
First impressions of the English Standard Version

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Having used the ESV (American version) in personal reading almost since it first appeared my impressions are somewhat mixed. It reads well in narrative sections and in the Psalms, but on occasion seems a little stilted—‘And the people were without number who came with him from Egypt’, rather than, ‘And the people who came with him from Egypt were without number’. I was surprised at some of the words that are used; ‘chambers’, ‘abode’, ‘multitude’, ‘whoredom’ (which my computer’s spell-check doesn’t recognise!), for example. The Old Testament temple now has a ‘nave’, and ‘resident alien’ suggests a visitor from outer space—but perhaps this is altered in the English version. I did not find it significantly easier to read than, say, the NKJV, in more difficult sections like the prophets and epistles. I have enjoyed using it, but it is not as readable as NIV and, perhaps regrettably, I think most people are likely to go for readability. ‘The words and phrases themselves,’ we are told, ‘grow out of the Tyndale-King James legacy’ and this may be a little unfortunate in that I suspect a tendency to retain words and phrases that could be replaced by those that are clearer and more appropriate for the second millennium.

The ESV was published in America in the autumn of 2001, and in Britain early in 2002. The 1971 RSV text provided ‘the starting point’ for this translation. Nevertheless the Preface informs us that ‘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 NKJV and ESV are both based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible, but in the NT the NKJV is based on what is known as the Received Text, whereas ESV is based on UBS 4 and Nestle/Aland 27. For some this will make ESV less acceptable, but others will believe it is a real advantage. Both in the OT and NT there are footnotes indicating differences in the textual record or translational alternatives.

The ESV advertises itself as an ‘essentially literal’ translation. It says that its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word correspondence’. Having said this, however, it inevitably has to qualify it, for no translation can have precise word-for-word correspondence. ‘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.’ The Preface continues, ‘As an essentially literal translation, then, 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.’ This is a very high aim, and the claims made are considerable.

For myself, I have some doubt about attempting an ‘essentially literal’ translation that seeks ‘word-for-word correspondence’. Where receptor languages are not too dissimilar from the original language accuracy may well mean a degree of word-for-word correspondence is possible, but the goal should not be such correspondence in itself but an accurate expression of the sense of the original words. In some respects my impression is that ESV sometimes carries literalness too far, while in others it shows a freedom which is unexpected, but on the whole, improves the translation. This is only an impression, but I have compared ESV with more than half of the NT in Greek.

So far as literalness is concerned I noticed a tendency to retain a chiasmic pattern from the original, ‘I will destroy the wisdom of the wise, and the discernment of the discerning I will thwart.’ There is even a chiasm which is not in the original, ‘nevertheless, like men you shall die, and fall like any prince’ (Psalm 82:7). Regarding freedom in translation consider, for example, Ephesians 2:8,9 ‘And this is not *your own doing*; it is the gift of God. Not *a result of works...*’. Or, Ephesians 4:29 ‘... but only such as is good for building up, *as this fits the occasion...*’. I think these are rather surprising for an essentially literal translation, and in the last reference it could be argued that NIV ‘*according to their needs*’ is more accurate, though REB supports ESV here. In 1 Corinthians 8:1 the word ‘this’ is inserted without any textual support, ‘This “knowledge” puffs up...’, which seems to change the meaning completely and loses the balance of the two clauses in the sentence.

ESV retains theological terminology, so words like ‘propitiation’, ‘regeneration’, ‘justification’ and so on are to be found. On the vexed question of gender language the Preface says, ‘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.’ The Preface also indicates that where the Greek word ‘brothers’ refers to both men and women this has been footnoted. This means that there are many such footnotes in the Epistles and the repetition gets tedious. It seems as if the translators could not bring themselves to grasp the nettle here. If the word refers to ‘brothers and sisters’ isn’t that the most accurate translation?

The ESV is well presented and the print is clear. There are cross-references, and the footnotes contain useful information as well as textual and translational alternatives. There are brief but valuable introductions to each book. The translators are committed to ‘the truth of God’s Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy’. They have done their task well and there is much that is commendable about the ESV. But the question that nags is this: what niche is there for it amongst British evangelicals? My own view is that it is unlikely to displace the NIV in churches where that has become established. I am left with the conclusion that it is those who favour the NKJV but who do not accept that the Received Text is necessarily the best who are most likely to turn to ESV. This, I would have thought, may not be a very large market.

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