

The New King James Version: In the Great Tradition

by Arthur Farstad

(Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1989), 171pp., paperback.

The author initially served as the New Testament Editor and later, as Executive Editor for the New King James translation project. Thus, he is intimately familiar with this particular modern translation and the principles behind its development. It also makes his treatment of the subject somewhat less objective at times.

The book is intended to address questions on a popular, rather than technical level. In his forward, R. K. Harrison identifies some of the popular questions:

What changes were made and why? Who was involved with the project? Did they believe in the inspiration, inerrancy, and infallibility of the Scriptures? Were the original languages considered? How long did it take to do all this? Who paid for it? Why a New King James? Why not a completely new translation?

The style of the book makes it both easy to read and interesting. Those looking for technical detail concerning translation theory or the treatment of problem passages by the NKJV translators will not find such issues dealt with here.

The author evaluates the NKJV translation according to three primary criteria: *accuracy* (chapters 1 through 4), *beauty* (chapters 5 through 8); and *completeness* (chapters 9 through 12).

Concerning *accuracy*, the author surveys the various English translations leading up to the venerable King James version and explains their contribution to the traditional text which also underwrites the New King James Version. Having explained the desire of the NKJV translation committee to update the excellent KJV translation, Farstad lists the various guidelines which were established by the translators to guide their work of updating the KJV text while preserving much of its heritage. Numerous examples are given of passages where KJV terminology was rendered differently by the NKJV and explaining the reasons why—usually due to changes in language with time or a better grasp of the underlying Hebrew or Greek terms since the time of the KJV translation.

Concerning *beauty*, the author explains the desire of the NKJV translators to preserve the majesty and literary qualities for which the KJV is rightfully known. Presentation improvements in the area of phrasing (poetry) and fulfillment (quotation of the OT in the NT) are explained. The final chapter in this section is perhaps the weakest—describing the desire of the NKJV translation to render Hebrew idioms in a manner more acceptable to polite company:

The contemporary mass media often revel in vulgar language. But is it right for Christian children to find in their Bibles what they are taught are “no-no” words elsewhere? We think not.

But is this the correct question to be asking? The question should not be “can children read the Bible without encountering harsh realities—including language that may *seem vulgar* in places,” but “what is the most *accurate rendering* of the underlying Hebrew or Greek text, *period*. The unfortunate result of the tendency of the translators to apply perfume to some of the more vivid word-pictures, especially in the OT, is that the intended “punch” of what God had specifically intended to describe can be watered down and lose its original impact on the modern reader. After (rightly) arguing for the primacy of verbal inspiration, it is disappointing to see how casually words in the original text are laundered for a “polite” Bible-reading audience. We would prefer to do away with such laundering and allow readers to be shocked by the rawness of God's communication in those areas.

Concerning *completeness*, the author discusses the various text behind both the Old Testament and New Testament. The treatment concerning the New Testament text is of more interest since this is where the NKJV translators chose to part ways from the majority of modern English translations which have favored the critical, rather than traditional text.

Actually, the NKJV textual policy in the New Testament is more objective than that in any modern version of which we are aware. Translators of most contemporary versions assume that the currently popular view is correct and they often label those readings supporting their theory as “the best manuscripts.” Also, manuscripts supporting the KJV-type reading are largely ignored. Since these latter readings almost always reflect the readings of eighty percent of the extant manuscripts, and very frequently close to ninety-five percent of the manuscripts, this labeling policy seems a bit unbalanced.

The approach taken by the NKJV translation results in what to this reviewer is one of its greatest strengths—a text which favors the Byzantine textual family, but which carefully footnotes variations between three main textual streams: the critical text (designated as “NU” for Nestle-Aland/United Bible Societies text), the majority text (designated MT) and the received text (or *textus receptus*, TR). The NKJV committee reasoned that the larger number of manuscripts containing traditional renderings might well indicate a superior textual line with wider circulation. Hence, the NKJV differs from most modern translations in denying priority to the relatively few (and fragmentary) Alexandrian texts and favoring the received or majority texts.

The book closes with a brief treatment of three translation methods: (1) literal translation; (2) dynamic equivalence translation; and (3) complete equivalence translation, which is defined as “basically *the literal method* updated to include scientific insights from *linguistic analysis*.” Here, the author argues that the NASB translation is perhaps overly literal in its rendering of connectives, but recognizes that the NKJV and NASB stand in the same camp (essentially literal) when compared to many other popular translations which favor dynamic equivalence translation (extreme forms of which are paraphrases).

The book includes several appendices listing the translation, editorial, and review committee members who contributed to the NKJV translation.

This book is recommended as an introductory popular-level treatment of the NKJV translation which includes a brief treatment of some of the issues which any translation must deal with in rendering the Word of God in English.

Review by [Tony Garland](#) of www.SpiritAndTruth.org.