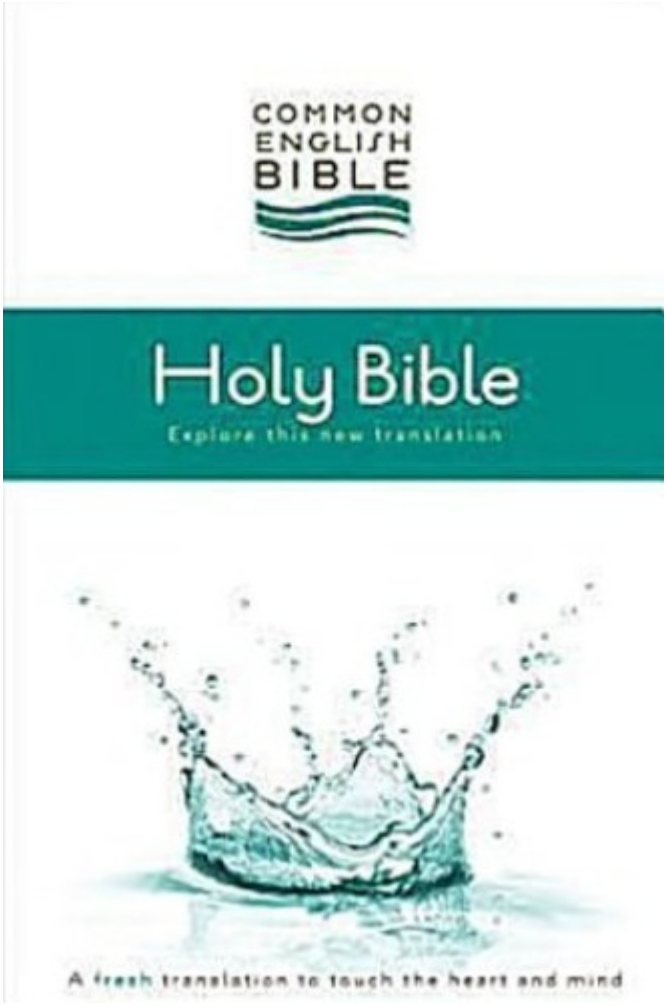
New testaments

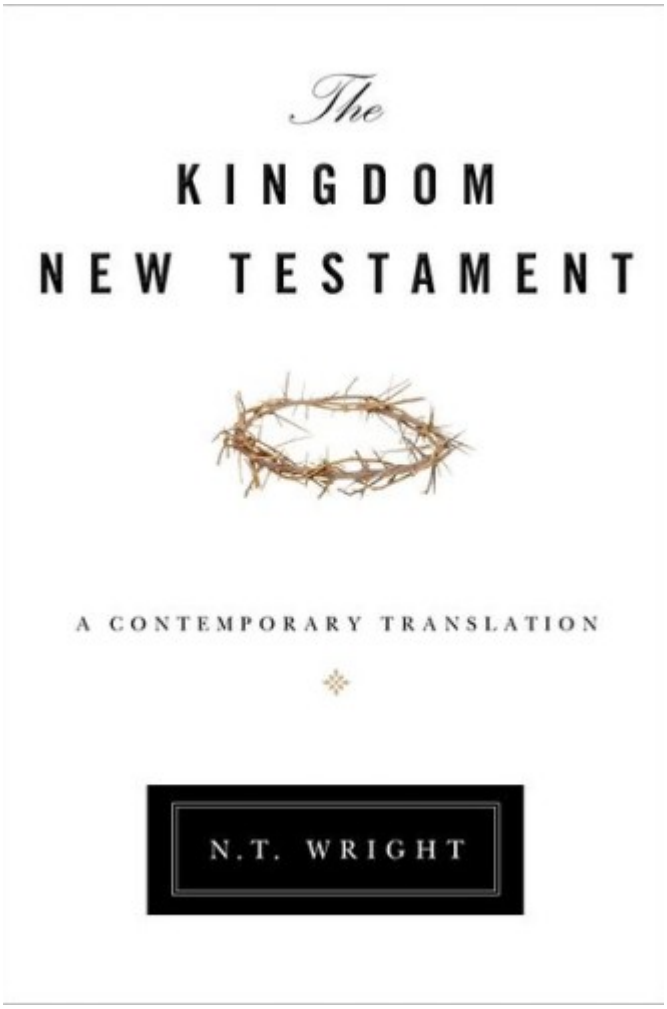
by James C. Howell in the April 4, 2012 issue

In Review



Common English Bible

Church Resources Development Corporation



The Kingdom New Testament

By N. T. Wright
HarperOne

A friend stuck his head in my office and asked what I was doing. "Writing a book review." "What's the book?" he inquired.

