

## *A British Scholar Looks at the RSV Old Testament*

**F.F. Bruce**

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*Textual critic finds volume, despite its defects, by far the best of the new English versions in scholarship, textual fidelity and English style*

When an ordinary British evangelical opens the RSV, his preliminary attitude tends to be rather different from that of his American opposite number. He knows little or nothing of the group of American churches which has sponsored the new revision, and the names of the revisers are, for the most part, names to him and nothing more. He is therefore more inclined to judge the version itself on its merits, without troubling much about its origin. He has not been exposed to the publicity campaign which preceded the publication of the work in the United States. And, most important of all, perhaps, no one is trying to impose the work on him as a standard version.

### **A "STANDARD" VERSION?**

Dr. Oswald T. Allis, in his sober and scholarly critique of the RSV, *Revised Version or Revised Bible?* (1953), justifies what some readers might regard as excessive severity in his criticisms by pointing out that a version which is expected or intended to become the standard English version for American Protestants must be scrutinized and judged with the strictest care. The conclusion to which he comes is that the RSV is unacceptable as a "standard" version, "however excellent it may be in some other respects" (p. 60). But the British evangelical looks at the RSV simply as another new translation. He has a few years to wait before he sees the first installment of the new Bible translation on which Christian scholars of the United Kingdom are at present engaged, and which, unlike the RSV, is to be a completely new translation and not simply a revision of existing versions. No doubt this forthcoming version will be judged on its merits by the public for which it is intended, and will be accepted as a standard version only if the Protestant public in Britain decides that it is worthy of such acceptance. And very probably the same thing will happen in the United States with regard to the RSV; in the long run the acceptance of the new revision as a standard version will depend not on the prestige of the revisers or the effectiveness of the advertising campaign, but on the inherent worth of the version in the estimation of American public opinion.

### **AN OBJECTIVE APPRAISAL**

This article is an attempt at an objective appraisal of the OT section of the RSV by a British evangelical who embraces wholeheartedly the Reformed doctrine of Holy Scripture and is engaged in the teaching of Biblical studies in a secular English university. It is based on detailed examination and experimental use of the version in the study, classroom and pulpit, for private devotion and family worship.

On the style of the RSV little need be said. It preserves the characteristic flavor of what has come to be felt, throughout the English-speaking world, as "Bible" language; the idiom is that "timeless" English which is recognized as classical on both sides of the Atlantic. Archaisms have been removed, both in vocabulary and in verbal inflection. The removal of one of these archaisms—the replacement of "thou" by "you" except in elevated language and in

addressing God—has involved the revisers in an issue of some theological delicacy, not so much in the OT as in the NT, where the Incarnate Son is addressed as “you” during His earthly sojourn. The real difficulty of this issue can hardly be appreciated by those who have not had some practical experience in Bible translation. It is undesirable that translators (selected primarily, no doubt, for their linguistic ability) should be obliged to make the fine theological decision involved in determining when our Lord is addressed as God and when as man. This is, in many cases, an impossible or even a non-existent distinction. The path of wisdom would appear to be, for translators who wish to replace “thou” by “you” to do so everywhere in prose, reserving “thou” only for the more elevated literary, levels in which it is still used in English. A literary decision of this kind is less invidious than the theological decision imposed on the RSV committee. (When “you” is employed indiscriminately, it may be thought useful to make a typographical distinction between its singular and plural senses, as Dr. William Hendriksen is doing in his *New Testament Commentary*.)

### QUOTATION MARKS AND PUNCTUATION

The use of quotation marks in the RSV has been criticized as introducing an element of interpretation; but this sort of interpretation may well be required in a translator. Unless he is producing a schoolboy’s “crib,” he must be expected to understand what he is translating well enough to know who is saying what. There are, to be sure, a number of places where alternative opinions are possible. But it is equally true that in several places alternative opinions are possible on a question of punctuation: it is not generally held that on this account the text should be unpunctuated, so that the reader may decide for himself. To take an example from the NT: a translator who rendered our Lord’s words in Luke 23:43, “Verily I say unto thee today shalt thou be with me in paradise,” would not be praised for refusing to introduce an element of interpretation but criticized for shirking the issue. It is part of his business to decide whether “today” goes with the preceding or with the following clause, and to punctuate accordingly; the

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revisers of 1611 and 1901 indicate their interpretative judgment (the correct one, I have no doubt) both by putting a comma after “thee” and by capitalizing “Today.” But there is no difference in principle between this form of interpretation and that involved in supplying quotation marks.

