

THE ENGLISH STANDARD BIBLE

A Research Paper

Presented to

Dr. Douglas Wilson

University of Mobile

In Partial Fulfillment

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by

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INTRODUCTION

The English Standard Bible, or the English Standard Version (ESV) is an “essentially literal” Bible translation in modern English. The ESV translators utilized a formal approach, highlighting accuracy, meaning, and literary brilliance. It retains the philosophy of “as literal as possible,” striving to be true to the original manuscripts in order that the viewer can comprehend the meaning and structure within those originals.¹ The translators also desire to render the text as closely as possible to the unique style of each writer.

Moreover, the ESV’s readability level is around the eighth grade. To compare, the New International Version (NIV) is around the same, the King James Version (KJV) is at the twelfth grade level,² the New American Standard Bible (NASB) is at eleventh grade level, and the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) is at the seventh grade level.³ The ESV is used across the board for public services, personal and scholarly study, etc. However, according to the Translation Oversight Committee, it is ideally fit for in-depth Bible research.⁴

¹ “About the ESV,” ESV.org, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.esv.org/translation/>.

² Joe Carter, “9 Things You Should Know About the ESV Bible,” The Gospel Coalition, September 30, 2016, <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/article/9-things-you-should-know-about-the-esv-bible/>.

³ “Translation Reading Levels,” Christianbook, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.christianbook.com/page/bibles/about-bibles/bible-translation-reading-levels>.

⁴ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version,” ESV.org, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.esv.org/preface/>.

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The concept for the English Standard Version of the Bible started in the beginning of the 1990s when Lane T. Dennis, president of Crossway, exposed the need for a new formal translation of the Bible that utilized the help of Christian scholars and pastors.⁵ Although many functional-equivalence translators make every effort to separate themselves from the tradition of the KJV, the ESV does not follow this trend. This translation is among the established tradition of English Bible translations within the past five-hundred years. The ESV's purpose is to continue this tradition into the "new century" (the twenty-first), with its "words and phrases themselves grow[ing] out of the Tyndale-King James legacy."⁶

Additionally, the ESV was produced to create a conservative version of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). Theologian Michael Marlowe reveals the extent of how the ESV is the "corrected" form of the RSV:

This is an evangelical revision of the Revised Standard Version that corrects the non-Christian interpretations of the RSV in the Old Testament and improves the accuracy throughout with more literal renderings. It also updates the language somewhat. The makers of this version undertook the work with the idea that there was a need for an evangelical version that was more literal than the New International Version but more idiomatic than the New American Standard Bible. The Revised Standard Version seemed close enough to this middle ground that it might be suitably revised in a short period of time.⁷

⁵ Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About the ESV Bible."

⁶ Leland Ryken, *The ESV and the English Bible Legacy* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011), 100.

⁷ Kurt Aland, *What Today's Christian Needs to Know: The English Standard Version* (London, UK: Trinitarian Bible Society, 2007), 1, <https://cdn.ymaws.com/www.tsbibles.org/resource/collection/D4DCAF37-AEB6-4CEC-880F-FD229A90560F/The-English-Standard-Version.pdf>.

Therefore, the ESV translation began with the 1971 edition of the RSV.⁸ Every word was examined through the Hebrew Masoretic text from *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (5th ed., 1997), the Greek New Testament (5th corrected ed., 2014), and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (28th ed., 2012) edited by Eberhard Nestle and Barbara Aland. The respect of the Masoretic texts is displayed in the ESV's attempt to render passages exactly as they are seen in the Masoretic text rather than search for other ancient versions or using emendations. However, in very rare and difficult cases, other sources are consulted such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Septuagint, and the Latin Vulgate.⁹

The editors of the ESV are considered conservative in regards to their opinions of the inspiration of Scripture and mainly ascribe to the fundamentalist Protestant view. Well-known scholars such as R.C. Sproul, Max Lucado, Wayne Grudem, Moises Silva, and William Mounce, contributed to this translation.¹⁰ The publishing team itself has over one-hundred people, with the Translation Oversight Committee containing fourteen key members. These members received aid from over one-hundred Biblical experts in the form of Translation Review Scholars and the Advisory Council. The team is international in nature and members are diverse in denominational leanings. All are committed to the absolute truth of the Word of

⁸ Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About the ESV Bible."

⁹ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, "Preface to the English Standard Version."

¹⁰ Kyle Pope, "A Review of the English Standard Version," Ancient Road Publications, accessed March 1, 2020, <http://ancientroadpublications.com/Studies/BiblicalStudies/ReviewofESV.html>.

