

The English Standard Version

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In this month's Feature article, Wayne Jackson reviews the new English Standard Version translation of the Bible.

For centuries men have been translating the original Scriptures (Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek) into their native vernacular. Each time a translation is produced there is the hope that it will be the perfect one. It never is; because translations, unlike the original autographs, are the productions of fallible men. And "to err is human." Some degree of subjective interpretation is woven into the fabric of any Bible version. Admittedly, though, some translations are better than others.

In the autumn of 2001, a fresh English translation made its appearance. Crossway Bibles, a division of Good News Publishers (Wheaton, IL) introduced the English Standard Version (ESV). The Preface of this rendition begins by echoing a statement expressed by the translators of the original King James Version. "God's sacred Word . . . is that inestimable treasure that excelleth all the riches of the earth." The translators pledge that this sentiment "is the motivating force" that undergirds the publication of the ESV.

Unlike many modern paraphrases, which pursue the Dynamic Equivalence (DE) approach, the ESV "seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and personal style of each Bible writer." Its goal, therefore, was to produce, a "word-for-word" edition.

As noted earlier, the DE ideology contends that the best version is that which is concerned more with the representation of ideas which express the primitive meaning, and not so much with the replication of the original words (usually designated as Form Equivalence - FE). It is not difficult to see that the DE concept lends itself more readily to subjectivity, than does the more literal approach. Surely those who believe that the very words of the original documents were inspired of God, would prefer a literal translation – to the extent that such is possible and practical.

The original-language texts employed in the project were the Masoretic text for the Old Testament, *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (1983 - 2nd Ed.), and for the New Testament, *The Greek New Testament* (1993 - 4th ed. UBS) and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (Nestle/Aland - 27th ed.). The English rendition of this new version is somewhat analogous to the RSV of 1971, minus the liberal elements of that translation.

The translation team involved more than 100 scholars, the names and credentials of whom are available upon request from Crossway Bibles. The ESV is recommended by such notable scholars as Robert Mounce, J.I. Packer, R.C. Sproul, Leon Morris, Harold Hoehner, and Jack Cottrell.

The Classic Reference edition of this Bible contains 76,000 center-column references, a concordance with 14,500 entries, introductions to each Bible book, full color maps, and even a CD-Rom with two English translations (KJV, ESV), along with several additional resources.

I have not gone through the entire volume. I've only checked random passages; nonetheless, I am impressed with this new version. It may turn out to be the best modern alternative to the King James translation of four centuries ago, better even than the revered ASV of 1901 – now that this latter version is almost extinct.

Strengths of the ESV

There are several strengths that underscore the value of the new ESV. First, as reflected in the textual base, it is translated from the latest collection of Hebrew and Greek documents, giving it the strongest textual foundation of anything yet produced in a translation.

Second, unlike some of the more recent versions, whose translators were characterized by liberal tendencies, the ESV appears to have been produced by men who attempted to “carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our language.”

For example, the RSV created a storm of controversy with its “young woman” rendition of Isaiah 7:14, whereas the ESV has it “virgin” – and so Isaiah and Matthew (1:22-23) are in harmony again!

Another of the strengths of the ESV is the clarity and accuracy which many passages lacked in some of the earlier versions. For example “expanse” replaces the ill-rendered “firmament” in Genesis 1. The term “cattle” (a specific term) appears as “livestock” (more generic) in the ESV of Genesis 1.

Genesis 22:1 notes that “God tested Abraham”; he did not “tempt” him (cf. James 1:13), as the old KJV suggested. The Shakespearean “thee” and “thou” are replaced with contemporary pronouns: “And God said to Abram, Go from your country and your father’s house . . .” (Genesis 12:1). The increasingly obsolete “brethren” is now found as “brothers.” Or when more distant relatives are considered, “brethren” becomes “kinsmen” (Genesis 13:8).

Compare the following passages which depict the power of God in the storms of nature. “The noise thereof sheweth concerning it, the cattle also concerning the vapour” (Job 36:33 - KJV). The ESV has it: “Its crashing declares his presence; the cattle also declare that he rises.” Or these: “. . .you are straightened in your own bowels” (2 Corinthians 6:12 - KJV); “. . .you are restricted in your own affections” (ESV).

Concerning the Sunday collection, the ESV correctly has: “On the first day of every week . . .,” whereas both the KJV and ASV omit the term “every.”

Note how beautifully the following passages dealing with God’s creation are rendered:

“For his invisible attributes, namely, his eternal power and divine nature, have been clearly perceived, ever since the creation of the world, in the things that have been made. So they are without excuse” (Romans 1:20).

“By faith we understand that the universe was created by the word of God, so that what is seen was not made out of things that are visible” (Hebrews 11:3).