Yet punctuation may affect the sense profoundly, as will be evident to anyone who compares the KJV and ARV renderings of the Seventy Weeks prophecy (Dan. 9:24-27) with the renderings given in the British RV (1884) and the RSV. The British RV and the RSV of verse 25 have a strong punctuation after “seven weeks,” thus attaching the sixty-two weeks closely to the rebuilding of the city “with squares and moat” (RSV). In this they follow the punctuation of the Massoretic text. It has been suggested, indeed, that the Massoretic punctuation here was a deliberate device to spike the guns of Christian interpreters; but this cannot be proved, and in fact early Christian interpretations of this prophecy would not have been greatly shaken by the Massoretic punctuation.

### POETRY AND PROSE

The revisers of 1884 and 1901 did good service by printing the OT poetical books and a few other poetical passages as poetry and not as prose. The revisers of 1952 have carried this practice farther by printing the poetical oracles of the prophetic books as poetry. Sometimes it

is uncertain in these books where the dividing line between poetical oracles and prose passages lies, and different views may be held of the metrical patterns in some of the poetical oracles. But in general the RSV presentation of the prophetic material is helpful in this regard.

There is one matter in which the RSV format may appear to leave a question of interpretation open: that is the way in which the titles of the Psalms are printed. Each title appears before and not after the number of the Psalm. The reader is thus left to decide whether the title belong to the following Psalm or not; in particular, he may follow J. W. Thirtle (*The Titles of the Psalms*, 1904) in attaching several of the titles as colophons to the Psalms which immediately precede them.

But these are external features of the version; we must consider features which belong to its essence. When the whole Bible in the RSV appeared in 1952, the present writer found himself rather better pleased with the OT than he had been with the NT installment which appeared in 1946. This relatively favorable impression has on the whole been confirmed by further study.

Much light has been thrown on the OT text by archaeological research during the first half of the present century, and the new revisers have freely availed themselves of this new knowledge. For example, *hammanim* are now rightly interpreted as "incense altars" (Lev. 26:30, etc.), instead of "idols" or "images" (KJV) and "sun-images" (ARV). The discovery of a Hebrew unit of weight called a pim (if that is the right vocalization), and the recognition of this word in 1 Samuel 13:21, have combined to restore lucidity to a passage which used to be uncommonly difficult to translate. To archaeology, too, we owe the appearance of the place-name "Kue" in 1 Kings 10:28, in place of "linen yarn" (KJV) and "droves" (ARV). But Kue (a reading supported also by the Septuagint and the Vulgate) is an unknown name to the vast majority of Bible readers; it might therefore have been better to explain it in a footnote as roughly corresponding to Cilicia, if not indeed to render it by "Cilicia" in the text.

The Ugaritic documents discovered at Ras Shamra some 25 years ago have helped in the elucidation of the Biblical Hebrew vocabulary. The translation of *qerashim* by "frames" instead of "boards" in the specifications for the Mosaic tabernacle (Ex. 26:15, etc.) has Ugaritic support. In general, the principle of utilizing archaeological evidence in this way will command the approval of serious Christians.

