

A look at the English Standard Version

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The ESV Bible (English Standard Version, 2001)¹ is a recent adaptation of the Revised Standard Version (RSV 1952, 1971).² It's not a new translation of the ancient Scriptures --just the next in a long line of "classic and mainstream" English Bible translations, revisions and new editions tracing their lineage back to William Tyndale's New Testament (1526) and the King James Version (KJV 1611, 1769).

Let's spend the next 15 minutes considering 16 passages in the ESV. How did the editors of the ESV handle the infamous mistranslations of the RSV? How accurately do they present Old Testament prophecy and New Testament fulfillment? Are there any denominational issues with this translation? Is the language they use "gender inclusive"? What about readability?

The Revised Standard Version "Litmus Test"

In its day, the RSV was considered a fine, scholarly translation. Many conservative Christians, however, criticized it strongly and avoided it completely because of the liberal, higher-critical theology evident in the translation of some key passages. For example, the translators of the RSV rendered Isaiah 7:14 in a way that denied Christ's virgin birth:

#1. Isaiah 7:14

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [KJV].

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a young woman shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el [RSV].

Footnote: Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, a *virgin is with child and shall bear* a son, and shall call his name Imman'u-el.

The Evangelical editors of the ESV restored that passage to its conservative interpretation:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Behold, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel [ESV].

(Compare: Matthew 1:18-25).

The translators of the RSV also used a little creative punctuation in Romans 9:5 to erase its clear reference to Christ's divinity:

#2. Romans 9:5

Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen [KJV].

to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen [RSV].

Footnote: Or *Christ, who is God over all, blessed for ever.*

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² Scripture quotations are from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright © 1946, 1952, and 1971 the Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the United States of America.

The ESV corrects that verse, too:

**to them belong the patriarchs, and from their race, according to the flesh,
is the Christ, who is God over all, blessed forever. Amen [ESV].**

Decades of criticism of the RSV provided the editors of the ESV with a well-documented list of passages to clean up theologically. How did they do? “It seems that the same judgment can be placed on the ESV today that was placed by the WELS on the NIV in the 1970s: Doctrinally it is ‘a translation which may be used with a high degree of confidence.’³”⁴

Messianic Prophecies

Jewish and liberal scholarship insists on translating Old Testament Scriptures in isolation from the New Testament. Sadly, there’s also a growing movement away from “letting Scripture interpret Scripture” even among Evangelicals. A survey of key Messianic passages in the ESV shows that the editors have avoided that trend. They clearly consider the New Testament’s interpretation of Old Testament prophecies part and parcel of divine inspiration and therefore authoritative.⁵

In the ESV, Jesus of Nazareth is presented as both David’s son and David’s LORD. That explains why this next verse isn’t rendered as some ancient “coronation song” but as a direct reference to Christ our Lord (with Messianic titles capitalized):

#3. Psalm 2:6-7

Yet have I set my king upon my holy hill of Zion.
I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me,
Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee [KJV].

“I have set my king on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will tell of the decree of the LORD: He said to me,
“You are my son, today I have begotten you [RSV].

**“As for me, I have set my King on Zion, my holy hill.”
I will tell of the decree: The LORD said to me,
“You are my Son; today I have begotten you [ESV].**

In the next passage, you’ll notice that the ESV still uses “man” in the collective sense of the whole human race (read “mankind”), most frequently when the Scriptures convey a clear contrast between “God” and “man” (see also Luke 2:52). The Hebrew phrase “son of man” can also refer to human beings in general but it’s rendered quite literally throughout the ESV Bible because of its Messianic importance. Though some English Bible translations started capitalizing pronouns that refer to God or the Messiah beginning in the 20th Century, the ESV doesn’t. That won’t stop us, however, from drawing a straight line from the promise in Psalm 8 to its fulfillment in Christ—exactly as the Holy Spirit explains it in Hebrews 2:9: “But we see him who for a little while was made lower than the angels, namely Jesus, crowned with glory and honor because of the suffering of death, so that by the grace of God he might taste death for everyone”:

³ *Book of Reports and Memorials for the Fifty-Fifth Biennial Convention of the WELS*, 1979, 197.

