

The New International Version—First Impressions

By Frederic E. Blume

[This essay was published in the *Wisconsin Lutheran Quarterly* in April 1974.]

In 1967 the New York Bible Society International undertook to produce a fresh translation of the Bible into contemporary English based directly on the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek of the Old and New Testaments. It was to be a fresh rendering of the original texts, not a revision of any existing translation. Last fall the New International Version-New Testament appeared. It is being published by The Zondervan Corporation, Grand Rapids, Michigan, and is copyrighted by the New York Bible Society International.

The readers of this *Quarterly* have been kept informed on the progress made in the study of the various modern-speech renderings of the Bible with a view to the possible use of some one of them in the publications of our church. When these studies and comparisons were made, the NIV-NT was not included among the translations considered because it had not yet appeared. For that reason it seemed in place to offer our readers at this time a statement of the impression made by this newcomer among the spate of Bible translations that have been flooding the market.

The outward appearance of the book is pleasing: bound in a plastic cover of rich brown with lettering and decorative elements in gold of chaste design. The combination of a glare-free off-white paper and an extremely well-designed font of type make for an attractive, easy-to-read page. The page-size is slightly taller than the one of our *Meditations* (5½ by 8½ inches), but the text is printed in a single column on the page. The paragraphing is that of our usual English usage, though the verses are numbered as are the chapters, and the name of the book and the chapter-and-verse at the beginning and end of the open page are indicated at the upper outside corners of each open page. This arrangement greatly facilitates the locating of a certain passage. All numerals on the pages of the text proper are arabic. Old Testament poetry is printed in poetic lines (Romans 10:18–20); the hymns in Revelation are likewise shown as such (Revelation 6:12–13); the letter of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:23–29) is printed like a letter.

A large corps of Bible scholars worked on the translation. Direction of the project lies in the hands of the Committee on Bible Translation, and its efforts are coordinated by an executive secretary, Dr. Edwin H. Palmer of Wayne, New Jersey. The Committee numbers fifteen men. The number of those who have participated or are still at work (now in the Old Testament) runs well over a hundred plus a goodly number who lent their aid in criticism of the productions along the line but are not listed on the published roster of participants. These men come from all the major Protestant churches in the United States, Canada, England, Australia, and New Zealand. Recognizable Lutherans are vastly outnumbered by men whose basic theological convictions are pointed in the direction of the Reformed tradition.

Despite that, we believe that any open-minded reader of the NIV-NT who is familiar with the Greek Testament will be gratified to discover that this large team of translators, consultants, and revisers has in the over-all produced a modern English translation of the New Testament that in admirable fashion meets the requirements set by Martin Luther of what a good Bible translation ought to be. That there will be points where we shall respectfully beg to differ with the renderings of a translation that does not come from within our confessional fellowship will have to go without saying. Noteworthy about this New Testament is that the kind of points just mentioned are so much less frequent than they are in the case of any other translation similarly produced. Quite regularly, in crucial passages it is the NIV-NT that comes out on the right side.

In discussing the criticisms made of his German translation, Luther at various times set forth his principles of translation. Prominent among these was always the requirement that the thought of the Greek or Hebrew Bible text should be expressed in the idiom of the receptor language. Such rendering would not be a paraphrase rather than a translation; it would merely be saying things in the way the people talk for whom the translation is intended. A slavish substitution of equivalents in your own language of the original could become

something that was not understood at all or something that was misunderstood. That the NIV-NT is in idiomatic American English the following samples will show:

(From the account of Paul’s experiences at Corinth. Acts 18:1–4,9–11,14–17)

After this, Paul left Athens and went to Corinth. There he met a Jew named Aquila, a native of Pontus, who had recently come from Italy with his wife Priscilla, because Claudius had ordered all the Jews to leave Rome. Paul went to see them, and because he was a tentmaker as they were, he stayed and worked with them. Every Sabbath he argued in the synagogue, trying to persuade Jews and Greeks....

One night the Lord spoke to Paul in a vision: “Do not be afraid; keep on speaking, do not be silent. For I am with you, and no one is going to attack and harm you, because I have many people in this city.” So Paul stayed for a year and a half, teaching them the word of God.... Just as Paul was about to speak, Gallio said to the Jews, “If you Jews are making a complaint about some misdemeanor or serious crime, it would be reasonable for me to listen to you. But since it involves questions about words and names and your own law—settle the matter yourselves. I will not be a judge of such things.” So he had them ejected from the court. Then they all turned on Sosthenes, the synagogue ruler, and beat him in front of the court. But Gallio showed no concern whatever.

(From the account of the storm at sea. Acts 27:17–20)

Fearing that they would run aground on the sandbars of Syrtis, they lowered the sea anchor and let the ship be driven along. We took such a violent battering from the storm that the next day they began to throw the cargo overboard. On the third day, they threw the ship’s tackle overboard with their own hands. When neither sun nor stars appeared for many days and the storm continued raging, we finally gave up all hope of being saved.

