

## THE NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION: A REVIEW ARTICLE

Peter C. Craigie\*

*The Holy Bible: New International Version.* Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978, xi plus 1635 pages.

Readers of this *Journal* will be familiar already with the *New International Version (NIV)* of the NT, which was published in 1973. The publication of the *NIV OT* in the fall of 1978 brings to completion a major task of translation and scholarship that has been going on for more than a decade. The format and print, already familiar from the earlier publication, are magnificent and are a happy reminder of the art of bookmaking at its best. But it is the substance of this new translation that is under review.

The translators determined to produce a translation in *contemporary* English, but also, as the title indicates, they desired to produce an *international* version of the Bible for the English-speaking world. This is a formidable task, given the diversities of style and idiom in the contemporary uses of English in many different parts of the world. In both these aims the translators have achieved remarkable success. The *NIV* is contemporary, not only in the removal of obvious archaisms ("thee," "thou" and the like) but also in the simplicity and clarity of its prose. It is international in being virtually free from "Americanisms" and "Britishisms," though there is a minor cost to pay for such international character. The cost can be seen in two ways. First, "international English" provides a uniformity of language throughout the entire English OT that cannot accurately reflect the chronological and regional dialects and peculiarities within the Hebrew text itself. (Though, to be fair, I know of no way of resolving such a problem in translation.) Second, the very concept of "international English" inevitably produces a slightly less dynamic and vibrant language than exists, for example, in contemporary American-English or, if you will excuse the prejudice, in contemporary Scottish-English. "International English" is something that everybody understands but nobody speaks. A paraphrase such as the *Living Bible*, which in places is unashamedly American-English (I imply no criticism!), can convey more character and vitality; but conversely a person such as myself (educated in Scotland and now a Canadian citizen) may be either mystified or mortified by such Americanisms. This is precisely the kind of reaction that the *NIV* does *not* elicit; it is truly international English, and I would be as happy in recommending it to American students as I would be in sending a copy to my dyed-in-the-wool Scottish relatives. In my judgment, then, the cost of adopting an international style of English is well worthwhile, and the version is successful in this context.

With respect to distinctiveness and novelty in translation, the *NIV* is appropriately conservative—that is, apart from the process of modernization there is not extensive change simply for the sake of change, which often results in the

\*Peter Craigie is associate professor of religious studies at the University of Calgary in Alberta.

apparent loss of well-loved passages of Scripture. The familiar Psalms (23 and 100, for example) are clearly recognizable and have lost none of the clarity and elegance of earlier translations. Genesis still begins in a familiar fashion: "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." (In view of the numerous footnotes throughout the text I was a little surprised that "In the beginning" received no comment, in contrast to *RSV*, *NEB* and others.) In Isa 7:14 it is still a "virgin" who will be with child (again there is no footnote; *RSV* has "young woman" and inserts "virgin" in the footnote).

For the most part the conservative tendency is admirable, for it means that the reader (brought up, perhaps, on an older version such as the *KJV*) does not lose the sense of continuity and does not feel that this is a *different* Bible. But sometimes the conservative tendency is a little too strong. Thus *yam sūp* (Exod 13:18 and elsewhere) continues to be translated as "Red Sea"; the footnote adds the comment: "That is, Sea of Reeds." In my judgment this is a conservatism peculiar to the English-speaking world (though rooted in the Greek versions), not to the Hebrew text itself or even to the non-English-speaking world (Luther's Bible, for example, had an appropriate rendition of the Hebrew: *Schilfmeer*). Though in some cases *yam sūp* may refer to what is now called the Gulf of Suez (and in other cases clearly does not), it would have been more accurate to have used the words of the footnote ("Sea of Reeds") in the text itself and to have suffered the wrath of the reactionaries who prefer the (Scottish) King James and his men to Moses!

A check on some of the classical *crucis* in the Hebrew text indicates a further dimension of the conservative approach. For the most part the translators appear to have been cautious, following traditional interpretations of problem passages rather than adopting radically new ones. Judges 5, which contains numerous textual problems, has been translated in a fairly conventional fashion; the translation of the crux in v 8 is essentially a modern form of the *KJV* and takes no account of a multitude of alternative renderings. (There is some novelty in v 10 with the appearance of "saddle blankets," though the context makes such a rendition appropriate; I am not convinced by the traditional rendering "white donkeys" in the same verse.) In Ps 2:12 the consonantal text *nšqw-br* continues to be translated "Kiss the Son" which, despite the ancient versions and a plethora of suggested emendations in recent decades, is surely correct. And on a broader scale the translators are free from "pan-Ugaritism," a disease afflicting much of contemporary OT scholarship (particularly with respect to the translation of the Psalms). In view of the limitations on time I have not reviewed the translation of difficulties in detail, but my distinct impression is that the translators have been very cautious and that, while this may occasionally have eliminated a few real advances that are being made with respect to our understanding of the Hebrew text, in the long run the caution is wise.

On grammatical matters the *NIV* is sensitive to Hebrew grammar without being hidebound to any formulaic translation. To take only one example, many former versions have been somewhat insensitive to the use of the participle in both Hebrew and Aramaic to express imminent action or the immediate future ("about to do something"). Usually the *NIV* conveys this sense clearly, e. g.: Gen 20:3, "You are as good as dead . . ."; Gen 6:17, "I am going to bring . . ." In some cases the translation could be more forceful, as for example in the frequent use of such participles in the opening chapters of Deuteronomy. Deut 1:20, where I

would translate "the LORD our God is about to give us," is translated in the *NIV* "the LORD our God is giving us." But as a whole the translators have achieved a remarkable balance between a proper understanding of Hebrew grammar and an equally appropriate translation into English.

