

# The English of the Revised Standard Version of the New Testament

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*(The following is the fifth of a series of articles, designed to introduce various phases of the Revised Standard Version. It is reproduced by permission of the International Council of Religious Education. - Ed.)*

The action of the International Council of Religious Education which authorized the preparation of the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, required the revision to be "designed for use in public and private worship, and to be in the direction of the simple, classic English style of the King James Version".

That does not mean that the present revisers were instructed to return to the errors and archaic language of the King James Version, but rather that they were charged to recover its simplicity and directness. These qualities had been lost in the versions of 1881 and 1901, and with them had gone much of the beauty and power of the older version. The major defect of the English Revised Version and of its variant, the American Standard Version, is that these are literal, word-for-word translations, which follow the order of the Greek words wherever possible, rather than the order which is natural to English.

It was unnecessary, for example, to change the third petition of the Lord's Prayer to: "Thy will be done, as in heaven, so on earth". The Revised Standard Version restores the familiar order of the words: "Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven".

Note, in the following passages, how the KJ translation is complicated in the ASV by changes due to following the order of the Greek words; and contrast with both versions the more direct, terse renderings of the RSV:

Luke 9 : 17. KJ: "And they did eat, and were all filled: and there was taken up of fragments that remained to them twelve baskets". ASV: "And they ate and were all filled; and there was taken up that which remained over to them of broken pieces, twelve baskets". RSV: "And all ate and were satisfied. And they took up what was left over, twelve baskets of broken pieces".

Luke 20 : 1-2. KJ: "And it came to pass, *that* on one of those days, as he taught the people in the temple, and preached the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes came upon *him* with the elders, And spake unto him, saying, Tell us, by what authority doest thou these things? or who is he that gave thee this authority?" ASV: "And it came to pass, on one of the days, as he was teaching the people in the temple, and preaching the gospel, there came upon him the chief priests and the scribes with the elders; and they spake, saying unto him, Tell us: By what authority doest thou these things? or who is he that gave thee this authority?" RSV: "One day, as he was teaching the people in the temple and preaching the gospel, the chief priests and the scribes with the elders

came up and said to him, "Tell us by what authority you do these things, or who it is that gave you this authority?"

Luke 23 : 8. KJ: "And when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad: for he was desirous to see him of a long season, because he had heard many things of him; and he hoped to have seen some miracle done by him". (Here is an example, incidentally, of the inaccuracy of KJ. The Greek reads, and good English demands, "to see" instead of "to have seen".) ASV: "Now when Herod saw Jesus, he was exceeding glad; for he was of a long time desirous to see him, because he had heard concerning him; and he hoped to see some miracle done by him". RSV: "When Herod saw Jesus, he was very glad, for he had long desired to see him, because he had heard about him, and he was hoping to see some sign done by him".

The versions of 1881 and 1901 tend to use the definite article wherever it is used in the Greek, with almost complete disregard of the fact that English usage with respect to articles does not permit blind following of the idiom of another language, be it French or German or Latin or Hebrew or Greek. So they contain such unnecessary changes and such awkward English as: "Is not the life more than the food, and the body than the raiment?" (Matt. 6 : 25). The RSV has: "Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing?"

The versions of 1881 and 1901 eliminated some of the archaisms of the King James Version. Notably, they substituted the personal relative pronoun "who" for the neuter "which" where this refers to persons. Paul is no longer made to say, as in KJ, "I am verily a man which am a Jew" (Acts 22 : 3), but simply, "I am a Jew". In Luke 20 : 20 the description of the spies in KJ, "which should feign themselves just men", became in ASV, "who feigned themselves to be righteous", and now reads in RSV, "who pretended to be sincere".

ASV got rid of the misleading archaisms "let" for "hinder" (Rom. 1 : 13), and "prevented" for "spoke first to" (Matt. 17 : 25); but it kept "provided" where the Greek means "foreseen" (Heb. 11 : 40), because "provide" once meant "foresee" just as "prevent" once meant "precede". It kept "providence" in the sense of "provision" (Acts 24 : 2). It retained the word "suffer" in the sense of "let", "allow", or "permit"; and it kept "communicate" in the sense of "share". The RSV makes the necessary changes with respect to these words.

Among the archaisms of the King James which the ASV retained, but which have been changed in the RSV, are the following:

"Of" becomes "by", when the actor or agent is denoted. Jesus was baptized "by John" rather than "of John", and tempted "by Satan" rather than "of Satan". This change of preposition occurs in many passages.

"Because that" and "for that" become "because" and "for". (Luke 9 : 7; Acts 8 : 11; 2 Cor. 5 : 4; etc.).

"Was yet a coming" and "I go a fishing" lose their "a". "The more part" is "the majority". "Nothing bettered" is "no better". "Compass round" is "surround". "Swellings" means "conceit" in 2 Cor. 12 : 20. The

word "magnify" is kept only in the Magnificat, when it is retained for liturgical reasons.