God.¹¹ The original English Standard Version of the Bible was published in 2001, so it is a fairly new translation. Marginal revisions of the text were published in 2007, 2011, and 2016.¹²

THEOLOGICAL ISSUES

One of the main theological issues that characterizes the translation of the ESV is the matter of gender-inclusive language. The ESV does not include gender-neutral language to the extent that many of the other modern translations do. The translation's end-goal is to give a literal rendering for what is contained in the original. Some gender-inclusive language is brought in when an original term is not gender-specific, such as changing "men" to "people" or "any man" to "anyone." "Men/man" are kept when it is male-specific or when a contrast is being made between God and man.

Moreover, where most modern translations change the Greek term ἀδελφοί to a more gender-inclusive word, the ESV keeps it as "brothers" in order to display the relational connection between fellow-Jews and fellow-Christians in the first century AD. There is a footnote, however, when the word is referring to men and women. υἱοί is often kept as "sons" due to the Greek usually containing a male connotation and the term having legal implications for adoption and inheritance laws. The third masculine singular "he" is preserved since it is congruent with the original languages and an "essentially literal" translation would be inconceivable without it. In every case, it is

¹¹ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, "Preface to the English Standard Version."

¹² Carter, "9 Things You Should Know About the ESV Bible."

done in order that the reader can see the underlying culture behind the text and not look at it solely through a modern, Western lens.¹³

The issue is that many versions are making the switch to gender-inclusive language and the ESV's refusal to do so has stirred some controversy. The language is considered "gender-exclusive" and makes it difficult for the twenty-first century reader to understand, which can lead to wrong interpretation and alienation of women. Supporters of gender-inclusivity detail that modern readers should not be left wondering if the text applies to all, or if it truly is only for men. Although the ESV translators render this as "literal," this point is misleading since a "literal statement" would include what the author intended—which can be gender-inclusive rather than masculine-specific.

Additionally, some argue that "Patriarchy is not the Bible's message. Rather, it is the fallen cultural backdrop [which] reveals the radical nature and potency of the Bible's gospel message in contrast to the patriarchal world." This is built upon the idea that people do not understand the patriarchy of that time frame and the overall cultural context—one very different from ours. According to proponents of this view, translating a Bible according to only this context can be misleading and misrepresentative of the true message.¹⁴

¹³ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, "Preface to the English Standard Version."

¹⁴ Carolyn James, "Three Unmistakable Examples of Gender Politics in the New ESV Translation," Missio Alliance, September 13, 2016, <https://www.missioalliance.org/three-unmistakable-examples-of-gender-politics-in-the-new-esv-translation/>.

Another theological controversy dealing with ESV is found within the 2016 edition of the translation. Crossway originally stated that this version would be the permanent ESV and would not undergo anymore changes. However, some theologians have stated that this rendering is “potentially dangerous” and have rejected it. One large theological issue is with the translation of Genesis 3:16. In other ESV versions it was attributed as, “Your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you.” In the 2016 edition, it was changed to say, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you.” Scot McKnight, a New Testament professor of Northern Seminary, exposes how this rendering can have an unfavorable response in readers:

This new translation of Genesis 3:16 suggests the curse against the woman is an act of God that seals estrangement, alienation and tension between females and males. By so rendering this verse, the ESV creates the impression that females and males are contrarians with one another. Some think they make women rebellious and men authoritarian in response. That is a sad and potentially dangerous interpretation for it gives the wrong kind of males a ready-made excuse for domination.¹⁵

It changes the entire meaning of the verse when it is expressed in this new way.

Furthermore, editors of the ESV do not follow the tradition of italicizing words added in translation. This can cause the reader to wrongly assume that certain phrases are in the original text when they actually are not. Romans 8:5 in the ESV is rendered as: “For those who live according to the flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit set their minds on the things of

¹⁵ Czarina Ong, “Why Biblical Scholars Think the New ESV Bible Translation Is 'Potentially Dangerous',” Christianity Today, September 19, 2016, <https://www.christiantoday.com/article/why-biblical-scholars-think-the-new-esv-bible-translation-is-potentially-dangerous/95789.htm>.

the Spirit.” The second use of “set their minds on” is not present in the actual text, only implied. If the phrase were italicized to indicate the addition, that would cause it to actually be “transparent to the original text.”¹⁶

