The American Translations of the Bible (K. Barker)
A Series on How We Got Our Bible: Part 4

The motivations behind the Revised and New Revised Standard Versions were not so clearly theological as the disputes which moved Wycliffe and Tyndale, though the appearance of the RSV provoked theological debates, charges and counter charges for years.

Between its first publication in 1611 and the American Revolution, the King James Version underwent no fewer than four revisions. For the most part, these revisions corrected printing errors and updated spelling but made few actual changes in the text of the KJV itself. However, by the late eighteenth century, more thorough revisions of the English Bible had begun to appear. John Wesley published a revised KJV New Testament in 1768 which included over 12,000 changes. That same year saw the appearance of a grandiose paraphrase by Edward Harwood, a Presbyterian minister. Noah Webster, of dictionary fame, produced a revision that was released in 1833. In it he changed archaic English spellings to their American form (such as honor instead of honour) and tried to eliminate phrases in the King James which were "offensive to delicacy and even to decency." That same year a Boston Episcopalian minister, named Rodolphus Dickinson, released a revision which carried English Bible translation to new heights, or depths, of ludicrous pomposity. Consider his rendering of Matthew 25:21:

> *His master said to him, Well-done, good and provident servant! you was [sic] faithful in a limited sphere, I will give you a more extensive superintendence; participate in the happiness of your master.*

Perhaps the most curious of these post-KJV translations was the version published by the woman's suffragist Julia E. Smith in 1876. Her translation is important in the history of the English Bible because it shows the consequences of a mechanical approach to translation. Ms. Smith decided that each Hebrew word, every time it appeared, would be translated by the same English word. She treated the Greek the same way. The results were disastrous – though quite educational. Listen to the way Ms. Smith translated Jeremiah 22:23:

> *Thou dwelling in Lebanon, building a nest in the cedars, how being compassionated in pangs coming to thee the pain as of bringing forth.*

Could anyone seriously consider such a translation an improvement over the King James? In any language, most words have more than one meaning. Thus, a single Hebrew word might be translated best by one English word in one place and different English word in another place.

None of these translations ever received widespread public support, but the very fact of their publication shows that English speaking people were beginning to struggle with the language of the KJV.

The Revised Version (RV) and American Standard Version (ASV)

To aid in that struggle both Houses of Convocation of the Church of England adopted a recommendation that a new and official revision be prepared. A committee of from twenty-four to twenty-eight British scholars and churchmen worked for ten years to produce the New Testament and fourteen years to produce the Old Testament. During this period an American committee of thirty scholars was appointed to cooperate in the project. The New Testament of the Revised Version (sometimes called the English Revised Version to distinguish it from the American edition) was published in England in 1881. The Old Testament was published in 1885, the Apocrypha in 1895. Readings which the American committee preferred but which the British committee rejected were printed in the appendix. By agreement, the American committee waited fourteen years before releasing an edition of the revision which moved the American readings from the appendix to the text. In 1901 Thomas Nelson and Sons published the copyrighted Standard American Edition of the Revised Version of the Bible without the Apocrypha. This revision became known as the American Standard Version.

The Revised Version, in both its British and American manifestations, was a disappointment. The revisers had tried to be consistent in the way they translated various Hebrew and Greek words. They were not so stiff and mechanical as Julia Smith, but their renderings were still wooden and difficult to read. They often retained the word order of Greek, even when it produced an unnatural word order in English. Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the noted English Baptist, described the Revised Version as "strong in Greek, weak in English." The American edition enjoyed only slightly better reception than its British forerunner. Neither edition was more than a marginal commercial success.

For all the effort, for all the time, for all the investment, there was still no replacement for the King James.

