

Irish Biblical Association

This submission from the Executive Committee of the Irish Biblical Association answers the call for responses made by the Irish Catholic Bishops' Conference, which is considering using the Revised New Jerusalem Bible as the basis for a new edition of the Lectionary for Mass. The call for responses notes that Bishops' Conference of England & Wales, along with that of Scotland, have opted to use the English Standard Version Catholic edition, whereas some other countries are seeking to use the 2019 edition of the Revised New Jerusalem Bible. Accordingly, this submission will compare the RNJB and ESV for selected passages, providing comments on our view of biblical accuracy and liturgical suitability for Irish parishioners today.

The membership of the IBA consists of professional biblical scholars and those who support scholarly research. While our Association is non-denominational, we are committed to supporting the Churches in their biblical ministries. As biblical scholars, we strongly recommend the Revised New Jerusalem Bible: (i) for the sake of accuracy, both linguistic and theological; (ii) from our knowledge of contemporary English and (iii) out of pastoral concern for the proclamation of the Word in parishes.

1. Unfortunate translations (sometimes with amusing results)

ESV	RNJB	Comments
Ps 147:10 His delight is not in the strength of the horse, nor his pleasure in the legs of a man.	Ps 147:10 His delight is not in horses, not his pleasure in the speed of a runner.	The RNJB clearly expresses the sense, but the crass literalism of the ESV fails signally at this point.
Rom 14:22 The faith that you have, keep between yourself and God.	Rom 14:22 The faith that you hold, you should hold in your own way in the sight of God.	RNJB is lucid, but ESV is misleading and completely misses the point: the issue here is not "faith" but optional convictions about food and drink.
Acts 1:26 And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias , and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.	Acts 1:26 They then drew lots for them, and as the lot fell to Matthias , he was listed as one of the twelve apostles.	"Lots" is already unfamiliar in current English, so when the lot fell <i>on</i> Matthias (ESV), we may hope he was not hurt too badly! The RNJB simply clarifies by saying: the lot fell <i>to</i> Matthias.

2. Idioms translated literally, leading to redundancy and unclarity

ESV	RNJB	Comments
Matt 2:25 but knew her not until she had given birth to a son. And he called his name Jesus.	Matt 2:25 he had not had intercourse with her when she gave birth to a son; and he named him Jesus.	The RNJB uses current English usage, but the ESV manages to be both quaint and cumbersome.

<p>Luke 22:3 Then Satan entered into Judas called Iscariot, who was of the number of the twelve.</p>	<p>Luke 22:3 Then Satan entered into Judas, surnamed Iscariot, who was one of the Twelve.</p>	<p>Whereas the RNJB conveys the sense, the literalistic ESV rendering is hardly current English.</p>
<p>Phil 4:12 I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need.</p>	<p>Phil 4:12 I know how to live modestly, and I know how to have plenty: I have been initiated into every condition and all conditions, both being full-fed and hungry, both in plenty and in poverty.</p>	<p>The RNJB is much clearer and more accurate, but the ESV opening sentence makes less sense. What does it mean to “know how to be brought low”?</p>

3. The trap of translating a word by the same word throughout

ESV	RNJB	Comments
<p>Gen 2:4 These are the generations of the heavens and the earth when they were created.</p>	<p>Gen 2:4 Such was the origin of heaven and earth when they were created.</p>	<p>Whereas RNJB has admirable clarity (“origin”), the excess literalism of the ESV (“generations”) is confusing in this context.</p>
<p>Matt 22:36 “Teacher, which is the great commandment in the Law?”</p>	<p>Matt 22:36 ‘Master, which is the greatest commandment of the Law?’</p>	<p>Here the Greek adjective <i>megalē</i> is a Semitic idiom for the superlative. “Greatest” (RNJB) is accurate here, while “great” (ESV) is an error in this context.</p>
<p>Acts 14:15 “Men, why are you doing these things? We also are men, of like nature with you, and we bring you good news, that you should turn from these vain things to a living God, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and all that is in them.</p>	<p>Acts 14:15 ‘Friends, what do you think you are doing? We are human beings, vulnerable like yourselves, proclaiming good news that you should turn from these vain things to the living God who made heaven and earth and the sea and all that is in them.</p>	<p>The RNJB’s discreet use of inclusive language is successful in the context. The contrast is not between men and women but between creatures and the creator, so human beings is a much better translation of <i>anthrōpoi</i>.</p>

