

In Discordance with the Scriptures, by Peter J. Thuesen

reviewed by [David Harrington Watt](#) in the [July 4, 2001](#) issue

The versions of the Bible we choose to carry, display and read are good indices of who we are. Peter Thuesen presents a history of the creation of a translation that became a kind of badge for many, the Revised Standard Version. He explores the controversy that attended its publication and the aftermath of that controversy. He analyzes the attempts of the men who produced the RSV to respond to the criticisms it engendered, and the efforts of some conservative Protestants to create an alternative to it--efforts that eventually led to the publication of the New International Version.

In the hands of a mediocre scholar an analysis of these events might have been of merely antiquarian interest. But because Thuesen, a lecturer at Yale Divinity School and one of the editors of *The Works of Jonathan Edwards*, is an unusually creative and intelligent scholar who writes vividly and gracefully, his book will appeal to a wide audience.

The movement to create what eventually became the RSV began in 1930. In 1946, the RSV New Testament appeared, and a translation of the complete biblical text was released in 1952. This release was accompanied by a good deal of fanfare. One ad for the book proclaimed that its appearance was the "Greatest Bible News in 341 Years."

To the chagrin of the men who produced it, the RSV was soon under fierce assault. One Protestant leader said that its publication was the "vilest, boldest, most deliberately devilish attack upon the holy Word of God" in all of Christian history. The U.S. Air Force Reserve published a manual that warned recruits not to use the RSV. State legislators in Michigan denounced it as a threat to national security. And a Baptist minister, Martin Luther Hux, staged a public and highly publicized incineration of one of its pages.

Why the great controversy? As Thuesen points out, it was occasioned, in part, by the links between the RSV and the National Council of Churches, an organization viewed with great suspicion by some conservative Protestants. And some of the men who oversaw the translation were not thought of as being wholeheartedly committed to Americanism. (Indeed one of them, Henry Joel Cadbury, was an admitted pacifist!)

Thuesen does a particularly good job of demonstrating the degree to which the controversy was related to Protestantism's lack of consensus about a fundamental scriptural question: Is the Hebrew Bible a Jewish or a Christian text? The Christians who created the RSV, people like William Albright and Luther Weigle, had begun to drift away from the common Protestant assumption that the Hebrew Bible can be properly understood only if it is read within the context of the truths to be found in the New Testament. They had gone so far as to ask a Jew, Harry Orlinsky, to play a role--carefully delineated and fairly small--in translating the Hebrew Bible.

Those who attacked the RSV, people like Carl McIntire and Gerald Winrod, believed that the Hebrew Bible was intended for the benefit of the Christian church and that anyone who tried to understand the Hebrew Bible outside of the context of the Christian faith was bound to fail. They called Orlinsky a "hostile infidel Jew" and asserted that such a man had no proper role to play in the translation of the Word of God. They were convinced that the Hebrew Bible ought to be translated in a way that made it clear that it was in large part about Jesus Christ.

They were upset by what they saw as the RSV's mistranslation of Isaiah 7:14. Rendering the Hebrew word *almah* as "young woman" was right if your primary concern was doing justice to the meaning of the Hebrew. But if your primary concern was the unity of the Protestant Bible, then you had to ignore the literal meaning of the Hebrew word and opt for "virgin." The New International Version was produced by people who were committed to unity and who emphasized the supposed christological links between the two testaments. Their translation of the Hebrew Bible made it seem natural to read it as an old testament that had been superseded by the new.

Many people regard this insistence on the Christianness of the Hebrew Bible as extremely suspect. But it has played a huge role in determining the way Protestant Christians have read their Bibles. The idea that 39 books of the Bible are not in any straightforward way Christian in outlook or intent is still hard for many of us to accept. Because Thuesen's remarkable book forces us to rethink our habit of reading the Tanakh as though it were Christian, it deserves a careful reading by women and

men who care about the history and present condition of American Protestantism.