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Let us come now to the question of the underlying text. The 1611 revisers adhered closely to the Massoretic text of the OT, even when they did not understand it fully. For example, the opening clause of 1 Samuel 13:1, "Saul reigned one year" (KJV), is a mistranslation, but it represents their attempt to force some sort of sense out of the Massoretic Hebrew which, as it stands, means "Saul was a year old when he became king." Only very occasionally did they prefer a reading from an ancient version to one from the Hebrew, or give a translation which implied a change of vocalization in the original. Their successors of 1884 and 1901 followed their example for the most part. The Preface to the OT in the British RV states that

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"the Revisers have thought it most prudent to adopt the Massoretic Text as the basis of their work, and to depart from it, as the Authorized Translators had done, only in exceptional cases." In a few places the British RV and ARV incorporate a versional reading in the text, hut more often they draw attention to it in the margin. Conjectural emendation they reduced to

a minimum. In 1 Samuel 13:1 the British RV supplies the figure "thirty" as Saul's age in years when he began to reign, with the support of a late recension of the Septuagint; ARV reads "forty," frankly admitting that the figure, absent from the Hebrew text, is supplied conjecturally; the complete uncertainty of the emendation is indicated in both versions by italicizing the number and placing it within square brackets. RSV is more cautious here, simply reproducing the Massoretic lacuna: "Saul was... years old when he began to reign."

During the last half-century and more there was a general tendency in OT scholarship to emend the received Hebrew text sweepingly by reference to the ancient versions, and (where they fail) by conjectural emendation. In recent years there has been a healthy reaction against this tendency—a reaction which is now being reinforced by the manuscript discoveries lately made in the Dead Sea area. When the Netherlands Bible Society sponsored the preparation of the new Dutch translation of the Bible, which appeared in 1951, it was possible for conservative and radical scholars to cooperate in the enterprise, because all alike agreed in accepting the general trustworthiness of the Massoretic text of the OT. So we are told by Professor G. C. Aalders of Amsterdam, an eminent conservative OT scholar. Similarly Professor J. Philip Hyatt, a member of the RSV committee, has declared: The first duty of the modern translator should be to give a faithful rendering of the Massoretic text, whenever that can be made to yield good sense; if not, he may then resort to emendation on the basis of the ancient versions; conjectural emendation should be a last resort, and is seldom necessary." A far cry from the day when an illustrious English Biblical scholar used to insist that there was nothing so certain in the world as a good conjectural emendation!

The RSV reflects this reaction against large-scale emendation. Those who think that even so it errs on the side of emendation may reflect that the error would have been much more excessive had it appeared a generation ago. In fact, the place it gives to emendation is remarkably moderate. Among emendations based on the Septuagint we note the inclusion in Genesis 4:8 of the words which Cain spoke to Abel (which the British RV admitted to its margin only.

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although it has the support of the Samaritan Hebrew as well); the longer text of 1 Samuel 14:41, which throws welcome light on the consultation of Urim and Thummim; and the reproduction of the full quatrain of Solomon's inaugural utterance at the dedication of his temple in 1 Kings 8:12 ff. But the two last instances illustrate the excessive conservatism of the new revisers in relation to the text. When they rendered 1 Samuel 14:41 according to the Septuagint they ought, for consistency's sake, to have followed the Septuagint text of verse 18 too, which makes mention of the ephod and not of the ark. The ephod was the instrument used for casting the sacred lot; as for the ark, it appears to have been still in its long retirement in the house of Abinadab at Kiriath-jearim. And the Septuagint rendering of Solomon's words in 1 Kings 8:13 is concluded by a note which ought probably to be translated "Behold, is it not written in the book of Jashar?"—but this is omitted in RSV.

There are other places where we might reasonably have expected the new revisers to make use of the Septuagint, where they have not done so. For instance, they might have read "like David" instead of "round about" in Isaiah 29:3; more remarkable still, they have not adopted the reading "He shall see light..." in Isaiah 53:11, although this Septuagint wording is now known to be supported by the two Hebrew scrolls found in the first Qumran cave (The RSV rendering "he shall see the fruit of the travail of his soul" is a mere paraphrase of the Massoretic reading.). The complete Isaiah scroll from Qumran, however, has been utilized in

a number of other places in RSV: e.g. in Isaiah 21:8, "Then he who saw cried" (The perplexing introduction of a lion thus disappears.).