"The Bible."

"Are you giving it a thumbs up or thumbs down?"

My subject was really two new translations of the Bible. One, the Common English Bible, reveals by its very name that it hopes to become a semiofficial text, read not just by most individuals but read aloud in most churches.

N. T. Wright's *The Kingdom New Testament* is something entirely different. We'll never dub it (outside this review) the KNT (or the NTWV!), and it won't appear in bound leather on lecterns or in hymnal racks.

While the CEB boasts that 120 scholars worked on the translation, the KNT was written by just one guy, albeit a brilliant one. The blurb calls him "the J. K. Rowling of Christian publishing." That's a bit over the top, but Wright has the stature to command a reading. He's too good at Greek to offer any wooden, literal renderings, and while striving for readability and a colloquial feel, using plenty of contractions and earthy language, he offers a translation, not a paraphrase like Eugene Peterson's *The Message*.

Wright acknowledges that he does a good bit of "experimenting"—for instance, trying not just *messiah* but *king* for *christos*. Reading Wright's volume feels like sitting in on a Greek Bible class with a great teacher.

That's a gift, but it also poses quite a few problems. In Wright's version, the one who tests Jesus in the wilderness is dubbed "the satan." I understand what Wright is after, but I suspect the average reader will stop short and wonder if it's a typo.

Both the CEB and the KNT are well marketed. The CEB boasts a $3.5 million advertising budget and is disseminated via the Web, Twitter, 20 digital platforms and multiple print editions. The CEB's cover spin, "A fresh translation to touch the heart and mind," might be a little out of sync with what might really happen if one attends to the prophets, Jesus or Paul, and the brag on the back cover ("The best translation of the Bible is the one you will read") seems more Madison Avenue than Via Dolorosa. At 1,200 pages, the CEB is difficult to manage physically: the paper is so thin that it is nearly impossible to flip two or three chapters ahead or back.

The language of both versions is crisp and fresh. Most happily, they sent me scrambling to *Biblia Hebraica* and the Nestle-Aland edition of the New Testament to inquire once again, "What do these texts actually say?"

I smiled when I read Matthew 2 in the KNT: the magi "set off. There was the star, the one they had seen rising in the east, going ahead of them! . . . They were beside themselves with joy and excitement." And Herod? "He flew into a towering rage."

The CEB's consistent use of *messenger* in place of *angel* is wonderfully helpful. I was almost giddy that both CEB and KNT recognize what New Testament scholar Richard

Bauckham taught me: Paul's colleague in Romans 16:7 is Junia (a woman), not Junias (a man, as in the RSV). I really dislike the KNT's Matthew 5:21: "You heard that it was said to the ancient people . . ." What ancient people? Pericles? Achilles? Mark 1:40 in the KNT speaks of a man "with a virulent skin disease" instead of a leper, which loses the sense of status (or lack thereof), the searing label that wasn't so much a diagnosis as a form of vicious ostracism.

Wright also ruins (for me) Jesus' interaction with the rich young man in Matthew 19. After running through a few commandments, he claims, "I've kept the lot; what am I still short of?" Jesus replies: "If you want to complete the set, go and sell . . ." The perfection Jesus offers does not seem a matter of adding one more thing to a list. But who am I to question one of the greatest New Testament scholars of our time?

I simultaneously liked and disliked what Wright does with the Beatitudes: "Blessings on the mourners! You're going to be comforted." In modern America, *blessings* can attract crass materialistic notions. But the shift to the second person, clearly not in the Greek, appeals to me for some reason.