⁴ “Some Thoughts on the ESV and Bible Translations” by Professor Thomas P. Nass, page 7:
www.wels.net/sites/wels/files/thoughts_on_esv_and_bible_translation.pdf

⁵ For more, see Dr. John F. Brug, “Principles of Bible Translation—Applied to Prophecy, 2nd Edition,”
www.wlsessays.net/files/BrugTranslationProphecy.pdf

#4. Psalm 8:4-6

**What is man that you are mindful of him,
and the son of man that you care for him?
Yet you have made him a little lower *than the heavenly beings*
Footnote: Or *than God*; Septuagint *than the angels*
and crowned him with glory and honor.
You have given him dominion over the works of your hands;
you have put all things under his feet [ESV].⁶**

We meet up with the Hebrew word *Sheol* in Psalm 16 and the Greek word *Hades* in Acts 2. Both have various meanings as can be seen in different English Bible translations: the grave, the realm of the dead, even hell. At times, the editors of the ESV will simply transliterate a Biblical name or difficult word and avoid translating it altogether as they do in these verses (leaving many readers to wonder what *Sheol* and *Hades* are exactly). You'll also notice that the ESV doesn't capitalize "your holy one" in this Old Testament prophecy but it does when it's quoted in the New. Nevertheless, the gospel truth that the Apostle Peter shares in his Pentecost sermon still shines through in the ESV: King David was a prophet who spoke of the Christ and his resurrection from the dead on Easter morning (compare Acts 2:25-31):

#5. Psalm 16:10

**For you will not abandon my soul to Sheol,
or let your holy one see corruption [ESV].**
Footnote: Or *see the pit*

Acts 2:27

**For you will not abandon my soul to Hades,
or let your Holy One see corruption [ESV].**

In the last prophecy we will consider, we see that the ESV would have translated away a reference to the Messiah in Genesis 49 were it not for their footnote. The preface to the ESV states that footnotes are considered "an integral part of the translation, informing the reader of textual variations and difficulties and showing how they have been resolved by the translation team," so be sure to read them:

#6. Genesis 49:10

The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor a lawgiver from between his feet,
until Shiloh come; and unto him shall the gathering of the people be [KJV].

The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until he comes to whom it belongs; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples
[RSV].

**The scepter shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet,
until tribute comes to him; and to him shall be the obedience of the peoples [ESV].**

Footnote: By a slight revocalization; a slight emendation yields (compare Septuagint, Syriac, Targum) *until he comes to whom it belongs*; Hebrew *until Shiloh comes*, or *until he comes to Shiloh*.

⁶ "The minutes of the committee assembled by Luther to revise his translation of Psalms indicated Luther's understanding of Psalm 8, 'The whole psalm is a prophecy concerning Christ. It is not a general statement about creation, as the Jews foolishly claim. It speaks about the gospel and about the subject and object of the gospel: Christ has suffered and has been raised to life. The Epistle to the Hebrews alleges that it is wholly or directly about Christ.'" *Revisionsprotokolle* in WA, DB3, p. XXXIV, translation by Dr. John F. Brug.

Reformed Tendencies

When reading or studying many Protestant or Evangelical Bible translations, Lutherans sometimes find themselves stumbling into or tripping over a passage here and there that has been influenced by Calvinism. We run into a double-predestination slant here and in Jude 4, where it sounds like God “chose some for disobedience/unbelief/damnation”:

#7. 1 Peter 2:8

And a stone of stumbling, and a rock of offence, even to them which stumble at the word, being disobedient: whereunto also they were appointed [KJV].

and “A stone that will make men stumble, a rock that will make them fall”; for they stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do [RSV].

and “A stone of stumbling, and a rock of offense.” They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do [ESV].

The Reformed often treat the Bible like “a guidebook for right living,” so it’s disappointing but not surprising that God’s “judgments” or “commands” are often presented as “rules” in the ESV (just consider Psalm 119 for a lengthy example).