(The revelation of the Man of Lawlessness. 2 Thessalonians 2:1–4)

Concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our being gathered to him, we ask you, brothers, not to become easily unsettled or alarmed by some prophecy, report or letter supposed to have come from us, saying that the day of the Lord has already come. Don’t let anyone deceive you in any way, for that day will not come until the rebellion occurs and the man of lawlessness is revealed, the man doomed to destruction. He opposes and exalts himself over everything that is called God or is worshiped, and even sets himself up in God’s temple, proclaiming himself to be God.

This is clearly not a rendering that calls attention to itself as a translation. It does not strive to startle or shock. Rather, it seems to make every effort to avoid just this sort of thing even in places where the original text could be understood to warrant a rugged colloquialism, for example, Mark 6:19 “nursed a grudge.” This too is a principle that Luther insists upon, for he never wearies of stressing the “solemn majesty, the profound simplicity, the glory and strength of the Divine Word” and insists that a translation of that Word must, so far as this can be done in a translation, reflect these same qualities.

As illustration of how the NIV-NT handles passages of highly significant doctrinal content, we shall arrange in parallel columns the renderings of other widely-known versions so that they may be compared with that of NIV-NT*:

* Abbreviations for the titles of the various Bible versions and the dates of the editions herein referred to are as follows: **NIV-NT**: The New International Version-New Testament (1973); **NASB**: New American Standard Bible (1971); **NEB**: New English Bible (1970);

Second Corinthians 5:20–21

NIV-NT

We are therefore Christ’s ambassadors, as though God were making his appeal through us. We implore you on Christ’s behalf: Be reconciled to God. God made him who had no sin to be sin for us, so that in him we might become the righteousness of God.

TEV

Here we are, then, speaking for Christ, as though God himself were appealing to you through us: on Christ’s behalf, we beg you, let God change you from enemies into friends! Christ was without sin, but God made him share our sin in order that we, in union with him, might share the righteousness of God.

MLB

On behalf of Christ, then, we are ambassadors, God as it were making the appeal through us. We beg you for Christ’s sake, be reconciled to God. God made Him who knew no sin to be made sin on our behalf, so that in Him we might share the righteousness of God.

Ephesians 4:16

NIV-NT

From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work.

NASB

... from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by that which every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

NEB

... and on him the whole body depends. Bonded and knit together by every constituent joint, the whole frame grows through the due activity of each part, and builds itself up in love.

When we today insist that any translation must be an adequate rendering of the original text, we speak of two quite unrelated matters: first, the particular wording accepted for translation on the basis of a comparative study of the many existing manuscripts; secondly, a sufficient insight into what was prevailing usage in the written and spoken Greek of that first century Mediterranean world so that the understanding of the words is arrived at, not from the usage of fifth century B.C. Athens, not of the later Latin, nor of general German or English usage, but rather from an understanding of what was common usage in the world where apostle and evangelist worked, preached, and wrote.

Martin Luther does not dwell on the problems of what we know as textual criticism. In his day that discipline simply did not yet exist in the area of Biblical studies. Luther was, however, well aware of the fact that there was a New Testament in printed form. Most probably it was the second edition of the first published Greek Testament that Luther translated. But we also know that he was aware that the libraries and monasteries were full of hand-written New Testaments and that here and there these manuscripts differed slightly the one from the other. An awareness that there were copies of the Bible many centuries older than those Luther knew and translated was not to come for a couple of centuries. The NIV-NT translation was made by Bible students who were well aware of the developments in textual studies. They describe theirs as an “eclectic” text. This means that they translated a text arrived at by a minute comparison of the way the Greek New Testament is read in the available sources: the manuscripts both ancient and medieval; the early translations into Latin and the language of Palestine at the time of Jesus; and the New Testament as it was quoted by the earliest Christian writers of whom we have any knowledge. In the main the Greek text translated in the NIV-NT is the one that among us is the New Testament of the classroom and the study, the text printed in the Nestle editions or more recently in “The Greek New Testament” of the united Bible societies and printed in Stuttgart, West Germany.

Ultimately, this text is arrived at by a comparison, not of manuscripts and other authorities, but of the great critical texts published the latter part of the nineteenth century. Consequently they reflect the textual preferences of the influential editors of these texts, the Anglican Hort and the German Tischendorf. These two editors were fascinated by the excellency of their favorite manuscripts, the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus respectively. While the quality of the readings in these two is consistently high (and Vaticanus has rightly been styled the “most valuable ancient manuscript of the Bible”), they reflect a narrow and sometimes quite un-historical perspective on the New Testament text, since both of them give us the wording as this prevailed in northern Egypt in the fourth and fifth centuries. Fully two-and-a-half centuries had elapsed between the writing of the last books of the New Testament and the time of the production of these two “great letter uncials”; so it must be clear that they cannot have spoken the final word in the area of materials for textual criticism.