The Revised Standard Version (RSV)

In 1927 the International Council of Religious Education (ICRE) formed a committee of sixteen (though the number was later reduced to fifteen) biblical scholars – eight with expertise in the Old Testament, eight in the New – to investigate the possibility of yet another revision of the English Bible. This body became known as the American Standard Bible Committee. Luther A. Weigle, dean of Yale Divinity School, was chairman. The secretary to the committee was James Moffatt, professor of church history at Union Theological Seminary. Moffatt was best known for his personal translation of the Bible. His New Testament was published in 1913, the Old in 1924. ICRE secured the copyright to the American Standard Version from Thomas Nelson in 1928.

The revision committee met periodically over the next two years, finally drawing up a three-fold resolution calling for a revision that should:

(a) "embody the best results of modern scholarship as to the meaning of scripture";

(b) be "designed for use in public and private worship"; and

(c) be "in the direction of the simple classic English style of the King James Version."

The economic depression halted the project for six years. The committee did not meet between 1931 and 1937. That year the committee was reorganized with thirty-two members. The International Council of Religious Education also formed an advisory board to review the work. This board consisted of fifty representatives from denominations who participated in ICRE.

The Revised Standard Version New Testament was published in February 11, 1946, the complete Bible on September 30, 1952. Within weeks over a million copies had been sold. For the first time in over three hundred years, a revision of the English Bible gained widespread popular support and showed the potential to replace the King James Version as the Bible of choice for English-speaking Christians.

The Revised Standard Version was the first major Bible translation produced after the convulsive controversy between modernism and more traditional, conservative Christianity. That controversy began in the nineteenth century but did not blossom until the 1920s. On one side were the modernists. They wanted to reconstruct Christianity to accommodate the teachings of modern science, sociology and history. They were critical of Scripture and of the very idea of God's special revelation to man. As a movement, modernism began fading after World War I. However, its influence remains strong today in the form of theological liberalism.

> On the other side were the fundamentalists who were determined to defend the historic Christian faith. The movement rallied Christians from many different denominations around the fundamental doctrines of the virgin birth of Jesus, His deity, His resurrection, His substitutionary atonement, His second coming, and the authority and inspiration of Scripture. The spiritual descendants of the fundamentalists exist today in two broad groups: very conservative Christians who continue to use the term *fundamentalists*, and the more modern evangelicals.
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> Eventually the controversy split several Protestant denominations. The fundamentalists saw that they could not dislodge the modernists. They and their teaching had become firmly entrenched – especially in denominational seminaries. So hundreds of thousands of conservative Christians fled the larger, mainline denominations to form independent churches and evangelical denominations. These "Bible believing" Christians, as they describe themselves, were almost entirely excluded from the RSV process. And the translation reflected their absence.

Evangelical Christians almost universally rejected the Revised Standard Version. Many, especially among lay people, were strongly suspicious of the liberal theology of some of the translators. They wondered if scholars who did not believe in the verbal inspiration and reliability of Scripture could be trusted to handle those Scriptures accurately.

> "Even though in many respects the RSV was carefully done," remarked one evangelical pastor, "the liberal bias did show up rather pronouncedly. Therefore our churches simply could not give it an endorsement."

Typical evangelical Christians, the men and women in the pews, pointed to the RSV's rendering of Isaiah 7:14. The RSV used the word "woman" where the King James Version said a "virgin" would conceive and bear a son. This was all the proof many Bible believing Christians needed. To them it seemed that at the very least the RSV translators had been careless in handling God's word. At the worst, those translators had blatantly disregarded orthodox Christian theology.

Many evangelical scholars joined the people in the pews in objecting to the RSV. They argued that, by and large, the RSV translators held a weak, vague or very general doctrine of the inspiration of Scriptures. This weakness showed up in the translation.

> "We can observe," says Stephen Paine, former President of Houghton College, "that translations generally reflect, in fact, you can almost say they always reflect, to some extent, the mindset and the general philosophical approach of the translators."
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> Some of the criticism of the RSV was unduly harsh and unfair. One preacher burned a copy in his pulpit with a blowtorch, commenting that, like the devil, it was hard to burn. He sent the ashes in a jar to the chairman of the translation committee. Some of the criticism deteriorated into little more than personal slurs against the translators themselves. Several faced charges before Senator Joseph McCarthy's investigative committee. Kyle M. Yates, a Southern Baptist scholar who served on the Old Testament committee, reflected on the verbal abuse. "I didn't realize I was so infamous as I have been since September 30th [1952]."