TEXTUAL EMENDATIONS

Generally, textual emendations have been made in paragraphing, dividing long sentences, adding punctuation, and providing connectives in order to supply clear English sentences. Conjunctions (“and,” “but,” “for”) are used quite often in the original languages, so much that to render them in modern English would be confusing. The thought process of a text, however, is still retained through different types of connectives such as “also,” “however,” “thus,” etc. Where significant textual emendations are made, footnotes are included to display variant readings, expound on technical meanings, or explain complicated renderings.¹⁷

Since the ESV translation began with the 1971 RSV, there are many places where it changes the RSV text for a more accurate translation. In the Old Testament, Isaiah 7:14 (RSV) renders *הַעַלְמָה* as “young woman” while the ESV changes it to “virgin.” Moreover, when the Hebrew text is unclear, the RSV translators made conjectural emendations to the text. This would not be an issue, if it was not so frequent (as many as six-hundred

¹⁶ Pope, “A Review of the English Standard Version.”

¹⁷ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version.”

times) and if they did not move outside the bounds of conservative renderings. The ESV fixes most of these conjectural emendations, which are rampant in Job.¹⁸

In the New Testament, an example is in Romans 3:25, where the RSV translates ἱλαστήριον as “expiation” while the ESV provides the term “propitiation.” “Expiation” means “covering for sin.” “Propitiation” works better in context, as it means “a wrath-ending sacrifice,” displaying the nature of salvation and Jesus’ death. Another important revision the ESV makes is in Romans 9:5. The RSV renders the verse as “to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed forever. Amen.” The ESV translates it as “To them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen.” The RSV dethrones Jesus as God while the ESV tells that He is God.¹⁹

There are some smaller issues in translation, where some consider the ESV translator’s choices as “unfortunate.” For example, in 1 Peter 4:3, the ESV renders the Greek word κόμοις as “orgies,” causing it to have a solely sexual connotation when it more so means something along the lines of “half-drunken,” “revelries,” or “carousing.” Then, in Matthew 16:18 ᾗδου is translated as “hell,” rather than “hades,” which is what the term is attributed as in Luke 16:23 and Acts 2:31.²⁰ More

¹⁸ Aland, *What Today's Christian Needs to Know: The English Standard Version*, 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Pope, “A Review of the English Standard Version.”

emendations were made through adding words, switching prescribed word order, prepositions, cases of words, participles, idiomatic equivalents, verb tenses, etc.²¹

A point of significance is the one Moises Silva makes in his quote about the ESV that “literalness in translation...is something of an illusion.” Silva argues that since the ESV says it is “essentially literal,” many readers do not realize the amount of syntactical emending that occurs in the translation. The ESV, at certain junctures, may accomplish the task of making Scripture and its meaning clear to modern readers but that does not mean the product can always be deemed as “literal.” Calling such translations word-for-word, Silva states, is a fantasy.²²

LINGUISTIC INSIGHTS

As far as linguistic insights go, the ESV does not accomplish anything monumental, such as shaping or establishing a language. There are linguistic corrections that the ESV translators chose to make to increase readability and modernize the language. Outdated terms have been changed to fit the contemporary sphere and important linguistic emendations have been made to significant texts, but the ultimate purpose is to keep the character of the language and the original meaning intact.²³ For example, the Authorized Version (AV) translates the singular “you” as “thee,” “thou,”

²¹ Rodney Decker, “Translation Philosophy and the English Standard Version New Testament” (evangelical Theological Society, San Antonio, TX, November 2004), http://ntresources.com/blog/documents/ESV_ReviewETS.pdf.

²² Moises Silva, *The Challenge of Bible Translation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003), 39-40.

²³ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version.”

and “thine” and the plural “you” as “ye,” “you,” and “your.” The RSV translators moved away from this practice except for in the case of speaking about God, with the capitalization of the terms. The ESV translator’s thought this to be antiquated and ceased the practice.²⁴ Retaining the nature of the language and the true nuances is essential due to the impact they have placed on the English-speaking group and its doctrine over the last half-millennium.²⁵

Moreover, the ESV translators desired to secure the nuance of the original text in the English version. Important terms in Scripture have been rendered as the same English word when the syntax and context permits. Rendering words in a congruent way displays the Old Testament to New Testament ties and fully portrays the overtones of the primary manuscripts. For example, terms like “faith,” “justification,” “grace,” “redemption,” etc. are kept due to their theological significance and because the Greek words were seen as significant terms within the Christian sphere in the New Testament. Altogether, these linguistic aspects are what makes it more suitable for in-depth Bible research; however, the literary brilliance allows it to also be utilized in a congregational and academic setting. An example of “literary brilliance” is the free expression of the Biblical authors’ stylistic differences—from the genres of prose, poetry, and history to the smooth style of Luke, the rationality of Paul, and the clarity of John.²⁶

²⁴ Aland, *What Today's Christian Needs to Know: The English Standard Version*, 9.