Rom 11:25 Lest you be wise in your own sight, I do not want you to be unaware of this mystery, brothers : a partial hardening has come upon Israel, until the fullness of the Gentiles has come in.	Rom 11:25 I do not wish you brothers and sisters , to be ignorant of this mystery and so seem wise to yourselves: a hardening has come upon a part of Israel until the full number of the Gentiles has come in.	RNJB achieves clarity by using current English. "Brothers and sisters" is the accurate translation of <i>adelphoi</i> . Beginning a sentence with "lest" (ESV) is archaic, while the "fullness of the Gentiles" is unnecessarily obscure.
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4. Errors of Exegesis

ESV	RNJB	Comments
Gen 3:5 For God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God, knowing good and evil.	Gen 3:5 God knows that the day you eat it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like gods, knowing good from evil.	RNJB accurately captures the deceptive promise of being "like gods" (LXX <i>theoï</i> ; Vulgate <i>dii</i>), indicated by the Hebrew plural participle "knowing."
Gen 3:16 To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband , but he shall rule over you."	Gen 3:16 To the woman he said: 'I shall give you intense pain in childbearing, in pain you shall give birth to children. Your yearning shall be for your husband , and he shall rule over you.'	RNJB directly reports the woman's punishment, but ESV adopts a strange interpretation: "Your desire shall be <u>contrary to</u> your husband." This is an unusual interpretation of the Hebrew preposition `el (and the LXX preposition <i>pros</i>) which normally means "towards."
Rom 11:6 But if it is by grace, it is no longer (ouketi) on the basis of works ; otherwise grace would no longer be grace.	Rom 11:6 And since it is by grace, it is not by works , or grace would no longer be grace!	RNJB clearly expresses the sense. The ESV misunderstands <i>ouketi</i> to give the impression that salvation once came through works.
1 Cor 15:58 Therefore, my beloved brothers , be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord , knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain.	1 Cor 15:58 So, my dear brothers and sisters , stay firm and immovable, always abounding in energy for the Lord's work , knowing that in the Lord none of your labours is in vain.	RNJB achieves clarity by using inclusive language. "Abounding in the work of the Lord" (ESV) makes little sense without the addition of "in energy" (RNJB) or some such clarification for the sake of accuracy.

5. Failure in translating into the conventions of the receptor language

ESV	RNJB	Comments
Rom 3:19 Now we know that whatever the law says it speaks to those who are under the law, so that every mouth may be stopped , and the whole world may be held accountable to God.	Rom 3:19 Now we are well aware that whatever the Law says is said for those who are subject to the Law, so that every mouth may be silenced , and the whole world brought under the judgement of God.	In English, people's mouths are not stopped (ESV); instead, they are silenced (RNJB).
1 Tim 3:6 He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.	1 Tim 3:6 He should not be a new convert, in case pride should turn his head and he incur the condemnation of the devil.	In contemporary English, one does not fall into condemnation (ESV), but one incurs condemnation (RNJB).
Heb 11:33 who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, obtained promises, stopped the mouths of lions ,	Heb 11:33 Through faith they conquered kingdoms, acted righteously and earned the promises. They closed the mouths of lions...	In current English, a lion's mouth is closed (RNJB), not stopped (ESV).