The ESV corrects the NIV relative to 1 Corinthians 7:15. The NIV suggests that if an unbeliever leaves his Christian mate, the Christian “is not bound” to the relationship any longer (which is at variance with Matthew 19:9). The ESV, however, correctly notes that the Christian is “not enslaved,” i.e., is not obligated to pursue the abandoning mate, maintaining perpetual proximity.

Passages dealing with baptism are given a fair treatment in this version (although, as with most others, the verb *baptizo* is anglicized, rather than being strictly translated as “immerse,” for commercial purposes). This is a problem that goes all the way back to the King James Version, and has been almost uniformly followed since then. One can only imagine how few editions would be sold among denominationalists if “immersion” was the common rendition of *baptizo*.

The ESV of 1 Peter 3:21 shows that immersion is “an appeal to God for a good [i.e., clean] conscience,” which obviously one cannot have apart from that obedience.

Corrections and Improvements

As noted earlier, there is no flawless translation. There is no version upon which all will agree in every particular. One may suggest improvements in a translation, without adopting the radical viewpoint that the version must be condemned altogether because of a weakness, or mistranslation, in some instances. The ESV appears, in this writer’s judgment, to be a good translation – in spite of a few problems.

Some earlier versions (e.g., KJV; NKJV; ASV; NASB) employed italics in the type-setting process indicating when words were being added to the text for clarification purposes. Unfortunately, the ESV does not continue that helpful procedure.

Some translations in recent years have had the tendency to be more generic than they needed to be. For example, the NASB rendered *porneia* (“fornication”) by “immorality” in Matthew 19:9. That is too generic. Stealing is a form of “immorality,” but it is not the basis for scriptural divorce.

Similarly, the ESV translates *porneia* as “sexual immorality.” Again, though, that is still too general. Lust is a form of “sexual immorality,” but evil thoughts are not a justification for terminating a marriage. The translators probably felt that the term “fornication” is not understood well enough today; that assumption likely is unwarranted.

The ESV’s rendition of *monogenes* (“only begotten” - KJV, ASV) as “only” will probably reignite the controversy that raged mightily a few years ago. But the basic disagreement has to do with the etymology of the original term. Does *genos* signify “kind,” hence, *monogenes* indicates “one of a kind,” i.e., unique? Or, does *genos* mean “begotten”?

Actually, the term “begotten” is from *gennan*, a kindred term, but with a different meaning. Most modern scholars who insist that “only begotten” is the preferred term, do so on theological grounds, i.e., the idea that Jesus derived his “being” from the Father (see Hoch, p. 606). Actually, one can argue that *monogenes* means “only” – without being liberal in his view of the Savior. *Monogenes* is rendered “only” on two occasions in the KJV (Luke 7:12; 8:42).

The ESV has followed the NASB in rendering the present participle, *hyparchon* (“being” KJV; “existing” ASV), in Philippians 2:6, as a past tense form – “was in the form of God” – which could leave the impression that Jesus was not deity while in the flesh, though the translators do not mean to imply this. The Lord always existed, and continued to exist, as deity, even though incarnate (Fee, 1995, p. 203; Vine, 1991, pp. 279-80). R.C.H. Lenski noted that Jesus never existed apart from the nature of deity (p. 774). There is no reason not to give the participle its full, present tense flavor, as we have noted earlier.

In a segment where the headship of “man” (in general) over “woman” is in view (1 Corinthians 11:3ff), rather than the husband-wife relationship, the ESV renders the original words *aner* as “husband,” and *gune* as “wife,” in a manner that is inconsistent with the immediate context, and at variance with other contexts dealing with the same gender theme (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:8ff).

The ESV could be improved by translating “the perfect” (1 Cor. 13:10) as “the complete,” which would then balance with its rendition, “the partial,” in 10b. The contrast is between partial revelation and complete revelation. Too many people erroneously attach a moral connotation to “perfect” in this text, thus contending that spiritual gifts were to continue until the coming of Christ (who is presumed to be the “perfect” one, implied in the passage).

It is unfortunate that most translations continue to lend credence to the notion of “hereditary depravity” by rendering the Greek term *psusei* as “by nature” in Ephesians 2:3. The word can denote that which reflects “a mode of feeling and acting which by long habit has become nature” (Thayer, p. 660). Man becomes a “child of wrath” by his practice, not by a contaminated nature effected by inheritance.

It is puzzling that the ESV transliterated the Greek word *hades* in Acts 2:27, and yet rendered the same term as “hell” in Matthew 16:18. The common conception of “hell” is that it represents the final abode of the wicked. One is grateful, however, for the ESV footnotes on Matthew 16:19 and 18:18, which reflect the perfect tense form of the verbs, “shall have been bound,” etc., thus showing that the apostles yielded to Heaven’s will, rather than the reverse being true (as alleged by Catholicism).

Conclusion

Though the ESV is not without some weakness, generally speaking, it appears to be an accurate, literal translation, rendered in beautiful English. It is a version, we believe, that will serve the English-speaking world with distinction. It is our hope that this new version will not become a point of contention within the body of Christ.