

An even better Bible

## **The leaders of the NRSVue project talk about translation, reception, and what Bibles are for.**

Interview by [Annelisa Burns](#) in the [February 2023](#) issue



Joseph Crockett (Photo courtesy of Samuel DeWitt Proctor School of Theology) and John Kutsko (Photo courtesy of Emory School of Theology)

*Last spring, the National Council of Churches commissioned the Society of Biblical Literature to lead a review and update of the New Revised Standard Version translation of the Bible. The new NRSV Updated Edition contains tens of thousands of changes, many of them substantive. The project was led by Joseph Crockett, who has since retired as CEO of the NCC's publishing subsidiary Friendship Press, and John Kutsko, who was executive director of SBL and is now executive director of Atla.*

## **Why update the NRSV now?**

**Joseph Crockett:** As owner and steward of the RSV and NRSV translations, the NCC recognized the need to review and update the NRSV. God deserves the best each generation can render, and the growth of information in the past 30-plus years makes Bible research, interpretation, and understanding an ever-changing enterprise. Philology, text-critical changes, and notes were the three primary areas that we wanted to address—that came out of conversations with SBL.

## **The preface to the NRSVue insists that it is not a new translation; it's a better version of an already good translation. Can you explain that distinction?**

**John Kutsko:** We approached this project as if it were regularly scheduled maintenance in light of new texts and understandings. We believed from the start that its primary value would be in the review itself, regardless of the extent of revisions made to the text. We did not know that we'd have 12,000 substantive changes.

A lot of folks think that the King James Version was a new work, that it was composed from scratch by its translators. In reality the KJV translators intentionally built on previous versions—some scholars say that 80 percent of the KJV reflects earlier versions. Its 1611 preface says, “We never thought from the beginning that we would need to make a new translation nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, but to make a good one better or out of many good ones, one principal one.” That’s the tradition in which we stand.

## **Help us understand the roles of the various organizations involved in the process of creating this updated edition.**

**JC:** Friendship Press was the principal interlocutor for the project. We collaborated with the NCC, SBL, and a host of Bible publishers to carry out the review and update. We met with publishers to see if it was worth it—if there was space in the marketplace, if they had any concerns or fears, or if this would just be something we were doing to satisfy our own interests. Every publisher said yes, they’d been waiting for us to come forth and make this proposal, and they were behind us.

**JK:** SBL’s role was to listen to what the NCC and the publishers wanted. We developed a series of resources, beginning with our goals. We also made three

guides—for Old Testament, Apocrypha, and New Testament—on the textual basis that we would use. We produced training videos on how to edit the documents with appropriate notation and documentation. Then we built a team of seven general editors, three SBL staff, two liaisons to the NCC, and more than 50 book editors, and we produced a timeline of what would happen from 2018 to 2021.

**JC:** A question behind your question, I believe, is why the NCC chose SBL as opposed to hiring out people. The NCC is composed of 37 different communions or denominations, and most of the leaders of those groups have been trained in the tradition of the KJV, RSV, and NRSV. Scholarly integrity is at the top of mind for these leaders. In keeping with the idea that God deserves the best, SBL was the logical organization to partner with for academic integrity.

**JK:** SBL members have always been involved in Bible translations, including the RSV and NRSV, but it was a new step for us to be formally involved in managing, directing, and producing this project. It was a natural undertaking for three reasons. First, SBL has a stake in the integrity of the NRSV. It's been, for decades, the primary translation in English-speaking university classrooms, mainline churches, and theological education. Second, since the NRSV there have been considerable new discoveries, manuscripts, text-critical tools, and philological insights. Third—and this is different from the NCC—is that SBL is agnostic. We're an interfaith, ecumenical, academic organization, not a religious one. And NRSVue is the most ecumenical—and interfaith—translation.

