Notes on the ESV (English Standard Version of the Bible)

by Gary Copeland, most recently edited in July 2023.

The 66 books that constitute the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The ESV is a popular "**version**" (meaning "**translation** from the original languages") written in a modern, easy-to-read style. Although I do not use the ESV routinely, I actually selected it for the lessons which appear on my YouTube channel (http://youtube.com/biblehighlightsgc/playlists) because of one particularly precise rendering of a passage with significant implications.

At https://truthonlybible.com/2015/11/23/aramaic-the-bibles-third-language/, (written 11/23/2015, link verified 7/25/2023), there's a helpful study about Aramaic and its use in the Bible.

Some Bible passages (like *any words*) are simply hard to translate.

Translating *the Bible* is particularly difficult because of the sheer import of each word.

- **Genesis 49:10** – ESV, "until tribute comes to" Judah, rather than the NKJV, "until Shiloh comes". The ESV reading comes "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."

- **Leviticus 16:8, 10, 26** – "Azazel" (a transliteration from Hebrew, maintained in the ASV and even the Spanish Reina-Valera, and (lowercase) in the Holman Christian Standard Bible), as if it's a **proper noun** (such as a person or evil spirit, from apocryphal influence) **or a fixed place** in the wilderness, rather than "**scapegoat**" (as in the KJV/NKJV, NASB, NIV). "Scapegoat" seems more fitting with the concept of "removal" of sin, according to the context of the passage, especially **Leviticus 16:20ff**. Note that Young's Literal Translation renders "a goat of departure" and the Wycliffe Bible is inconsistent, reading "the scapegoat for Azazel" twice and simply "Azazel" once, in v. 10. ESV footnote, "The meaning of Azazel is uncertain; possibly the name of a place or a demon, traditionally a scapegoat" (retrieved 6/18/2018, edited slightly).

- **1 Samuel 13:1** – ESV, "Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel". NKJV, "Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel." Footnotes on BibleGateway.com: **The Hebrew is difficult** (compare 2 Samuel 5:4; 2 Kings 14:2; see also 2 Samuel 2:10; Acts 13:21); Hebrew, "Saul was one year old when he became king, and he reigned two years over Israel" (see 1 Samuel 10:6); some Greek manuscripts give Saul's age when he began to reign as thirty years.

Some versions change (hopefully improve!) over time.

The ESV was originally published in 2001 and was updated in 2011. Here are examples of significant changes — improvements, in my view — in the updated ESV:

	ESV 2001	**ESV 2011**
1 Samuel 13:1	Saul was … years old when he began to reign, and he reigned … and two years over Israel. *(The ellipses are actually in the ESV!)*	Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel,
Ephesians 5:7	Do not associate	Do not become partners
Philippians 2:7	made himself nothing	emptied himself
2 Timothy 3:17	that the man of God may be <u>competent</u>,	that the man of God may be <u>complete</u>,
1 John 2:16	pride in possessions	the pride of life

Comments about this document

This is not a discussion of the history of the ESV, and I don't pretend to know the reasoning behind the particular word choices. Also, this is not an explanation of the differences in the manuscripts and texts from which the Bible is translated. I'm simply trying to **catalogue some problems and some advantages of this version** as I run across them. Because I've been using the New King James Version (NKJV) for a long time, most of these notes were sparked by noticing the differences between the ESV and the NKJV.

I realize that no translation has ever been, or will ever be, beyond criticism, and these notes are not intended to be picky, petty, or pedantic. So I've actually culled a few examples where my preference for a language style (e.g., Habakkuk 1:5) or word choice (e.g., Exodus 4:25) was showing, or which were inconsequential (e.g., Genesis 48:22). But as we study God's holy writings, hopefully these notes will cause us to think about the version we're using and maybe even help us understand some important points. Please email me with any questions, corrections, or additions related to this list: garydavidcopeland@gmail.com.