Three examples of conjectural emendation in the RSV may be adduced. That in Psalm 2:11 ("Serve the LORD with fear, with trembling kiss his feet") is one with which students and teachers have long been familiar in the Hebrew classroom; it assumes that the Massoretic letters *wgylw br'dh nsqw br* should be transposed to *wbr'dh nsqw brglyw*. The ancient versions seem to have found difficulty in understanding the Hebrew, and to us it is strange to find Aramaic *bar* ("son") in this verse when the regular Hebrew word *ben* (inflected *b'ni*, "my son") has been used in verse 7. Jerome, finding the same Hebrew consonantal text before him as we know, rendered it "Worship in purity" instead of "Kiss the Son." The RSV form does not obscure the divine Sonship of the Lord's Anointed, for that is plainly asserted in verse 7; but even so the emendation is not altogether certain, although it is attractive. In Psalm 137:5 "let my right hand wither" (RSV) reflects the emendation *tikchash* for *tishkach* ("let her forget"); it is surprising that no mention is made of this in a footnote.

More controversy has been caused, however, by some of the RSV renderings of the traditional text than by emendations of that text. Christian criticism has concentrated, as is natural, on the rendering of some of the Messianic "testimonies" in the OT, where the Christological reference is sometimes thought to be unnecessarily obscured. Now it must be premised that the translator's business is to translate the best established text of his original, even when (in some of the passages in view) the wording of a NT quotation may be more explicitly Christological than the OT Hebrew is. But this does not excuse what I should describe as the most glaring defect in the RSV of the OT—its rendering of Psalm 45:6 by "Your divine throne endures for ever and ever." If the Hebrew words could be made to yield no other sense, this rendering might possibly be defended by assuming that we have to do with a rather awk-

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ward compendious construction; but in fact the Hebrew goes straightforwardly into English in the traditional wording, "Thy throne, O God, is for ever and ever."

The translation of Isaiah 7:14, which has possibly aroused most controversy, requires more serious thought. The new revisers, of course, in translating *'almah* as "young woman," had in mind the partial and short-term fulfillment of the prophecy in a form which served as a sign to Ahaz: if a young woman conceived at the time when Isaiah uttered the words, then the threat from Samaria and Damascus was indeed dispelled before her child knew the difference between right and wrong. The perfect and long-term fulfillment of the prophecy is recorded in Matthew 1:23, where the Septuagint *parthenos* ("virgin") is most divinely apt to the manner of our Lord's conception and birth. With all respect to Professor H. M. Orlinsky's well-merited reputation as a Septuagint expert, there is no foundation for his statement that Christians substituted "virgin" (*parthenos*) in the Septuagint text here (*Intr. to RSV of OT*, p. 30). On the other hand, the argument that the rendering of *ha-'almah* in Isaiah 7:14 should be settled without more ado by the fact that the Septuagint reading *parthenos* receives canonical ratification in Matthew 1:23 should not be pressed by those who condemn the new version for rendering Zechariah 12:10 in a form ("when they look on him whom they have pierced") which receives canonical ratification in John 19:37. It is true that *bethulah* rather than *'almah* is the word that actually asserts virginity, but *'almah* normally implies it (In the new Dutch version mentioned above it is translated by *jonkrouw*, which according to Professor Aalders can mean either a young girl who is still a virgin or a young woman already married.). But since the new revisers have enlisted the aid of the Ras Shamra documents elsewhere, they

might have done so here. For Isaiah's announcement of the birth of the child Immanuel is couched in language reminiscent of the Ugaritic formula for announcing the birth of a hero. And in that formula the Ugaritic equivalents of Hebrew *'almah* and *bethulah* appear in synonymous parallelism! There are overtones in Isaiah 7:14 which are not satisfied by the RSV rendering. The prophet's words probably rang a bell in the minds of his hearers, just as did the reference of his contemporary Micah to "the time when she who is in travail has brought forth" (Mic. 5:3, RSV).

