

Introductory Note

by

Editor

(Evangelical Tracts' website 9th July 2003)

Which Version?

Ideally the Christian should read the books of the Old and New Testaments in the Hebrew and Greek languages that they were originally written in. But as no original manuscripts have come down from those times we believe, as Christians, that the ancient Jews, and then the Christians, have accurately copied those original manuscripts and passed them down through the providential hand of God from generation to generation to provide us today with virtually identical copies of the God-inspired originals.

Any new or revised translation of the Word of God must include an examination of those ancient manuscript copies, and one of the advantages the 19th & 20th century translators have had over the translators of the Authorised Version of 1611 (AV), is that there have been many ancient manuscripts discovered since those times, to enable the translators to check ever more carefully the accuracy of their translation with those ancient manuscripts. It is interesting to note that the differences between the great 4th and 5th century Greek manuscripts of the Bible, used in the 19th century Revised Version (RV), have in no way altered any fundamental teaching of the faith once and for all delivered to the saints. The words of J. C. Ryle in 1881 concerning the New Testament RV, which he preferred his clergy not to use "until the practice is formally sanctioned by law," [which it never was], still ring true today and are worth recording:

"But the main reason for thankfulness about the Revised Version [1880 New Testament], which I commend to the attention of my clergy, is the glorious testimony which it bears to the soundness of the whole doctrinal system of Christianity. After ten years of patient and diligent investigation, after careful examination of versions and manuscripts not known 250 years ago, after the united labour of the ablest committee of Biblical scholars that could be got together, after all this, the Revised Version comes forth from the crucible without the loss of a single doctrine of our most holy faith; let me rather say with every doctrine more fully established than ever. Who does not know that many of the enemies of Christianity in this land have made the alleged defects of our Authorized Version the chief ground of their attacks on the Gospel? 'Give us a new translation,' they have often cried, 'and you will see what will become of your favourite dogmas.' The Revised Version supplies a crushing answer to all these assailants. The New Testament has been translated once more by men whose competency none can dispute. And what is the result? Not a single stone in the fabric of Christian truth has been disturbed! The Trinity, the proper Deity of Christ, the personality of the Holy Ghost, and the atonement, remain just where they were, and are even more clearly brought out than before. For all this, I ask you to join me in thanking, blessing, and praising God. We may boldly say, 'Thy Word is truth.' 'Thy Word is very pure: therefore thy servant loveth it.' (John xvii. 17; Ps. cxix. 140.) [Extract from *a Charge at the Primary Visitation delivered by Bishop Ryle in the Parish Church of All Saints, Wigan, Lancashire, October 20, 1881.*]

It is incumbent on Christians, who are unable to study these ancient copies in their original languages, to use the best available trans-

lation of the Word of God from those copies. The AV, with its minor revisions, has reigned supreme for hundreds of years, and deserved to. The AV will always remain the only true English version for many devout Christians. But now another English version has been published that deserves to be taken very seriously as a worthy relative of the AV. This new version is the English Standard Version (ESV) published in 2001. It is a version derived from the excellent Revised Standard Version (RSV) of 1971, which in turn came from the RSV 1952, which itself came from the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV) and the Revised Version of 1885 (RV), which were themselves revisions of the AV. There was a great deal of outstanding Biblical linguistic scholarship involved in all of these revisions. The ESV comes from a long line of dedicated Biblical scholarship. As was said by Scrivener, a renowned biblical scholar of the latter part of the 19th century, “only a revision wholly derived from the AV and which takes account of newly-discovered ancient manuscripts with ever deeper studies of the languages of those manuscripts, and taken in hand by those biblical scholars who uphold the Bible as being the Word of God, will a worthy successor to the AV be possible.” I believe the ESV fulfils those conditions.

The 20th century saw a proliferation of new versions of the Bible in English, and it is no coincidence that the first edition of the New English Bible in the 1960s, (what I would call the *Liberal Version*), did not owe very much to a literal translation of the ancient languages, nor to Christian scholarship of any other English version. It was to be a “modern” version owing virtually nothing to tradition, but everything to what the Liberals deemed relevant to the times in which they lived. It was primarily a paraphrase that was so trendily up-to-date, that within a few years it was already out of date. When it was decided to issue a new edition of it, it was thought better to have a whole new translation rather than a revision. There is no danger of that happening to the ESV, whose majestic language is worthy of the AV tradition from which it comes.

The superiority of the ESV to every other 20th century translation amounts to this: it adopts the only sound policy for translating the ancient languages that was followed by the AV, of a literal word-for-word translation, improving on the AV tendency to use a variety of synonyms for the same Hebrew or Greek word. The Christ-centred translator will not deviate from as near a literal word-for-word translation of the original languages as possible, for he believes he is translating the very oracles of God and knows the importance of every single word of the ancient manuscripts, be they great or small. However, a mechanical literalism of grammar and words is not possible from one language to another. For example, Young’s 19th century literal translation of the Bible proved that, without some literary allowances for the different English grammar, syntax and idiom from that of the ancient Hebrew and Greek, its grammatical incoherencies and syntactic anomalies made it unreadable in many places. The ESV follows Luther’s very wise statement concerning his translation of the Bible into German, that the translator must ensure the revelation of the Word of God is to be understood by the Germans in their own language by adapting the ancient languages to speak as Germans would speak today. But unlike Luther, whose translation was the first in German, the ESV has the great advantage of following the familiar language of the AV that has been so long established.