Gender Issues

One stated goal of the ESV was to provide a conservative response in Bible translation to our culture’s demand for gender-inclusive language.⁷

That being said, it might surprise you to learn that the ESV uses the words “man” and “men” in translation quite a bit less than the RSV (671 times, to be exact). Here’s a fine example of the editors making sure that God’s plan of salvation is properly understood as being inclusive of all –men, women and children (see also John 12:32, Romans 3:28 and Titus 2:11):

#8. 1 Timothy 2:4

(God) will have all men to be saved, and to come unto the knowledge of the truth [KJV].

(God) desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth [RSV].

(God) desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth [ESV].

In other salvation passages, however, the editors appear inconsistent in that regard because they chose to follow a more traditional rendering of an already-familiar verse. Here they stuck to the basic translation of the word for “men” and then used a helpful footnote to give the proper interpretation:

#9. Acts 4:12

Neither is there salvation in any other: for there is none other name under heaven given among men, whereby we must be saved [KJV].

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [RSV].

And there is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among men by which we must be saved” [ESV].

Footnote: The Greek word *anthropoi* refers here to both men and women.

⁷ “Colorado Springs Guidelines for Translating of Gender-Related Language in Scripture,” www.keptthefaitth.org/docs/CSG.pdf

Well-placed footnotes point the reader to an inclusive understanding of the word for “brothers” too – but only when the context and the rest of Scripture allow it. You’ll notice that the footnote here refers to verses 14 and 15 (because the church has always been made up of “brothers and sisters in Christ”) but not to verse 16 (because women didn’t choose the Apostle that replaced Judas):

#10. Acts 1:14-16

¹⁴ **All these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer, together with the women and Mary the mother of Jesus, and his brothers.**

¹⁵ **In those days Peter stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said, ¹⁶ “Brothers, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit spoke beforehand by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus [ESV].**

Footnotes: Acts 1:14 Or *brothers and sisters*. The plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) refers to siblings in a family. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, *adelphoi* may refer either to men or to both men and women who are siblings (brothers and sisters) in God’s family, the church; also verse 15.

You will also notice that “father/s” isn’t changed to “ancestor/s” or “parent/s” in the ESV. That may strike today’s readers as too patriarchal or “Eastern,” but it’s true to the culture and language of the Bible and faithful to God’s revelation of himself as “the Lord, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob... This is my name forever, and thus I am to be remembered throughout all generations” (Exodus 3:15, ESV).

In the ESV, all of God’s children, male and female, young and old, are still called “sons of God,” reflecting the adoption and inheritance rights of first-century Rome and at the same time reminding all of us of the privileges we enjoy through the Son of God born of Mary “when the fullness of time had come”:

#11. Galatians 4:7

So you are no longer a slave, but a son, and if a son, then an heir through God [ESV].

There is one glaring “gender” error in the ESV’s translation of a key passage that states the general Biblical principal of male headship. The editors favor a narrower meaning of “wife” and “husband” instead of “woman” and “man”. Their footnote improves their translation a little bit but not enough. (At least they don’t carry through on that mistake in parallel passages in 1 Corinthians 14:34-35 and 1 Timothy 2:8ff):

#12. 1 Corinthians 11:3

the head of every man is Christ; and the head of the woman is the man;
and the head of Christ is God [KJV].

the head of every man is Christ, the head of a woman is her husband,
and the head of Christ is God [RSV].

**the head of every man is Christ, the head of a wife is her husband,
and the head of Christ is God [ESV].**

Footnote: Greek *gunē*. This term may refer to a *woman* or a *wife*, depending on the context.

ESV Translation Philosophy

The ESV was produced with the plan to give English Bible readers a “more word-for-word” translation option than the “more thought-for-thought” translation of the New International Version. As such, the editors attempted to make the actual words and word order in the original languages more transparent to English readers by being “tighter to the text.” They also tried to avoid interpreting or even changing the thought of the original by being “essentially literal.”

Overall, the work of the editors of the ESV reflects their belief in the divine, verbal inspiration and inerrancy of God’s Word. They show that by trying to account for every word in the original without adding or subtracting even “an iota or a dot” (Matthew 5:18, KJV “one jot or one tittle;” NIV “the smallest letter or the least stroke of a pen”).