"Is come" means "has come", and in general "is", "are" and other forms of the verb "be" as auxiliaries for the perfect tense of intransitive verbs of motion, are replaced by the corresponding forms of the verb "have".

Where Paul wrote "would that" the King James Version made him say "would to God"; and in fourteen cases where he wrote "be it not so", the King James Version reads "God forbid". The ASV corrected the former of these expressions, but not the latter; the RSV removes the insertion of the name of God.

At some points the revisers of 1881 and 1901 introduced archaisms which were not in the King James Version. They greatly, and unnecessarily, increased the use of such words as "holden", "aforetime", "sojourn", "must needs", "would fain", and "behooved". They joined the word "haply" to the word "lest" in seventeen cases where the King James did not have it; the Revised Standard Version has eliminated the word "haply" in all cases.

One of the great issues which the present revisers faced was whether or not to retain the second person singular, "thou", with its correlative forms, "thee", "thy", "thine", and the verb endings "-est" and "-edst". After two years of debate and experiment it was decided to abandon these forms and to follow modern usage, except in language addressed to God. The "-eth" and "-th" forms for verb endings in the third person are not used at all. Something is lost, be it granted, by the elimination of the plural nominative "ye"; but this is a loss that has been sustained by the English language.

In general, the Revised Standard Version uses the simpler forms, as "to" for "unto" and "on" for "upon". "Enter into" is "enter". The "so" is omitted from "whosoever", "whatsoever", and the like. "According as" is simply "as". "Insomuch that" is "so that". "They that" and "them that" are "those who". "Exceeding" and "sore" are not used as adverbs. Such phrases as "on this wise" and "set at nought" and such words as "privily", "wherein", "whereby", "thereabout", and "divers" are replaced by modern equivalents.

In the use of "shall" and "will" modern usage is followed. The inverted order of subject and predicate is avoided unless it is necessary to reproduce the meaning and emphasis of the original Greek. In punctuation, and in the use of quotation marks, modern usage prevails.

The printing in italics of English words demanded by the sense but not explicitly represented by a corresponding word in Greek, was a misleading feature of the former versions. How inconsistently it was done will be manifest even to the reader who knows no Greek if he will compare the KJ printing of Matthew 5 : 3-12 and Luke 6 : 20-26 with the ASV printing of the same pages. The RSV omits italics altogether, on the principle that only words necessary to convey the meaning in English are used.

We must speak with caution, for there has been no set purpose to reduce the number of words and no sufficient count has been made. But

a count of the words in a few chapters, chosen from various books, shows that the style of the Revised Standard Version is terse. It probably contains fewer words than the former authorized versions, and certainly fewer than other modern versions such as those of Weymouth, Moffatt, and Goodspeed. Here are the figures:

	KJ	ASV	RSV
Matthew 5 . . .	1081	1056	1002
Mark 1-2 . . .	1654	1618	1534
Luke 8 . . . .	1431	1431	1367
John 4 . . . .	1096	1085	1038
Acts 10 . . . .	1108	1128	1022
Romans 8 . . .	904	898	898
1 Cor. 15 . . .	1165	1169	1151
Ephesians 3 . .	410	418	405
Philippians 1 .	632	653	639
Colossians 2	503	515	502

Yet we have not hesitated to use more words than the older versions, if that was necessary to convey the meaning. An interesting example is 1 Cor. 7 : 19, which starts out with more words in the initial clause, but ends with a total of one less. The verse reads in KJ: "Circumcision is nothing, and uncircumcision is nothing, but the keeping of the commandments of God". This is ambiguous, for "but" may be taken to mean "except". In ASV the wording is unchanged, and the meaning is made to depend upon the punctuation, changing the comma after "nothing" to a semicolon. The RSV reads: "For neither circumcision counts for anything nor uncircumcision, but keeping the commandments of God".

A requirement that has constantly been kept in mind by the present Committee is that the Bible should be translated into language that is euphonious, readable, and suited for use in public and private worship. It must sound well, and be easy to read aloud and in public. The choice of words and ordering of phrases must be such as to avoid harsh collocations of sound, and consonantal juxtapositions over which tongues will trip and lisp—that sentence is an example of what must not be in the English Bible!

Much even of the prose of the King James Bible has the beauty, and something of the rhythm, of poetry. But it is a mistake to assume that all of the Bible is poetry, or that, to be readable and suited for use in public worship, the translation must be rhythmic.

For use in public and private worship, it is not necessary that the language of the English Bible be stiff or strange or antique, or that it convey the impression of a self-conscious effort to be reverent. But it must not be irreverent, and it must not be colloquial or trivial. For use in worship the Bible must be cast, not in what is merely the language of today, but in enduring and simple diction which is worthy to stand in the great tradition of Tyndale and the King James Version.