It's easy to quibble over details, as I'm sure the committee of 120 did, and as I'm sure Wright did in his own head. The magi claim they have come to "honor" Jesus; they do honor him, but *proskuneo* implies worship, a physical humbling, done in awe. The CEB's Matthew 25 tries *valuable coins* for the nettlesome *talents*. Yes, *talanta* aren't little abilities we use for God. But they aren't a numismatist's craving; they are a staggering sum, these *talanta,* far more valuable than even the best pocket change. And I sighed a bit when I read Matthew 27:46 in the CEB: breathing his last, Jesus prays, "Why have you left me?" (quoting Psalm 22, where oddly the CEB adds "left me all alone"); being left implies mere distance, whereas *forsaken* is more visceral, emotional, harrowing.

Both the CEB and the KNT strive for accuracy and clarity; but they also make the case in prologue and in practice for achieving a colloquial feel. This is obviously more problematic for the CEB than for Wright, as a chatty flavor seems inappropriate for public, liturgical readings. But maybe not. If a Bronze Age storyteller employed common language when passing along the tale of Jacob sleeping on a stone, or if Paul dashed off a letter in frustration and the tone is earthy by the standards of that day, should we seek an equivalent for our day? Or once those words become scripture, should translators pitch their renderings of the acts and words of God a bit higher? If accessibility was Mark's or Jonah's purpose (and we

cannot know if it was), where along the spectrum of reading levels in the public today would we peg a translation? My grandparents, whose education halted at grade ten or so, had a profound understanding of the King James Version, but I know a Harvard-trained lawyer in my town who claims he just can't understand the wording of scripture—and he has a Good News Bible somebody gave him.

How colloquial were the originals anyhow? Robert Alter argues that the Hebrew deployed in Genesis was "stylized, decorous, dignified, readily identified by its audiences as a language of literature, distinct from the language of quotidian reality." Alter therefore thinks that the KJV provides the best approximation of the formal, archaizing style of the original.

Besides this, what do we do about traditional hearings of scripture, those that bear resonance and meaning because of repetition over a lifetime? At funerals we say aloud and in unison the 23rd Psalm, and of course the words of the King James Version are what rises up out of the deep register of memory and emotion.

Again, these questions pertain to the CEB more than the KNT, which like Wright's bestselling *For Everyone* series of commentaries is meant to be light and provisional. But even if colloquial phrasing is a worthy goal, can we go too far? Wright's rendering of the scene of Jesus' baptism has John the Baptist saying, "Someone a lot stronger than me is coming." While many would claim that nitpicking about proper grammar is tomfoolery in these text-and-Twitter times, I'll never believe that the best way to honor God in rendering God's Word is to use bad grammar (it's defensible only if Mark had done the same). Who can't understand "Someone a lot stronger than I is coming"?

John continues: "I've plunged you in water; he's going to plunge you in the holy spirit." Is Wright proposing that John, modern Baptist-style, actually dunked people in the river?

Sometimes modern lingo doesn't nestle up comfortably to the biblical mentality. In Psalm 1, the CEB offers "the truly happy person" in place of the traditional "blessed." But the word *happy* (even with the assertion *truly*) connotes something in our culture very different from what the Psalmist suggests in the balance of the Psalm. When Mary responds to Gabriel at the Annunciation, Wright has her exclaim, "I'm still a virgin!" (Luke 1:34). The CEB is more explicit: "I haven't had sexual relations with a man." While these efforts are not inaccurate, isn't some restraint of

expression in order, since the originals are themselves restrained?

The familiar euphemism of "knowing" for sexual relations, a less graphic way of speaking (and perhaps one that expresses a depth of emotion beyond mere carnal activity), seems like one we would want to retain in scripture; the Greek plainly says Mary had not known a man. In the CEB 1 Kings 1:4 reads "have sex," but in Genesis 4:1 and even 19:5, referring to homosexuality, it sticks with *know*, yet adds *intimately*, an adverb that again explains too much.

All modern translations wrestle with issues of gender, and if those are resolved to suit modern sensitivities, new issues are introduced, including the fact that an inclusive translation simply is no longer a literal rendering. I am never sure if I want to rely on the Bible as read aloud (or silently) to be the arbiter of inclusiveness. Do we let the words be what they were once upon a time and then offer a theological rationale for why nowadays we think more broadly, or do we actually change the wording (and thus not require the explanation)?

My uneasiness with modern gendered translations is the loss of the pointed nature of singular pronouns. Fiddling with Psalm 1, the CEB, trying to avoid "He is like a tree," lunges for "They are like a tree." They plural are like a singular tree? As in branches and leaves and roots and bark individually? Should it have been "They are like trees"?