²⁵ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version.

²⁶ “Translation Philosophy,” ESV.org, accessed February 28, 2020, <https://www.esv.org/translation/philosophy/>.

RECEPTOR LANGUAGE

Much like linguistic insights, the ESV has not had too much of an effect on the receptor language, English, as it was well-established when the translation was created. Moreover, due to the “essentially literal” nature of the translation, a large portion of the language seems to be on the more scholarly side in order to remain reverent and faithful to the originals. It has been said that literary English follows the standard of spoken English as it appears.²⁷ The changes in language usually begin with teenagers and young adults. As they communicate, new words, constructions, phrases, sayings, etc. are integrated into the modern lingua franca—language that is different from those of older generations.²⁸ The ESV does not necessarily follow the language of the day, as the twenty-first century has seen a shift, largely due to social media, where slang becomes colloquial and more “scholarly” language dies out as time goes on.²⁹ This Bible translation stands outside of culture in this way and remains stationary in a world of constantly evolving language. Not stationary in a negative way, but constant and true to the original text when other translations may be contextualizing (sometimes too much) to fit into the culture.

²⁷ “The Attitude of the School Toward Reforms in the English,” *The Intelligence: A Semi-monthly Journal of Education* 23 (January 15, 1903): 51, https://books.google.com/books?id=EZblAAAAMAAJ&pg=PA51&lpg=PA51&dq=English+moving+toward+more+colloquial&source=bl&ots=t2JTYQmpZ2&sig=ACfU3U24MqpxyMY_aAd3ljj9vI3Mx_d_1Q&hl=en&sa=X&ved=2ahUKewjmg62s8vnnAhWukHIEHYGhBVEQ6AEwEHoECAkQA.

²⁸ Betty Birner, “Is English Changing?,” *The Linguistic Society of America*, accessed March 1, 2020, <https://www.linguisticsociety.org/content/english-changing>.

²⁹ Linton Weeks, “Do We Talk Funny? 51 American Colloquialisms,” NPR, March 12, 2015, <https://www.npr.org/sections/npr-history-dept/2015/05/12/404660475/51-words-the-united-states-of-colloquialisms>.

There is a negative aspect to the traditional rendering of the ESV, however.

Although the English is fairly understandable, albeit slightly antiquated, there are a few technical roadblocks in the English of the ESV due to the attempt to balance the formal approach with correct English style. A few examples of the formal approach rendering unnatural English are as follows: Luke 8:27, “a man who has demons,” Matthew 1:18, “she was found to be with child,” Matthew 1:25, “knew her not,” Acts 3:11, “the portico called Solomon’s,” Luke 5:12, “full of leprosy.”³⁰ Modern English speakers do not speak this way and sometimes the real meaning can be lost in translation.

CULTURAL ASPECTS

The ESV translators state in the Bible preface that the “objective [is] transparency to the original text, allowing the reader to understand the original on its own terms rather than on the terms of our present-day culture.”³¹ This specific quote is referring to the use of gender-inclusive pronouns, but it also characterizes the ESV as a translation.

Therefore, there are not many places where modern culture has formed what the text says.

Two main instances are: selective gender-inclusive language and the rendering of אָדָם and δοῦλος . As aforementioned, the ESV uses gender-inclusive language when an original term is not gender-specific, such as changing “men” to “people” or “any

³⁰ Decker, “Translation Philosophy and the English Standard Version New Testament.”

³¹ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version.”

man” to “anyone.”³² Although they have not bent to culture as other translations have, this change was not only made for accuracy, but also most likely due to the shift toward gender-inclusive language. The translators gave in slightly to the shift with these minor changes.