### **What did the middle of the process look like? How were people and organizations communicating with each other?**

**JC:** We prayed a lot!

**JK:** It was intense. Each of the three teams—the Hebrew Bible, Apocrypha, and New Testament teams—met at least monthly for 30 months. Each biblical book was assigned to one or more book editors. Each of our 50-some book editors made their updates in a tracked document with a corresponding log document that contained their rationale. Each submission was then reviewed by a team of editors, with a primary general editor taking the lead to review each submitted book. That editor then annotated the log with a recommendation to either accept, reject, or discuss any change. Then each team met, and if all the team members accepted or rejected the change, that decision stood; and if any member asked to discuss a change, then

we had the discussion.

I can't understate how important it was to develop a team that felt committed to each other and to the project. Differences of opinion were inevitable. My goal in directing it was to try to get folks to reach a consensus, knowing that we could also use notes for alternative readings. It became a pretty amiable process in the end.

SBL submitted our recommendations, and then it went to a process that the NCC oversaw.

**JC:** Friendship Press's Bible translation and utilization committee sent the text out for review by 45 people, including pastors, professors, laypeople, reviewers, and educators. Along with gathering their feedback we asked *how* they read it, whether in the pew or for their professional work. We went through every item that they raised.

Then we went back to the SBL with our preferred revisions, recommended reconsiderations, and general concerns. Not all of our preferred revisions were accepted, and it was important to us that we defer to SBL as the final judge. But we thought it was important for them to hear how other people in the translation process—the target audience—were receiving the revisions and updates that they'd made. I don't know of any other translation in modern history that has made audience consideration such an important feature of the process.

We also had focus groups, such as the African American community. Meanwhile, the SBL had people from the Jewish tradition reading the texts. We changed the ordering of the deuterocanonical books—many of which are part of the canon, not apocryphal, for the Orthodox and Catholic communities—to be more in keeping with the Greek Orthodox tradition.

### **Can you speak to the difficulty of bridging the historical gap between the biblical world and the 21st century?**

**JK:** To me, two key words that characterize the NRSV are *integrity* and *trustworthy*. It was paramount to produce a translation, as best as we could, that did not have a social, political, or theological agenda. Any agenda would undermine the brand.

We didn't try to liberalize the Bible. An interviewer recently cited to me the project's goal of producing a text that is as free as possible from the gender bias in the

English language and asked if I was concerned that this might raise charges that the NRSVue is a “woke revision.” I responded that “woke” is a mischaracterization of what we do. While all scholarship, including translation, is socially located and can’t be completely objective, our book editors and the general editors were both diverse and specialized. They strove for the ideal of representing the sources and the meaning of the ancient texts.

There were a number of terms that were philologically inaccurate or culturally insensitive. For example, the word *adelphoi* is often translated “brothers,” but it also can mean “brothers and sisters.” It’s often, in patriarchal contexts, assumed that we’re going to use “brothers,” but there are a number of places in the New Testament where *adelphoi* means “brothers and sisters.” In those cases, based upon philology and our understanding of the context, we changed the translation to “brothers and sisters.” It wasn’t an attempt to be woke; it was an attempt to be scholarly.

**JC:** If we were attempting to be woke, we probably would not have used “brothers and sisters.” We would have used a word that is more inclusive, one that the LGBTQ community would have preferred—and they let us know that we were not woke from their vantage point!

John informed me that the language around illness and disease is so dynamic that there’s not a center or a consensus. How we navigated that, in terms of trying to be both inclusive and faithful to the original text, was by allowing the text to stand for itself. Mark 1:40 is one example. In the NRSV, Jesus cleanses “a leper.” The NRSVue changes it to “a man with a skin disease.” We did not try to go ahead of the research by suggesting a new term; we simply used today’s vocabulary to give another view into the ancient world.

### **Were there changes that made you worry about backlash?**

**Crockett:** Every change!

**Kutsko:** The book *The Murderous History of Bible Translations* by Harry Freedman chronicles the long history of burning translators at the stake or beheading them. None of us working on the NRSVue wanted to be burned at the stake or beheaded—or, frankly, spoken ill of! But Freedman says something really important in his book: living in a more tolerant world doesn’t lessen the emotional attachment that people have to a particular translation. For many people, the words of the Bible

that they've grown up with are comforting, and changing them can be unsettling. Freedman says that there's really nothing uncontroversial about any change, simply because it's the Bible.