Clearly, the Revised Standard Version did not meet its objective of becoming the single Bible for all English speaking Christians. More translations were on the horizon.

The New International Version (NIV)

The first of these was the Holy Bible, New International Version. Though the completed NIV was not published until 1978, the first steps in the translation process actually began less than three years after the release of the RSV.

Howard Long died in the summer of 1990. He was a man of many talents. He was an engineer, a pilot, a salesman, a businessman, a college physics instructor and an inventor. But above all, he was a committed Christian who took seriously Christ's commission to share the gospel. But in the summer of 1955, Howard Long was angry.

He had traveled to Portland, Oregon, on business, where he had a dinner appointment with an associate. As was his custom, Howard directed the conversation toward spiritual matters. His associate seemed interested, so Howard invited the man to his hotel room. There, Howard thought, the man could read the gospel for himself – directly from the pages of the Bible.

But that wasn't what happened.

Howard had used the King James Version for years, so to him it was familiar. But not to his friend. Its Elizabethan English seemed peculiar to him.

> "He got red in the face," Howard said. "I didn't know what it meant at first. Then he just exploded with laughter. He sort of fell off his chair. He said, 'That's the funniest thing I've ever listened to in years!'"

Howard had no chance to talk about spiritual things after that. "There was no chance to talk about the way of salvation," Howard recalled. "And I was very upset."

Howard unleashed his frustration on his pastor, the Rev. Peter DeJong of the Seattle Christian Reformed Church. After the Sunday morning worship service, while asking some questions of the pastor in the church yard, the subject came up and Howard expressed the anger that had been building for months.

> "We've translated the Bible into a couple thousand tongues," Howard said to his pastor. "And when we run out of languages to translate into, some day we're going to translate it into English."
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> "I said it in anger," Howard recalled. "I really spilled it on him."

But behind the emotional response, Pastor DeJong recognized the genuine and passionate concern of a sincere Christian.

> "If you feel so strongly about it," DeJong replied, "why don't you do something about it?"

So Howard did.

With the encouragement of his pastor, Howard went to work with consistory, or board, of the Seattle church. Together the men prepared a petition for the other congregations of their denomination, the Christian Reformed Church, or CRC. They presented their request to the Classis Pacific, the regional CRC body at its October 29, 1955, meeting in Vancouver, British Colombia, Canada. The petition proposed:

> "… that the Christian Reformed Church endeavor to join with other conservative churches in sponsoring or facilitating the early production of a faithful translation of the Scriptures in the common language of the American people."

Though it met with a cool reception at first, the petition was eventually presented to the annual Synod, or council, of the entire Christian Reformed Church in June of 1956. Pastor DeJong and other representatives of the Seattle church argued their case on the grounds that:

1. We do not now have such a translation.

    a. Versions presently in use among us (the King James and the American Standard Version) have become antiquated so that they are no longer written in the common language of the people.

    b. The Revised Standard Version, presumably written to fill this need for a modern translation, has failed to win the approval of our Synod and of other conservative Christians.

2. Such a version is needed:

    a. To make our own use of God's Word less difficult and therefore more effective.

    b. To make God's Word easier for our children to understand.

    c. To make the Word more readily understandable to those unfamiliar with it as they are confronted with it in missionary and personal work.

3. Our Reformed Faith which is founded on God's Word demands that we use every available, appropriate means to promote the use and study of that Word.

The Synod accepted the petition and referred it to "the teaching staff of the Old and New Testament departments of [Calvin] Seminary for a thorough consideration…" the committee met regularly for five years, examining the issue from several perspectives. They looked carefully at the major existing translations. They also wrote other churches and denominations asking if they believed a new translation was needed. Many did. But the committee had another reason for contracting other groups. They knew that a major new translation was too large a project to undertake alone. They would need the help of others to do the job correctly. And besides, the original proposal called for a cooperative effort by evangelical Christians, not just for members of the Christian Reformed Church.