Where the ESV's rendering is disagreeable

- **No use of italics** to indicate words not actually in the text. Because a precise, word-for-word translation of any language to another sounds clumsy, the art of translating often employs some added words to help smooth the reading. There is a long-standing practice of identifying those added words by italicizing them. Some people may imagine that the use of italics is confusing, and the whole exercise may seem fairly insignificant, but this is not simply a question for scholars and linguists to debate; it creates real problems in Bible reading.

    One of the best examples of the benefit of italics (and even arguing against the addition of *any* words) is in **John 8:24, ESV:** "… Unless you believe that I am he you will die in your sins." Italicizing "he" (as in the NKJV) would be appropriate seeing that there is no pronoun in the Greek, and *omitting* "he" allows us to understand Jesus to be claiming to be the "I AM" - Jehovah God! - as from **Exodus 3:14**. The passage would read, "Unless you believe that I am, you will die in your sins."

- **A tendency to *interpret* rather than *translate*.** For example, the ESV renders **1 Corinthians 1:26** as "worldly standards," rather than (NKJV) "according to the flesh." A similar example is in **Matthew 5:22** where the ESV renders "raca" as "whoever insults his brother." Matthew's use of the Aramaic "raca" should either be *translated* (perhaps, "fool") or left in Aramaic, as it is in Matthew 27:46: "Eli, Eli, lema sabachthani" (although Matthew does explain *that phrase* for the reader by translating it to Greek), but it should not be *interpreted* to the broader "insults his brother." See also notes on **1 Cor. 7:1** below.
  This tendency of the ESV is actually one of the most serious criticisms I have against it. Those who wrote the ESV should *translate* the text and leave the reader to grapple with its meaning.

- **Genesis 15:13** – ESV renders it as "They will be afflicted for four hundred years." This means that the Egyptian suffering and bondage would last 400 years. Also, the ESV rendering of Acts 7:6-7 specifies the time in Egypt as 400 years. The wording of the NKJV, however ("…four hundred years and the nation they serve I will judge…") leaves room for moving punctuation to understand that the "400 years" belongs with the previous phrase.
    Why does this matter? The NKJV translation allows for a more accurate time span. *From the giving of the promise to Abraham through the time in Egypt* would be a *total* of 400(-ish) years. Note that **Galatians 3:16-17** specifies the period from God making the promises to the giving of the Law as "430 years."

- **Ezekiel 18:20** – The ESV renders the second sentence in that verse as "The son shall not suffer for the iniquity of the father, nor the father suffer for the iniquity of the son." The NKJV reads,

"The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son."

    Why does this matter? Our human experience tells us that people frequently "suffer" because of the sinful choices of others. So the NKJV rendering is much better and fits with the rest of the passage teaching that "The soul who sins shall die" and that "The righteousness of the righteous shall be upon himself, and the wickedness of the wicked shall be upon himself."

- **Matthew 16:18** – ESV, "the gates of <u>hell</u>," though the Greek word is for "Hades," as even the ESV footnote admits.

    Why does this matter? The words "Hell" and "Hades" have very different meanings. Specifically, the realm of Satan (Hell) prevails against the church every time a Christian is overcome by his sins and returns to the world. On the other hand, the realm of the dead (Hades) has no power whatsoever over the church, thanks to the resurrection of Jesus.

- **Matthew 24:28** – ESV, "vultures" (the perhaps expected carrion bird), rather than, as in the NKJV, "eagles". "Eagles" is both truer to the Greek and were a symbol of the Roman army since 104 B.C. (See http://www.bible-history.com/archaeology/rome/2-roman-eagle-bb.html.)

    Why does this matter? It was the Roman army which fulfilled the predictions Jesus made there in Matthew 24. (Incidentally, an eagle will also eat carrion.)

- **Luke 13:15-16** – ESV, "untie" (v. 15) and "loose" (v. 16), rather than, as in the NKJV, "loose" in both verses.

    Why does this matter? The ESV's use of *different* words obscures the fact that Jesus used the *same* (Greek) word, emphasizing His "lesser to the greater" argument about healing the woman.

- **Acts 18:24** – The ESV says Apollos was "competent," rather than (NKJV) "mighty" in the Scriptures. The Greek is <dunatos>. "Mighty" is closer to the Greek and carries a much stronger connotation.

