Compass Life Adult Sunday School John Goodrich

**“English Translation Theory and the Formation of the ESV”** May 19, 2019

**I. Why are there so many different English translations of the Bible? Aren’t all translations created equal?**

Defining Key Terms

* *Translation*—the rendering of a given literary composition from one language into another.

*Version/Primary translation*—a translation of a literary composition from its original language(s) into another language.

* *Second translation*—a translation of a primary translation.
* *Literal translation*—a translation that prioritizes formal equivalence, expressing the exact meaning of the original words of a source text (*Vorlage*).
* *Paraphrase*—a translation that prioritizes functional/dynamic equivalence, preserving the original ideas of phrases and whole sentences of a source text, sometimes at the expense of the original words.

While all translations aim to communicate God’s revealed word to a particular readership, not all translations utilize the same methods, infer the same meanings, rely on the same manuscripts, and have the same target audiences. Thus, all translations have a particular purpose, but not all translations are created equal.

**II. How do I know what the best Bible translations are? What criteria should I use to evaluate translations?**

Important Questions for Evaluating Translations

* What source text(s) does the translation use?
* What corpuses does the translation include?
* Who is going to be using the translation and for what purposes?
* How literal, readable, and accurate is the translation?
* What are the qualifications of the translator(s)?
* What theological or denominational perspectives does the translation adopt?

Translations suit different people and various purposes. Yet generally speaking, adult Bible readers should favor versions translated literally and accurately from the best extant Hebrew and Greek manuscripts by reputable scholars representing the reader’s own theological commitments. Moreover, adults should privilege translations that communicate clearly to modern sensibilities and in ways that will aid in the close study and memorization of Scripture.

**III. Can I really trust the English Standard Version (ESV)?**

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| **A Selective Survey of Important Bible Translations** | | |
| ***Translation*** | ***Source Texts*** | ***Type of Translation*** |
| Diatessaron (c. 160-175) | Greek NT Gospels | Literal, primary translation |
| Peshitta (2nd cent.) | Hebrew Bible, LXX, and Greek NT | Literal, mostly primary translation |
| Coptic Versions (2nd-3rd cent.) | LXX and Greek NT | Literal, semi-primary translation |
| Old Latin Versions (2nd-4th cent.) | LXX and Greek NT | Literal, semi-primary translation |
| Latin Vulgate (late 4th cent.) | Hebrew Bible and Greek NT | Literal, primary translation |
| Early English Versions (7th-8th cent.) | Vulgate | Literal, secondary translations |
| Wycliffe Bible (1380/1382) | Vulgate | Literal, secondary translation |
| Tyndale Bible (1526) | Hebrew Bible and Greek NT (*textus receptus*) | Literal, primary translation |
| Other Early Modern-English Versions (1537) | Hebrew Bible, Greek NT, modern translations | Literal, mostly primary translations |
| King James Version (1611) | Hebrew Bible and Greek NT (*textus receptus*) | Literal, primary translation |
| Revised Version (1881/1885) | Hebrew MT and Greek NT (Wescott and Hort) | Literal, primary translation |
| American Standard Version (1901) | Hebrew MT and Greek NT (Wescott and Hort) | Literal, primary translation |
| Revised Standard Version (1946/1952) | Hebrew MT (w/DSS and LXX influence) and Greek NT (Nestle 17th ed.) | Literal, primary translation |
| Living Bible (1967/1971) | American Standard Version | Paraphrase, secondary translation |
| New American Standard Bible (1971) | Hebrew MT (w/DSS and LXX influence) and Greek NT (Nestle’s 23rd ed.) | Literal, primary translation |
| New International Version (1973/1978) | Hebrew MT (w/influence from various other witnesses) and Greek NT (NA/UBS). | Semi-literal, primary translation |
| New King James Version (1979/1982) | Hebrew MT (w/LXX influence), and Greek NT (*textus receptus*) | Literal, primary translation |
| New Revised Standard Version (1989) | Hebrew MT (w/DSS and LXX influence) and Greek NT (UBS 3rd ed.) | Literal, primary translation |
| The Message (1993/2002) | Hebrew MT and Greek NT (UBS 4th ed.) | Paraphrase, primary translation |
| New Living Translation (1996) | Hebrew MT and Greek NT (UBS 4th ed.) | Paraphrase, primary translation |
| English Standard Version (2001) | Hebrew MT (w/influence from various other witnesses) and Greek NT (NA 27th ed./UBS 4th ed.). | Literal, primary translation |

A Closer Look at the ESV

* Source Texts—Hebrew MT (w/influence from various other witnesses) and Greek NT (NA 27th ed./UBS 4th ed.).
* Translation Committee—A 15-member oversight committee comprised of leading evangelical scholars and chaired by J. I. Packer.
* Translation Legacy—The RSV provides the starting point for the ESV.
* Translation Philosophy—An “essentially literal” translation that seeks as far as possible to reproduce the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer.
* Exegetical Accuracy—While no translation can claim to convey with precision every intended nuance of every Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek word or phrase, the ESV reflects with great accuracy the meanings of the original authors in their historical-cultural contexts.
* Global Distribution—Ranked 4th best-selling Bible translation of 2018, behind NIV, NKJV, and NLT. In 2013, Gideon’s International announced it would be transitioning its modern English version from the NKJV to the ESV, which will make the ESV one of the most widely distributed versions in the world.

Yes, you really *can* and *should* trust the English Standard Version (ESV). Not only is the ESV based on the very best extant OT and NT witnesses and translated by a team of highly respected evangelical scholars, but it is literal, highly readable, and very accurate in its handling of the original languages. Furthermore, its widespread usage makes the ESV “well suited for public reading and preaching, for private reading and reflection, for both academic and devotional study, and for Scripture memorization” (ESV preface).