The Evangelist Mark, for example, begins many of his sentences with the Greek word “And...” That’s typical of his fast-paced, narrative style. My English teacher never liked it when I started my sentences that way, but the editors of the ESV just leave the word there:

#13. Mark 1:17-20

**And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you become fishers of men.”
And immediately they left their nets and followed him. And going on a little farther, he saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.**

They do the same with other connectives like “but” and “for.”

Even the word “Behold!” is rendered very carefully in over 1000 verses. We rarely use that word in day-to-day conversation. For the editors of the ESV however, a casual, “Look!” or “Listen!” doesn’t have the same weight or effect as a time-honored, “Behold!” (“Hey! Pay careful attention to what follows! This is important: ‘the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel!’” Isaiah 7:14, ESV).

Classic English

If you are at all familiar with the King James Version or the RSV, you will undoubtedly appreciate the fact that the ESV preserves the traditional English and simple, yet majestic cadences of many favorite Bible passages, like:

#14. Psalms 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want [KJV].

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want [RSV];

The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want [ESV].

as well as Psalm 22 and Psalm 51, Isaiah 40 and 53, Matthew 6 and Luke 2. Many will appreciate how true the ESV is to their “gold standard” of English Bible translation. To some, it’s nostalgic, reverent or transcendent; to others, archaic, outmoded or awkward.

Idiomatic English

An “idiom” is an expression that means something other than the literal meanings of its individual words. The ESV’s preference for rendering the original word-for-word instead of thought-for-thought can leave the English reader scratching his head at times. In the next verse, for example, the phrase “cleanness of teeth” can leave the casual listener thinking of something good you get from your dental

hygienist rather than a sure sign of divine judgment. Of course, you could argue that the context makes the meaning clear enough (and English Bibles have been using those exact same words for 400 years):

#15. Amos 4:6

And I also have given you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and want of bread in all your places:
yet have ye not returned unto me, saith the LORD [KJV].

“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me,” says the LORD [RSV].

**“I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities,
and lack of bread in all your places,
yet you did not return to me,” declares the LORD [ESV].**

At other times, however, the reader will just be left wondering, “What exactly does that mean?”

#16. Isaiah 45:1

**Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus,
whose right hand I have grasped,
to subdue nations before him
and to loose the belts of kings,
to open doors before him
that gates may not be closed: [ESV].**

That’s why pastors often recommend good Bible Study tools⁸ and encourage everyone’s attendance and questions in Bible Classes. (If you’re still wondering, that idiom refers to an old method of disarmament by “stripping away the kings’ armor”).

We could cherry-pick other verses in the ESV that have words like “barren, bewail, breach, buckler, cubits, dromedaries, indolence, lest, litters, loins, necromancer, pate, pinion, sire, vexation,” and so on. Here and there, you can find phrases like “dark sayings, eating with the blood, fiery serpents, figured stone, perpetual due, public adjuration, sleep in his pledge, uncircumcised lips and the way of women” that might leave you puzzled, too. But our 15 minutes for the ESV is over...

Quite a few reviewers have called the English of the ESV “choppy, clumsy, confusing at times, convoluted, or cumbersome” and therefore question its readability. But you can still figure out most of the tough stuff in context or with study. And there are still some 750,000 other English words used in over 31,000 other verses in God’s Word, the English Standard Version, that the average reader will have no problem understanding. Perhaps it just boils down to what you’re looking for in a translation. Beauty? Simplicity? Style? Faithfulness? The question we need to answer, of course, is “Which quality is most important?”⁹

⁸ In many respects, “The Lutheran Study Bible” (2009) from Concordia Publishing House in the English Standard Version (Text Edition: 2007) surpasses their popular “Concordia Self-Study Bible” (NIV 1984).

⁹ “For us purity of doctrine must ever remain *the* essential test of a translation. To endorse a translation that features crisp, contemporary English and that ‘reads like a novel’ but subtly blends in error or undercuts the reader’s confidence in the reliability of God’s Holy Word is to court disaster: It is infinitely better to retain a translation that may not be as easy reading, that may not include the latest in scholarship, but which accords to the Lord Jesus Christ His rightful place in God’s plan of salvation,” WLS Seminary President Armin Panning, www.wlssays.net/files/PanningNASB.rtf, page 5.