- **Romans 2:1-11** – ESV chops a long sentence into several sentences, thus having to add words to do so.

- **Romans 6:17** – ESV, "standard" of teaching, rather than NKJV, "form" of doctrine. Strong's: Short definition: a figure, model, type. Definition: (originally: the mark of a blow, then a stamp struck by a die), (a) a figure; a copy, image, (b) a pattern, model, (c) a type, prefiguring something or somebody.

- **Romans 7:3** – ESV, "she lives with another man," rather than, as in the NASB, "she is joined to another man" or NKJV, "she marries another man". Note that the same Greek word is used in the first and last parts of the verse, but the ESV translates them differently (i.e., inconsistently).

- **1 Corinthians 3:4** – ESV translates Greek <sarkikos> as "human" instead of "fleshly" or "carnal."

- **1 Corinthians 7:1** – ESV *interprets* the Greek <G680 haptomai> as "have sexual relations" instead of simply (as in the NKJV, NASB, and many others) "touch". Strong's defines that Greek word as follows: "Properly, to attach oneself to, i.e. to touch (in many implied relations)." Note how this Greek word is used in other passages, to touch the hem of Jesus' garment or to touch someone's eyes. 1 Corinthians 7:1 simply says "to touch" a woman. (Remember my complaint about the ESV *interpreting* instead of *translating*.)

- **Revelation 13:8** – ESV, "everyone whose <u>name</u> has not been <u>written</u> <u>before</u> the foundation of the world in the book of life of the Lamb who was slain," rather than, "the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world" (as in the NKJV and others). The translations among *all* the versions show two key differences, the translation of a preposition and the connection of its prepositional phrase to an event. 1) Fifteen versions on BibleGateway.com (as of 7/15/2023) including the ESV translate the Greek preposition (ἀπό, <apo>) as "before", which seems unsupportable, according to lexicographers Vine, Strong, and Thayer, while the other 47 translate it as "from" or "since." 2) Some translations have the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world, while others

have the names written from the foundation of the world.

    Why does this matter? Besides the apparent mistranslation of that preposition, the question is whether that time reference (related to the foundation of the world) should apply to the *writing* of people's names in the Lamb's Book of Life, or to the death of the Lamb. It is true that the plan for Jesus to be the sacrifice for sins was made before the creation of the earth (see Ephesians 3:11), so there would be no theological inconsistency in suggesting that Jesus was slain "before" the creation. But because the ESV translates "before" the creation and applies it to the *writing of the names*, that translation seems to give support to the Calvinistic doctrine (as contrasted with the Biblical doctrine) of predestination. (One version, the ICB, changes the word order to apply the phrase to "all the people since the beginning of the world whose names are not written.")

    Note that the ESV (correctly) translates that same Greek preposition as "from" in **Revelation 17:8**: "names … written in the book of life from the foundation of the world." In that passage, which speaks only of the writing of the names, only four — less literal — versions (namely, the CEV, GNT, TLB, NLT) translate <apo> "before", and a couple others (the GW and NOG) render "when the world was created", again being unsupported as a translation.

Where the ESV's rendering is agreeable

- **Leviticus 10:1** – ESV, "unauthorized fire," is clearer in English than NKJV, "strange" fire.

- **Ruth 2:22** – ESV, "assault," is truer to the Hebrew <paga> than NKJV, "meet" you.

- **Ecclesiastes 1:8** – ESV, "full of weariness," is truer to the Hebrew <yagea> than NKJV "labor."

- **Jeremiah 27:1** – ESV, "In the beginning of the reign of Zedekiah the son of Josiah," is better than the NKJV "Jehoiakim".

  Footnote: Following Masoretic Text, Targum, and Vulgate; some Hebrew manuscripts, Arabic, and Syriac read Zedekiah (compare 27:3, 12; 28:1). Septuagint omits verse 1.

- **Daniel 2:44-45** – Better punctuation to connect the elements of the dream to the interpretation (done by God, shattering other kingdoms).