The other major cultural aspect on translation is the rendering of עֶבֶד and δοῦλος. These terms are often translated as “slave” although they encompass a variety of relationships, such as “slave,” “servant,” and “bondservant.” Since the term “slave” often causes most people to think of the egregious nineteenth-century practice of slavery, the ESV carefully examines each context before determining what term to use. For example, the Old Testament understanding of slavery can be voluntary or involuntary but there is always protection for those within slavery and ways they can be released from it. In the New Testament, δοῦλος is best represented as “bondservant,” or a person in the Roman empire who is bound in servitude by a contract for seven years. When the contract was up, the person was set free, and paid the money due to them. However, the term still means “slave” despite the modern conception of the word. The ESV does not use this term lightly—only in the incidences where it is absolutely necessary. For example, where total possession by something is displayed (Romans 6:15-23), “slave” is utilized. When a less-permeating form of servanthood is being shown (1 Corinthians 7:21-24), “bondservant” is translated. “Servant” is used when it is portrayed that the subject has extensive freedoms (John 4:51).³³

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

TRANSLATION INFLUENCE

The ESV contributes a few things to pastors and churches that other versions, like the NIV, do not. Reverend Dr. Jason Carter explains his reasonings for switching to the ESV from the NIV, the main reasons being consistency and easier expository preaching. Dr. Carter argues that the ESV is easier to utilize when engaging in expository preaching and teaching. He employs a quote from Kevin DeYoung that explains his argument:

I preached from the NIV for five years. It is a good translation in many respects, but it is difficult to preach from—especially if one wants to preach exegetically and with an eye to the original languages. There were a number of times over those five years when I had to un-explain the NIV in order to make a point in a sermon. Other times I had to simply skip a point I would have otherwise made because to get behind the NIV text in the sermon would have taken too much work.³⁴

The original intent and language of Scripture often gets shrouded within thought-for-thought translations and makes it more difficult to see what the actual meaning is. Carter also makes the point that the ESV does not “under-translate.” For example, the NIV translates the Greek word ἱλασμός as “sacrifice of atonement,” “atonement,” and “atoning sacrifice” rather than the appropriate theological term of “propitiation.” It is important that “propitiation” be kept because it is a significant term in Christianity and has crucial meaning in understanding salvation. The ESV retains “ἱλασμός” as “propitiation.” Dr. Carter also states the fact that the ESV does not “over-translate.” He compares it once more with the NIV, doing a side-by-side rendering of 1 Corinthians 4:9.

³⁴ Jason A. Carter, “Why Our Church Is Switching to the ESV (English Standard Version) for Its Pew Bibles,” Rev. Dr. Jason A. Carter, August 28, 2018, https://www.revdrjasoncarter.com/blog/2018/8/28/why-trinity-wellsprings-church-is-switching-to-the-esv-english-standard-version-for-its-pew-bibles#_ftnref6.

The ESV translates it this way, “For I think that God has exhibited us apostles as last of all, like men sentenced to death, because we have become a spectacle to the world, to angels, and to men.” The NIV asserts it as, “For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like men condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to men.”

The NIV makes additions to explain Paul’s imagery with words such as “procession” and “arena.” Although this may have been Paul’s original thought, we do not know because it is not in the original text.³⁵ The addition is fairly unnecessary and merely makes the statement more flowery.

In reference to the popularity of the ESV, from the time of publication in 2001, the ESV Bible has been widely accepted and utilized by a variety of church leaders, religious organizations, denominations, and independent people.³⁶ The popularity of this translation can be seen in the retail statistics of the ESV Study Bible. This version acquired one-hundred thousand preorders when it first came out in 2008. Since then, over one-million copies have sold. It is one of only nineteen Bibles to do so in the last ten years.³⁷

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ “About the ESV.”

³⁷ Daniel Silliman, The Most Popular Bible of the Year Is Probably Not What You Think It Is, *Washington Post*, August 28, 2015, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2015/08/28/the-most-popular-bible-of-the-year-is-probably-not-what-you-think-it-is/>.

CONCLUSION

The ESV is a formal, “essentially literal” translation of the Bible. It is congruent with the title of “translation,” as it does not add commentary or interpretation into the mix but attempts to translate word-for-word what the original text says.³⁸ It is perfect for those who do not like the woodenness of the NASB, but also do not want the superfluous additions that usually accompany functional equivalents such as the New Living Translation (NLT) or the NIV. Although some translation choices may be unfortunate or slightly antiquated, it does not contain any significant errors or mistranslations. It is overall a reliable Bible and is trustworthy in any context one may use it in. It is God’s Word, after all, and deserves to be treated as such.

³⁸ ESV Translation Oversight Committee, “Preface to the English Standard Version.”

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On my honor, I have neither given nor taken improper assistance in completing this assignment.

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Sanders", with a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.