The RSV rendering of the announcement of the coming ruler in the Micah passage just quoted has also received some criticism, especially the final clause of verse 2: "whose origin is from of old, from ancient clays." This rendering, it is feared, may obscure the eternal pre-

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existence of Christ. But the eternal pre-existence of Christ is a truth first clearly taught in the NT, and without that later and fuller revelation we should not have been able to deduce it certainly from Micah 5:2. The words translated "of old" and "ancient" by RSV here are translated in exactly that way by KJV in Psalm 77:5, "I have considered the days *of old*, the years of *ancient* times." It is in the light of the NT that we learn that the antiquity of Messiah's "origin," described by Micah, is the antiquity of eternity. Similarly, it is in the light of the NT that we learn that the manner of Messiah's "origin" (in itself a perfectly reasonable rendering of the Hebrew in this context) consists in His eternal generation from God the Father.

A similar objection has been leveled against the RSV translation of Proverbs 8:22, where Wisdom is made to say: "The LORD created me at the beginning of his work." Whether or not "created" is the best rendering of Hebrew *qanah* here (the Septuagint so renders it, and this appears to be the sense of the verb in Gen. 14:19, 22), we must remember that in Proverbs 8:22 ff. we have not a Messianic prophecy but an adumbration of a truth first proclaimed in the NT. Here and elsewhere in the Wisdom literature of the OT, divine Wisdom is personified as the eldest daughter of the Almighty (metaphorically speaking), but in the NT divine Wisdom is identified with the only-begotten Son of God (*ontologically* speaking).

The RSV has earned our gratitude in making the Messianic prophecy of Genesis 49:10 more immediately intelligible. What is the ordinary reader to make of "Shiloh" in KJV and ARV? He will naturally think of the Ephraimite town of Shiloh where the sanctuary was set up shortly after the Israelite settlement in Canaan, but what has that to do with Judah's royal tribe? Some scholars have connected Shiloh here with an Akkadian word meaning "prince." But the RSV rendering, "until he comes to whom it belongs," has even stronger support than the Peshitta and Targum mentioned in the footnote to this verse; it has the support of the prophet Ezekiel, who was almost certainly quoting Genesis 49:10 when he spoke in God's name of the downfall of the Davidic monarchy in Zedekiah's day: "A ruin, ruin, ruin I will make of it; there shall not be even a trace of it until he comes whose right it is; and to him I will give it" (Ezek. 21:27, RSV).

It might have been thought at one time that the establishment of the Davidic monarchy exhausted the reference of Jacob's blessing on Judah; again, with the fall of that monarchy it might have been thought that the promise of Genesis 19:10 had been annulled. But Ezekiel declares that the prophecy neither found its ultimate fulfillment in the rise of David's house nor met its final frustration in the ruin of David's house; another was yet to come, the one, as

Jacob said, "to whom it belongs," and to Him would the sovereignty, absolute and eternal, be given by God.

The OT section of the RSV is certainly capable of improvement. Whether it is worthy to be accepted as a standard version is a question to be decided by those who are invited to accept it as such. It has been introduced into the British Isles as another unofficial, "modern-speech" version, and it is by far the best of such versions, for up-to-date scholarship, textual fidelity and English style. Some of its defects leap to the eyes but the really serious ones can be counted on one's fingers and do not detract unduly from the generally high level of the work—a level which is higher in the OT than in the NT. In neither Testament does the RSV supersede the British RV or the ARV, particularly for purposes of careful study. But it is a useful adjunct to these versions, and if the student will take time to ascertain the reason for every change in text or translation which he finds in the RSV, he will learn much of great value about the Biblical text and its meaning.

Of the men who carried out the work of revision I have said almost nothing, preferring for present purposes to judge them by this, their finished product. They assure us that they have done their work with no thought of finality, and that they themselves are more acutely conscious of its shortcomings than any reader can be. This we can well believe. Future revisions and translations, including the new British version now being prepared, will no doubt profit by the criticisms voiced against the RSV. But when all these criticisms have been heard, and due allowance made for those which are well founded, it remains true that every doctrine of the Christian faith and every article of Christian duty can be established as conclusively from this as from any other translation. The common reader of the RSV will not fail to recognize the authentic note of the Word of God, attested in his heart by the Holy Spirit.

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