Since the readers of the New Testament who have approached it with an awareness of the Greek text have been nurtured on the editions referred to so that these have become a sort of 20th century *textus receptus*, the writer cannot see how the translators of the NIV-NT could have proceeded, in matters of text, in a way altogether different from the one they follow. The much-discussed pericope John 7:53–8:11 is printed in the text proper preceded by a note on the manuscript tradition. The “at Ephesus” of Ephesians 1:1 is handled the same way as is the “long ending” of Mark (16:9–20). The famous addition to 1 John 5:7 (*comma Johanneum*) is most appropriately put in the footnote with the note that the “Vulgate adds” it.

The writer would have reservations about a similar treatment of other passages, for instance, Matthew 17:2–3 and 24:36. He repeats, however, that in the present state of the text-critical discipline in New Testament studies it would have been extremely hard for those responsible for the NIV-NT to have adopted a totally different mode of procedure. However, he must express the hope that the time lies not too far in the future when the students of the New Testament who hold a high view of Scripture and devoutly believe in its verbal inspiration can agree on a theory of textual and manuscript origins that is based on the authenticity, apostolicity, and historicity of the several New Testament documents. When that time comes, there will have to be a reevaluation of the different textual traditions. Perhaps that time will not come until (as the founders of Harvard College in colonial America phrased it) the present generation of divines shall lie in the dust. But come it must!

Finally, something must be said concerning the fact of any translator’s deepest theological convictions coming to expression, we may be sure for the most part quite unconsciously, in the choice of words he makes to express what he thinks and feels the original text says. Not under discussion here is the sectarian bias that can be, and has been, given to Bible translations. What we mean is the way any person with deep religious convictions will put into words the meaning a text conveys to him. Now the translator is not a computer into whom data are fed and for whom the result will have to be a single mathematically predetermined one. Rather, the highest compliment a recent student of Luther could pay to the Reformer was to point to him as “creative translator.” Anyone who upholds a certain creedal confession is merely saying that the terms of the creed spell out what he understands the Bible to teach. When such a person turns to Bible translation his religious convictions are bound to find some degree of expression. In this regard, religious and theological background is quite similar to national linguistic origins. We who are a couple of generations closer to the land of our Lutheran forebears simply had to learn that certain things were acceptable German but impossible English. But to this very day certain ‘things from over there keep running us under yet’! Of course, this matter is something totally different from the demand that each language has a genius all its own and insists on saying things its own idiomatic way. Luther’s discussion of his reasons for adding that word to the expression “by faith alone” should keep us clear on this point.

In this regard our English Bible went through an interesting development. The first English New Testament translated from a Greek text, that of William Tyndale, has a strong Lutheran cast. That is where the translator’s convictions lay. His marginal notes and prefaces reproduce the substance of those in *Luther’s Neues Testament Deutsch*. But as the English political and theological climate changed during the sixteenth century, the several great Bible revisions show a trend in the Protestant Reformed direction. Puritans as well as Anglicans had to be satisfied. The last of the great revisions, that of King James in 1611, readmitted some

strong influences from the Latin Vulgate. An example of the latter is the introduction from the Latin of “charity” instead of “love” in I Corinthians 13.

When we are dealing with a Bible translation that does not come from within our own confessional fellowship, we shall therefore have to continue to cope with differences of opinion as to how passages that in sensitive areas convey a high doctrinal content are to read. We may be sure that there would be differences of opinion aplenty in the areas of linguistics, English style, and textual criticism even were an English Bible to come out of our own circles. That there will continue to be differences of opinion especially on the rendering of passages where a doctrinal content is prominent will continue to be a fact of life for us so long as we shall continue to turn to Bibles whose lineage is not comparable to that of the *Lutherbibel*.

The answer to the question as to the nature and extent of such differences of opinion with regard to the NIV-NT must await the outcome of studies still being carried on. Preliminary studies seem to point to the expectation that while there are passages where changes could or should or must be made, in comparison with the findings in studies of a large number of other modern versions, the incidence here is slight indeed.

A single example will be sufficient at this time. In 2 Corinthians 13:11 the second verb, an imperative, is the same word, here in the middle voice, as the verb, there in the active, used Mark 4:19 of James and John as doing this to their nets, and commonly translated “mending.” Now the word does not mean “patch” but rather “fit part to part,” and hence: “put in order.” Of the middle voice the meaning at 2 Corinthians 13:11 would be: “keep on putting yourselves in order” and a paraphrastic rendering would come out something like: “the practical matters of your lives as Christians must continue to be of concern to each of you.” Of course, we are not suggesting this as a translation for any printed New Testament. This is merely the meaning and the connotation that the word conveys. Below we are reproducing the renderings of some well-known Bibles. In this case it seems to us that the last, the MLB, as a brief yet adequate rendering has the best of it:

KJV	Be perfect
NIV	Aim for perfection
NASB	be made complete
RSV	Mend your ways
NEB	Mend your ways
TEV	Strive for perfection
MLB	Mind your ways

However that may be, we have the distinct impression at this time, should our Commission on Christian Literature carry out the suggestion that it publish pamphlets to serve as remedial aids to WELS readers of the many contemporary Bible versions on the market, that by comparison the one on the NIV-NT could be a slender volume indeed.