Although the *NIV* does not betray any distinctive theological prejudices and peculiarities in its translation, general theological assumptions emerge sometimes in the treatment of passages that may be identified as messianic in the light of the NT. Thus *māšīaḥ* (with or without a pronoun suffix) is "Anointed One" in Dan 9:25, 26 and Ps 2:2; the alternative, without capitalization ("anointed one"), is listed in a footnote. But in Isa 45:1, where precisely the same Hebrew word refers to Cyrus, there is no capitalization. This procedure, I would suggest, reflects theological understanding, not precise translation. In Psalm 2 all terms that are interpreted as messianic ("Anointed One," "King," "Son") are capitalized; but if the Psalm were initially a royal coronation Psalm, then the terms would all have referred initially to the *human* Davidic king. The translation of quotations from this Psalm in the NT might appropriately include capitals, but in my judgment it is misleading with respect to the initial sense of the Psalm to use them in the OT itself. This messianic procedure is not followed consistently, however. Thus "priest" is not capitalized in Ps 110:4: "You are a priest forever. . . ." though in the light of Heb 5:6 the verse is clearly messianic from a NT perspective.

In a difficult book such as Job, any reviewer will inevitably find something to quibble with; in the comments that follow the quibbles may reflect more negatively upon the reviewer than upon the *NIV*. Let us begin with the word *hasšātān* in Job 1:6 ff. *NIV* translates "Satan" and adds in a footnote: "*Satan* means *accuser*." But is the term a proper name? And why is the Hebrew definite article used in the text: "the accuser" (or, as I would prefer, "the adversary")? A case can be made for "Satan" at one or two points in the Hebrew text of the OT (e. g., 1 Chr 21:1, where the word is used without the article), though I have not yet been convinced that a proper name is intended in Job. The quibble at this point is not merely linguistic, for the interpretation one adopts for the whole book of Job is influenced considerably by one's understanding of *hasšātān*. Is this the Satan of the NT, or is this member of the "sons of God" (1:6, *NIV* "angels") a less significant being? I would prefer simply to translate "the adversary," believing it to be more precise and avoiding the retrojection of a later concept of reality into the book of Job; but this is a debate that will continue!

Job 1:21 contains an example of what I believe to be the "rationalizing" of Hebrew poetry. The *NIV* renders: "Naked I came from my mother's womb, and naked I will depart." As is indicated in a footnote, the latter part of the Hebrew line should be translated "and naked I will return there." Why has the clear meaning of the text been relegated to the footnote? I presume it is because the logic does not fit our modern logic—viz., when we die we do not return to our mother's womb. But this is poetry, and poetry reflecting a world view very different from our own. I would prefer to keep the clear meaning of the text.

A final quibble with respect to Job pertains to the beasts of chaps. 40 and 41. The first, in 40:15, has been variously identified: "behemoth" (*KJV*); "hippopotamus" (*Modern Language Bible*); "crocodile" (*NEB*). The *NIV* retains the traditional "behemoth," which (although it is essentially transliteration) has entered the English language through the influence of the *KJV*; in a footnote "hip-

popotamus" or "elephant" are suggested. Admitting the ambiguity, I would have preferred a translators' decision for a real beast here rather than the mysterious and amorphous behemoth; the reading "hippopotamus," for example, brings remarkable vividness and reality to the verses that follow. And then there is "leviathan" (41:1) which, according to the footnote, is "possibly the crocodile"; but in Ps 104:26 the same "leviathan" is frolicking in the sea with the ships! There are no simple solutions to such problems, however, and the difficulty with the Joban beasts is that while they might be real creatures they might equally be "poetic monsters." They may characterize, perhaps, the monsters faced by any translator coming to grips with the precise meaning of the Hebrew text.

The *NIV* renditions of Hebrew poetry are exceptionally well done and constantly portray sensitivity and insight with respect to the nature of the Hebrew. For those who are still bound to the *KJV*, the poetry alone should be sufficient reason to switch to the *NIV*. More than a third of the OT is in poetry, and though the *KJV* achieved poetic language it did not demonstrate the lines, thought units and parallelism of Hebrew poetry clearly in its format. Here the *NIV* excels. In terms of literary excellence in *English* I still consider the *NEB* to be unsurpassed, though that is a subjective assessment. But in my judgment the literary excellence of the *NEB* is sometimes at the expense of the meaning of the Hebrew text, and for that reason my ultimate preference is for the *NIV*—not always so brilliant, but certainly safer.

"Of making many books there is no end" (Eccl 12:12, *NIV*). That is true and a warning to all scholars, but certainly it does not apply to the constant "remaking" of the Book of Books. Reviewers will both praise and criticize, but when all is said and done the OT *NIV* is a magnificent monument to Biblical scholarship. This is scholarship at its best, directed toward a practical end—namely, the clarification of the Biblical text through careful translation for present and future generations of English-speaking peoples. More than one hundred scholars worked on this project; they were aided by typists, editors, typesetters, printers, families and others. Having seen their work, I am convinced that their labor was not in vain. They remain anonymous, but they deserve our heartfelt thanks.

A postscript: While I was waiting for my review copy I happened to be in my local bookstore and could not help hearing a loud Scottish voice giving an advance order for copies of the *NIV*. At the time I thankfully anticipated my free review copy, but when it arrived it was an unbound, prepublication edition. In spite of all the Scottish blood coursing in my veins, I will spend the money to buy a "real *NIV*" as soon as it is released.

But perhaps I should wait until after Christmas, just in case.