Similarly, the CEB tries this for Psalm 8:3: "When I look up at your skies . . . what are human beings that you think about them?" The problem here is that the mood of the Psalm is the small, solitary individual out in the dark. I'm someone who thinks about historic christological readings, and the "man" crowned with glory spoken of in the Psalm was thought to refer to Jesus—a lovely if curious notion not even possible if we render it *human beings*.

In the beginning the CEB seems bedeviled by the use of *human*. The first human being, Adam, loses not merely his gender but also his very name: "The Lord God formed the human." But doesn't Adam, which does mean man/human, function as name? The results are inconsistent, as Eve is woman but Adam is human. Genesis 2:22 then verges on implying that Eve is of some other species: "The Lord God fashioned a woman and brought her to the human being."

The CEB resorts to *human* once more in tackling the rich but mystifying apocalyptic term *Son of Man*: "The Human One must suffer" (Mark 8:31). The rendering human

isn't wrong, but the startling nuance of *Son of Man/Human One* in Daniel and then the Gospels is explosively larger than anything human. This expected One is "human" plus so very much more: the eternal judge, originating from heaven, descending mightily to usher in the apocalyptic era. The KNT sticks with *son of man* (but not capitalized).

A bigger problem in Mark 8 is the avoidance of the masculine gender by turning singular into plural: "All who want to come after me must say no to themselves, take up their cross" (CEB). Should "they" take up "crosses"? Does the pressing invitation feel less personal in the plural?

Wright quite cleverly gets around this problem: "If any of you want to come the way I'm going, you must . . ." (Mark 8:34). This is promising; but when dealing with the same phrasing in Matthew 16, Wright regresses considerably, jumbling singular and plural: "If anyone wants to come after me, they must give themselves up."

All these efforts begin to feel tentative and not very authoritative. While straining for inclusivity much of the time, flawed oversight or a botched consistency leaves the CEB with utterly uninclusive renderings. Most readers thumbing through the CEB for a sample would probably check John 3:16, which reads "For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son." Certainly other locutions would be awkward, but why strain for alternative gender readings in Mark 8 but not in John 3?

Wright also falters on this front. One of his experiments is to use *king* as a substitute rendering for *messiah*. *Kingdom* (which appears in the title) is a term that has created discomfort among those who care about gendered images. We may sympathize; who among us could do better? Does the thicket of difficulties call into question the entire enterprise of trying for an inclusive translation (as opposed to interpretation)? Or will we over time perfect our techniques and settle on new conventions?

All translation is interpretation, of course, and the question is: how much weight should an exegetical slant be given? Wright is entirely aware of the issues lurking beneath the choice of English words to stand in for weighty theological concepts, especially *dikaiosyne*. He is right in arguing that there simply is no single English word that will capture the complex nuances of *dikaiosyne*, so he does his "best to bring out the different flavor which *dikaiosyne* seems to carry in this or that passage." The prickly issue is that we have an ongoing ruckus over precisely what

Paul intended in various deployments of this word, and Wright himself has contributed plenty to the debate.

What is lost is evident in his work on Romans 3: in verse 21, *dikaiosyne* is "covenant justice," but in verse 24 it is "declared to be in the right." Wright may be right as an exegete, but isn't he interpreting more than he is translating? The CEB strives to retain the root (leaving it to the interpreters to interpret), using *righteous* or *righteousness*.

As a reader and interpreter, I find myself quibbling with translations that imply a particular interpretation that I may or may not be fond of. In Romans 10:4, Wright offers "The Messiah is the goal of the law," picking just one of the two or more possible connotations of *telos* (end). The CEB pictures God the creator deliberating, "Let us make humanity in our image to resemble us so that they may take charge of the fish" (Gen. 1:26). I am not sure "take charge" is what God wanted them to do, for taking charge was what got them into a mess with the God who I believe wanted a humbler kind of dominion that is more caretaking than dominating. And *humanity*, to me, connotes not merely a huge batch of human beings collectively, but also something of their spirit, their culture, as in "the humanities."

In the end, since we still give the Bible the thumbs up, perhaps our prayer for this pair of Bibles might be taken from the CEB's rendering of Genesis 50:20: "God produced something good from it." If a new translation gets somebody reading the Bible again, the quality of the work may not matter nearly as much as the faithful act of reading.