6. Out of date expressions

ESV	RNJB	Comments
1 Cor 10:26 For "the earth is the Lord's, and the fullness thereof. "	1 Cor 10:26 To the Lord belong the earth and all it contains.	RNJB directly expresses the sense in the style of current English. No one today uses an expression such as "the fullness thereof." It comes directly from the King James Version of 1611.
Luke 9:12 Now the day began to wear away...	Luke 9:12 The day was tending towards evening...	The RNJB is much more idiomatic than the ESV. No one today speaks of a day "wearing away." The Greek verb <i>klino</i> means "decline."

<p>Luke 24:29 but they urged him strongly, saying, “Stay with us, for it is toward evening and the day is now far spent.” So he went in to stay with them.</p>	<p>Luke 24:29 but they pressed him saying, ‘Stay with us! It is nearly evening, and the day is almost over.’ So he went in to stay with them.</p>	<p>The RNJB is much more idiomatic than the ESV for the Greek verb <i>klino</i> meaning “decline.” The archaic expression “far spent” (ESV) is taken directly from the King James Version (1611). Whereas the ESV claims to render Greek words consistently, it renders the Greek verb here differently from Luke 9:12 (see above).</p>
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7. Gender inclusive inconsistency

ESV	RNJB	Comments
<p>Matt 10:32 So everyone who acknowledges me before men, I also will acknowledge before my Father who is in heaven, 33 but whoever denies me before men, I also will deny before my Father who is in heaven.</p>	<p>Matt 10:32 Everyone, therefore, who acknowledges me in the presence of others, I will acknowledge in the presence of my Father. 33 But whoever denies me in the presence of others, I will deny in the presence of my Father in heaven.</p>	<p>RNJB conveys the sense in the style of current English, but ESV sounds archaic. Here “before” really means “in the presence of.” The use of “others” (RNJB) is a clever and unobtrusive solution for the sake of gender-inclusivity.</p>
<p>Mark 8:35-37 For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel’s will save it. For what does it profit a man to gain the whole world and forfeit his soul? For what can a man give in return for his soul?</p>	<p>Mark 8:35-37 For whoever wants to save life will lose it; but whoever loses life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. How does it profit someone to gain the whole world and forfeit life? And what could anyone give in exchange for life?</p>	<p>Again RNJB conveys the sense more in the style of current English, but ESV sounds archaic. Whereas the ESV claims to render Greek words consistently, it renders <i>psyche</i> as “life” in 8:35 but “soul” in 8:36-37.</p>

8. Awkward and unnatural idioms and tortured word order

ESV	RNJB	Comments
<p>Matt 6:34 “Therefore do not be anxious about tomorrow, for tomorrow will be anxious for itself. Sufficient for the day is its own trouble.</p>	<p>Matt 6:34 So do not worry about tomorrow: tomorrow will take care of itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.</p>	<p>By avoiding the archaic inversion of the ESV, the RNJB makes the same point much more smoothly.</p>

<p>Luke 17:4 and if he sins against you seven times in the day, and turns to you seven times, saying, 'I repent,' you must forgive him."</p>	<p>Luke 17:4 And if he wrongs you seven times a day and seven times comes back to you and says, "I am sorry," you must forgive him.'</p>	<p>The ESV phrase "in the day" is a rare idiom in English ("back in the day"), whereas the RNJB unobtrusively gets it right.</p>
<p>John 17:6 "I have manifested your name to the people whom you gave me out of the world. Yours they were, and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.</p>	<p>John 17:6 I have revealed your name to those whom you gave me from the world. They were yours and you gave them to me, and they have kept your word.</p>	<p>Again, the RJNB sounds much more natural – especially given the marked simplicity of the Fourth Gospel.</p>

A final thought

A good translation will be natural, uplifting and memorable – becoming part of our spirituality, as happened with the original Jerusalem Bible. By using current English, the RNJB seems much more fresh and accessible than the ESV. If we wish Scripture to be heard as God speaking to us today rather than a vestige of a bygone order, the use of contemporary English in the RNJB seems preferable to the archaic style of the ESV.