Even as the committee from the CRC was at work, other evangelicals were examining alternatives to the RSV. One of those people was Earl Kalland of the Conservative Baptist Theological Seminary in Denver, Colorado.

> "I was a member of the National Association of Evangelicals (NAE), on what was then called the Education Commission," he explains. "Here, there and everywhere persons and groups thought they could do a little better [than the RSV] in translating the Scriptures into current English."

For evangelicals the Bible is the final rule of faith and practice, so it was no wonder that Kalland and others in the NAE were concerned. They were not satisfied with the RSV. But they did not want backlash against the RSV to produce a wave of sub-standard, so-called evangelical, translations. They were afraid that sincere people without enough scholarly expertise might produce new translations that simply were not accurate. So when the NAE met in Buffalo, New York, in April of 1957, the question of a new translation was open for discussion. Through his post on the Education Commission Kalland was instrumental in the appointment of a three man committee to investigate whether the NAE should cooperate with other evangelical groups in sponsoring a new translation. Stephen Paine, then president of Houghton College, was appointed chairman.

It was inevitable that Paine and the members of the NAE committee should eventually cross paths with the committee from the Christian Reformed Church. The two groups began sharing one another's research and reports and decided to meet face to face. Both the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals had scheduled their 1961 annual meetings in Grand Rapids, so the two committees planned a joint meeting.

Ultimately, the two committees merged. They sponsored a conference on Bible translation in Palos Heights, Illinois, August 26 and 27, 1965. Scholars from a number of evangelical denominations attended to hear the reports of nearly ten years of study by the CRC and NAE committees. A committee of fifteen – later designated the Committee on Bible Translation – emerged from this conference. The following year the committee enlisted the sponsorship of New York Bible Society, now International Bible Society, and work on the new translation began.

One man's anger and frustration, coupled with growing evangelical concern over the Revised Standard Version, set in motion events that would lead to a new translation of the Bible in contemporary English. The New International Version New Testament was published in 1973, with the complete Bible appearing in 1978.

Howard Long, however, was not the only person who was looking for an alternative to the language of the King James Version.

The Living Bible (LB)

In 1956, Kenneth Taylor lived with his wife, Margaret, and ten children in the suburbs of Chicago. Each night, when Taylor sat down with his children for family devotions, he found himself doing just what Howard Long had done. After reading a passage he would explain it in simple English the children could understand.

> "The problem was simple," Taylor recalls, "My children simply couldn't understand the greatest book in the world. They found the KJV too difficult to read. They were always bored and lethargic about passages which should have thrilled them."
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> "All too often, I would ask questions to be sure they children understood, and they would shrug their shoulders. They didn't know what the passage was talking about."

One of the Taylor children finally complained, "Well, Daddy, if that's what the verse means, why doesn't it say so?"

Taylor didn't have an answer.

But he was determined to find one. Like Howard Long and the men who worked on the New International Version, Taylor grew from conservative evangelical roots. He was a graduate of Wheaton College and attended Dallas Theological Seminary before earning a Master of Theology degree from Northern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was director of the Moody Literature Mission of Moody Press. He knew and loved the Bible, and he was determined to help his children understand it.

The answer came one hot summer afternoon while Taylor was working in his upstairs study.

> "The thought suddenly occurred to me," he says, "that maybe instead of a word – for – word translation from the original Greek and Hebrew, as most translations have been, it should be a thought – for – thought translation."

Taylor opened his Bible and tried his idea on 2 Timothy 4:2. The King James reads:

> *Preach the Word; be instant in season, out season; reprove, rebuke, exhort with all longsuffering and doctrine.*

But in Taylor's notebook, it quickly became:

> *Preach the Word of God urgently at all times, whenever you get the chance, in season and out, when it is convenient and when it is not. Correct and rebuke your people when they need it, encourage them to do right, and all the time feeding them patiently with God's Word*.