In an ideal world all Christians would choose to be students of the Hebrew and New Testament Greek languages of the Bible, so that they could read the ancient manuscripts in virtually the same language as the original God-inspired writers. Whatever anyone says, it is impossible to revive those dead languages to be the living languages in

which someone brought up in England can think and speak as naturally in those languages, as he can his native tongue. A plain reading of texts in the English Bible allows you to draw from memory, at an instant, those parallel passages from other Epistles and Gospels and Books of the OT that ensures that the Bible is made to interpret itself more easily. That can never be done naturally by using dead languages, even if one had grammatically mastered them. A living language has to be used regularly in conversations, reading and writing, on a daily basis, to become part of one's natural way of thinking and speaking. Ancient languages can never meet that criterion except for the most ardent Biblical scholar over a lifetime of study.

I have, over many years, studied an extensive number of Bible texts for the accuracy of their translation, comparing the many versions with the ancient languages, and without doubt the RSV of 1971 was more accurate than any other 20th century version I studied. The selection of that version to revise was absolutely right. The ESV has now corrected most of the RSV's textual errors and has greatly improved the accuracy of its word-for-word translation. The Evangelical scholars who supervised the ESV have the highest reputations for scholarship and for their faithfulness to a belief in the Bible being the Word of God for our salvation. A complete list of the Translation Oversight Committee, the Translation Review Scholars, and the Advisory Council, is available upon request from HarperCollins Publishers.

I must also add another important advantage that ESV has over other versions. It is that it very wisely uses, for its centre column Bible references the outstanding 19th century RV parallel text references over which a great deal of scholarly effort was expended to get the essential references exactly right. The ESV committee should be congratulated for using those references that I have used for many years myself as a starting point for examining parallel passages.

The Crossways ESV American edition includes some very helpful introductions to each book of the Bible, and the scholarship behind them gives them great weight. The HarperCollins ESV English edition does not include those introductions. I do not know why this is the case, unless it was felt that the introductions contain debatable opinions that should have no place in the Bible.

I have for many years prayed for such a Bible as this to be published, based on the RSV of 1971, which was my "conversion Bible", and therefore I highly recommend the ESV for those who have been brought up in the AV and RSV tradition of high scholarship, accurate word-for-word translation, and faithfulness of interpretation.

PREFACE

OF

THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION BIBLE

[published by HarperCollins 2001AD]

The Bible

“This Book [is] the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God.” With these words the Moderator of the Church of Scotland hands a Bible to the new monarch in the British coronation service. These words echo the King James Version Bible translators, who wrote in 1611: “God’s sacred Word ... is that inestimable treasure that excelleth all the riches of the earth.” This assessment of the Bible is the motivating force behind the publication of the English Standard Version.

Translation Legacy

The English Standard Version (ESV) stands in the classic mainstream of English Bible translations over the past half-millennium. The fountainhead of that stream was William Tyndale’s New Testament of 1526; marking its course were the King James Version of 1611 (KJV), the Revised Version of 1885 (RV), the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV), and the Revised Standard Version of 1952 and 1971 (RSV). In that stream, faithfulness to the text and vigorous pursuit of accuracy were combined with simplicity, beauty, and dignity of expression. Our goal has been to carry forward this legacy for a new century.

To this end each word and phrase in the ESV has been carefully weighed against the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, to ensure the fullest accuracy and clarity and to avoid under-translating or overlooking any nuance of the original text. The words and phrases themselves grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy, and most recently out of the RSV with the 1971 RSV text providing the starting point for our work. Archaic language has been brought to current usage and significant corrections have been made in the translation of key texts. But throughout, our goal has been to retain the depth of meaning and enduring language that have made their indelible mark on the English-speaking world and have defined the life and doctrine of the church over the last four centuries.

Translation Philosophy

The ESV is an “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on “word-for-word” correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original.

In contrast to the ESV some Bible versions have followed a “thought-for-thought” rather than “word-for-word” translation philosophy, emphasizing “dynamic equivalence” rather than the “essentially literal” meaning of the original. A “thought-for-thought” translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture.

Every translation is at many points a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between “formal equivalence” in expression and “functional equivalence” in communication, and the ESV is no exception. Within this framework we have sought to be “as literal as possible” while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence. Therefore, to the extent that plain English permits and the meaning in each case allows, we have sought to use the same English word for important recurring words in the original; and, as far as grammar and syntax allow, we have rendered Old Testament passages cited in the New in ways that show their correspondence. Thus in each of these areas, as well as throughout the Bible as a whole, we have sought to capture the echoes and overtones of meaning that are so abundantly present in the original texts.