When the NRSV came out, people thought it had the taint of human hands because of its attempt to render gender based upon the context. When the RSV came out, one big change was to translate *almah* in Isaiah 7:14 as "young woman" instead of "virgin." A pastor named Luther Hux delivered a long sermon and then led everyone outside, gave each person an American flag, held up a copy of the RSV, ripped out the page that contained Isaiah 7, and burned it. The story is that the RSV committee received a box of ashes. So everything feels really fraught when you're translating the Bible.

One recent interviewer saw that the NRSVue changed the translation of the Hebrew word *hataat* from "sin offering" to "purification offering" and asked me what I would say if someone asserted that changing that word meant we were taking sin out of the Bible. First, I can assure your readers that there is still a lot of sin in the Bible.

**JC:** And it doesn't stop with the Bible!

**JK:** The translation "sin offering" for this Hebrew word *hataat* has a long history, but biblical scholars now agree that "purification offering" is more accurate. That change wasn't driven by an agenda; it was done on philological grounds.

**This update comes 30 years after the NRSV. Where do you see the NRSVue in another 30 years?**

**JK:** Some of our processes had us thinking about the future. One was that we turned over to the NCC not only our suggested changes but also a boatload of other materials. Our whole archive, including all of the discussions among the editorial team, are in a permanent record.

Another thing is that, in the future, Bible translations are going to have to reckon with the fact that text criticism is changing. While what we need now is to read one text together, text critics and churches in the future may want more diversity and less of the same text.

**JC:** Given the diversity across the globe and within communities, some groups may want to produce Bible texts specific to their community, which would be more

limited in scope. Such a text would not propose to be the Bible for everyone, but our Bible for our community and our beliefs.

**JK:** I worry about the future's ability to support scholars with sufficient language facility. We found it pretty difficult to find a team of people who had mastered Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and so on. Most Protestant denominations don't require Greek or Hebrew for ordination, so faculty are teaching these languages less. I'm not optimistic that a review begun in 2050 will find the necessary scholars to do what we did in this updated edition.

We have already begun conversations about having regularly scheduled review panels to reevaluate some of the difficult elements or incorporate new understandings. That won't mean that in five years there's another updated edition, but there will be some tweaks or at least reconsiderations every five or so years.

**How do you expect the NRSVue to relate to older editions? Can you market a new edition without undermining the old ones?**

**JC:** The RSV will remain in print, but the NRSV will go out of print. Based upon the particular product line—be it a commentary or a pew Bible or something else—there is a timeline for when its NRSV edition will go out of print. Commentaries take the most investment and the longest development time, and then there are other products that have the capacity to turn over quicker. We're attentive to the investments publishers have made in the NRSV, and we want to provide them enough lead time to change.

In the publishing world, if a book doesn't get a certain amount of traction within six months, it is typically put on a backlist or killed in terms of marketing investment and promotion. But most books are developed over two or three or maybe five years, while a Bible is a decades-long investment. It's a long-term investment for long-term value.

**How do you hope people are using or reading the NRSVue?**

**JK:** The Bible can't be read alone. I was raised Catholic, so the idea of *sola scriptura* is really foreign for me, and it became even more foreign through my scholarship. We want people to use tools to understand the Bible. We want people to use commentaries, study Bibles, histories, and introductions.

One of the important features of this translation, one that goes back to the KJV, is that it has notes at the bottom of the page—critical notes that say “alternative reading” or “might mean this” or “is uncertain.” When the KJV came out in 1611, those notes were required to be printed, and the NCC still requires those notes to be printed. Those notes tell you a lot. They tell you that it’s not clear what is said, that you need other things to help you understand what the Bible says.

**JC:** It’s impossible—well it’s not impossible, people do it—but it’s implausible from a scientific perspective to read the Bible and to think that you’re hearing directly from God, without all of the other filters that are predetermined by your time and place of birth, the community you were born into.