When he had finished a section, he took his handiwork downstairs to try out on the family. After supper, instead of reaching for the familiar Bible, Taylor took out his penciled manuscript and read.

> "They listened all the way through," he recalls. "I could see they weren't bored like they usually were. They actually seemed eager to answer my questions."

Taylor was convinced. He decided to prepare his own version of the New Testament epistles from Romans through Jude. Each day, on the commuter train to and from Chicago, he worked on the project. The first installment, Living Letters, was published in 1962. The Living New Testament was published in 1967, and the Living Bible was released in 1971.

Taylor's theological conservatism shows up in his choice of the American Standard Version as the basic text from which his revision was made. The ASV was known as a very literal translation, and in the thinking of many evangelicals a more literal translation is a more accurate translation. Taylor could have chosen the Revised Standard Version as his basic text. Instead, he chose the last revision before the RSV.

While committees from the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals were still exploring the need for an alternative translation, while Kenneth Taylor was composing his Living Letters on the daily commuter train to Chicago, another conservative translation of the Bible was in the offing.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB)

The Lockman Foundation was founded as a non-profit corporation in La Habra, California, in 1942 to promote Christian education, evangelism and Bible translation. By 1958 the foundation had begun release of portions of its Amplified Bible. However, the principals of the Foundation were convinced that evangelical Christians needed an alternative to the Revised Standard Version. The RSV is not mentioned specifically in the Lockman Foundation's literature. However, like Taylor, the Lockman Foundation reached backward past the RSV to the American Standard Version. The preface of the NASB states that the Lockman Foundation "felt an urgency to update [the ASV] by incorporating recent discoveries of Hebrew and Greek textual resources…" The preface further praises the ASV for its "scholarship and accuracy" and says the New American Standard Bible sought to preserve the "lasting values of the ASV."

The first portion of the NASB, the Gospel of John, was published in 1960. The four Gospels were released in 1962, the New Testament in 1963 and the entire Bible in 1971. The Bible was an immediate success, quickly becoming the largest selling modern language translation of Scriptures. However, the appearance of the Living Bible and New International Version bumped the NASB from its top spot. In recent years sales have flagged badly. The bulk of NASB sales now come from study editions purchased by evangelicals.

Within a decade of the publication of the Revised Standard Version three new translations had appeared from conservative evangelical sources. Two, the Living Bible and the New American Standard Bible, consciously reached back before the RSV for source material. The third, the New International Version, was clearly intended as an evangelical alternative. Yet there remained a late entry in the bidding.

The New King James Version (NKJV)

Sam Moore came to the United States from Lebanon. After college he built a successful Bible sales organization and eventually bought the American interests of Thomas Nelson and Sons. Nelson already had a distinguished history in Bible publication, having published the English Revised Version, the American Standard Version and the Revised Standard Version. Moore became interested in a new translation after reading a book on the Textus Receptus, the Hebrew and Greek text behind the King James. However, when his son Joe asked, "Why can't you make a Bible I can understand?" Moore decided to use the resources of his company to produce another translation.

The year was 1975. The Living Bible and the New American Standard Bible were already commercial successes. The New Testament of the New International Version was also selling well. Like those translations, the new version Moore envisioned would be produced by conservative and evangelical scholars. It would, however, have an important difference. While every major English Bible translation from 1885 to 1975 was based on a critical or eclectic text, only the King James was based on the traditional text. Moore proposed a new revision of the King James based on the same Hebrew and Greek text used by the KJV translators themselves.

In a series of meetings in Chicago, Illinois; Nashville, Tennessee; and London, England, Moore explained his proposal and solicited the support of conservative evangelicals. His idea even won the praise of many fundamentalists who previously had been suspicious of any attempt at revision of the King James.

The New Testament of the New King James Version was published in 1979, and a revised edition with Psalms appeared in 1980. The completed Bible was released in 1982.