- **John 3:16** – ESV, God "gave his only son," is truer to the Greek than NKJV, "His only begotten son."

- **John 14:2** – ESV, "In my Father's house are many rooms" is truer to the Greek than NKJV, "mansions."

- **Romans 11:26** – ESV, "In this way all Israel will be saved" is true to the unambiguous Greek and prompts the reader to ask, "In *what* way?" (It drives the reader to study the context!)

  The NKJV here renders the passage, "So all Israel will be saved." The word "so" can have *four* meanings in English, so a quick, out-of-context reading makes it sound like a conclusion statement, flatly (unconditionally) stating that all Israel *will* be saved, which is *not* the case.

- **2 Timothy 3:16** – ESV, "All Scripture is breathed out by God," is truer to the Greek <theopneustos> than the KJV/NKJV, "given by inspiration of God."

- **Hebrews 8:2** – ESV, "in the holy places", is truer to the Greek <hagion>, while NKJV interprets as "the sanctuary."

- **Hebrews 10:19** – As in Hebrews 8:2, the ESV rendering, "enter the holy places" is truer to the Greek <hagion> than NKJV "the holiest."

- **1 John**, throughout – ESV, "makes a practice of sinning," "keep on sinning," etc. is truer to the Greek tense and less confusing in the **context** of **1 John 1:7 – 2:2** which makes clear that Christians – those in the light – will sin. The ESV's rendering helps distinguish the *occasional* sin from a *lifestyle* of sin.

Different renderings supportable from the same Greek words

- **Matthew 10:32** – ESV, "everyone who <u>acknowledges</u> Me before men," rather than NKJV, "confesses."

- **Luke 2:49** – ESV, "I must be <u>in my Father's house</u>," rather than NKJV "<u>about My Father's business</u>."

- **Hebrews 10:29** – ESV, "outraged," rather than NKJV, "insulted."

- **Hebrews 10:39** – ESV, "preserve," rather than KJV "saving" their souls.

Different renderings because of the choice of Greek text

(Most of these omissions occur in other versions that use the same Greek text. They're considered "omissions" because most of the versions that went before the ESV included them.)

- **Matthew 18:11** and **Luke 9:56** – ESV omits the mission statement, "seek and save the lost."

- **Matthew 19:9** – ESV omits the condemnation of the one who marries a woman divorced for a reason other than fornication. *ESV footnote on BibleGateway.com*: Some manuscripts add "and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery"; other manuscripts "except for sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery" (retrieved 6/18/2018).

  Note also that the ESV itself includes both aspects of Jesus' teaching in **Matthew 5:32**:

  > "But I say to you that everyone who divorces his wife, except on the ground of sexual immorality, makes her commit adultery, and whoever marries a divorced woman commits adultery."

- **Mark 9:44, 46** – ESV omits the repetitions of "where their worm does not die…."

- **Mark 10:24** – ESV omits "for those who trust in riches", which confuses the meaning.

- **Luke 4:4** – ESV omits "but by every word of God."

- **Luke 4:8** – ESV omits "Get behind Me, Satan!"

- **John 1:27** – ESV omits "is preferred before me."

- **John 5:3-4** – ESV omits the last phrase in verse 3 and omits all of verse 4. The footnote on Biblegateway.com (retrieved 6/18/2018) mentions the following: "Some manuscripts insert, wholly or in part, waiting for the moving of the water; 4 for an angel of the Lord went down at certain seasons into the pool, and stirred the water: whoever stepped in first after the stirring of the water was healed of whatever disease he had. Note that this reflects the sick man's belief which he states in verse 7 (minus the reference to an angel).

- **Acts 8:37** – ESV omits the entire verse.

- **2 Peter 3:10b** – ESV, "the earth and the works that are done on it will be <u>exposed</u>," rather than NKJV "burned up." BibleGateway.com has a footnote pointing out the manuscript difference: The NKJV notes "NU laid bare, lit. found"; the ESV notes "Greek *found;* some manuscripts *will be burned up"* (retrieved 6/18/2018).