reader," quoted by Luther A. Weigle, *The English New Testament from Tyndale to the Revised Standard Version* (New York, Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1949, \$2.00), p. 83.
4. May, *op. cit.*, p. 103.
5. *Look*, February 10, 1953, "The Great Bible Controversy," p. 98.
6. May, *op. cit.*, p. 109.
7. *Ibid.*, p. 103.
8. Wm. A. Irwin, *An Introduction to the Revised Standard Version of the Old Testament* (New York: Thomas Nelson and Sons, 1952), p. 14.