As an essentially literal translation, then, the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language. As such, it is ideally suited for in-depth study of the Bible. Indeed, with its emphasis on literary excellence, the ESV is equally suited for public reading and preaching, for private reading and reflection, for both academic and devotional study, and for Scripture memorization.

Translation Style

The ESV also carries forward classic translation principles in its literary style. Accordingly it retains theological terminology—words such as grace, faith, justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, propitiation—because of their central importance for Christian doctrine and also because the underlying Greek words were already becoming key words and technical terms in New Testament times.

The ESV lets the stylistic variety of the biblical writers fully express itself—from the exalted prose that opens Genesis, to the flowing narratives of the historical books, to the rich metaphors and dramatic imagery of the poetic books, to the ringing rhetorical indictments in the prophetic books, to the smooth elegance of Luke, to the profound simplicities of John, and the closely-reasoned logic of Paul.

In punctuating, paragraphing, dividing long sentences, and rendering connectives, the ESV follows the path that seems to make the ongoing flow of thought clearest in English. The biblical languages regularly connect sentences by frequent repetition of words such as “and,” “but,” and “for,” in a way that goes beyond the conventions of literary English. Effective translation, however, requires that these links in the original be reproduced so that the flow of the argument will be transparent to the reader. We have therefore normally translated these connectives, though occasionally we have varied the rendering by using alternatives (such as “also,” “however,” “now,” “so,” “then,” or “thus”) when they better capture the sense in specific instances.

In the area of gender language, the goal of the ESV is to render literally what is in the original. For example, “anyone” replaces “any man” where there

is no word corresponding to “man” in the original languages, and “people” rather than “men” is regularly used where the original languages refer to both men and women. But the words “man” and “men” are retained where a male meaning component is part of the original Greek or Hebrew. Similarly, the English word “brothers” (translating the Greek word *adelphoi*) is retained as an important familial form of address between fellow Jews and fellow-Christians in the first century. A recurring note is included to indicate that the term “brothers” (*adelphoi*) was often used in Greek to refer to both men and women, and to indicate the specific instances in the text where this is the case. In addition, the English word “sons” (translating the Greek word *huiioi*) is retained in specific instances because of its meaning as a legal term in the adoption and inheritance laws of first-century Rome. As used by the apostle Paul, this term refers to the status of all Christians, both men and women, who, having been adopted into God’s family, now enjoy all the privileges, obligations, and inheritance rights of God’s children.

The inclusive use of the generic “he” has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it. Similarly, where God and man are compared or contrasted in the original, the ESV retains the generic use of “man” as the clearest way to express the contrast within the framework of essentially literal translation.

In each case the objective has been 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.

Textual Basis

The ESV is based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (2nd ed., 1983), and on the Greek text in the 1993 editions of the Greek New Testament (4th corrected ed.), published by the United Bible Societies (UBS), and *Novum Testamentum Graece* (27th ed.), edited by Nestle and Aland. The currently renewed respect among Old Testament scholars for the Masoretic text is reflected in the ESV’s attempt, wherever possible, to translate difficult Hebrew passages as they stand in the Masoretic text rather than resorting to emendations or to finding an alternative reading in the ancient versions. In exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or, if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text. Similarly, in a few difficult cases in the New Testament, the ESV has followed a Greek text different from the text given preference in the UBS/Nestle-Aland 27th edition. In this regard the footnotes that accompany the ESV text are an integral part of the ESV translation, informing the reader of textual variations and difficulties and showing how these have been resolved by the ESV translation team. In addition to this, the footnotes indicate significant alternative readings and occasionally provide an explanation for technical terms or for a difficult reading in the text. Throughout, the translation team has benefited greatly from the massive textual resources that have become readily available recently, from new insights into biblical laws and culture, and from current advances in Hebrew and Greek lexicography and grammatical understanding.

Publishing Team

The ESV publishing team includes more than a hundred people. The fourteen-member Translation Oversight Committee has benefited from the work of fifty biblical experts serving as Translation Review Scholars and from the comments of the more than fifty members of the Advisory Council, all of which has been carried out under the auspices of the Good News Publishers Board of Directors. This hundred-member team, which shares a common commitment to the truth of God's Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy, is international in scope and includes leaders in many denominations.

To God's Honour and Praise

We know that no Bible translation is perfect or final; but we also know that God uses imperfect and inadequate things to his honor and praise. So to our triune God and to his people we offer what we have done, with our prayers that it may prove useful, with gratitude for much help given, and with ongoing wonder that our God should ever have entrusted to us so momentous a task.

Soli Deo Gloria!—To God alone be the glory!

*The Translation Oversight Committee**

*A complete list of the Translation Oversight Committee, the Translation Review Scholars, and the Advisory Council, is available upon request from HarperCollins Publishers.