

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

by Gary Copeland, most recently edited in 2018.

The 66 books that constitute the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. (For a helpful study about Aramaic and its use in the Bible, see <https://truthonlybible.com/2015/11/23/aramaic-the-bibles-third-language/>, retrieved June 11, 2018.) The ESV is a popular version (meaning “translation from the original languages”) written in a modern, easy-to-read style. And because of a particularly precise rendering of a passage with significant implications, I actually selected the ESV for the lessons which appear on my YouTube channel! (<http://youtube.com/biblehighlightsgc/playlists>)

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

Translating *anything* can be challenging, and translating *the Bible* is particularly so 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) which 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).
- **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. <i>(The ellipses are actually in the ESV!)</i>	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 or translational philosophy of the ESV (though I do have something to say about their tendency to *interpret*), 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." See also 1 Corinthians 7:1 where the ESV renders "to touch" (Greek <haptomai>) as "have sexual relations with." 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 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 not *interpreted* to the broader "insults his brother."

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.” But our human experience tells us that people frequently “suffer” because of the sinful choices of others. So the NKJV rendering is much better: “The son shall not bear the guilt of the father, nor the father bear the guilt of the son.”
- **Matthew 16:18** – ESV, “the gates of hell,” though the Greek word is for “Hades,” as even the ESV footnote admits. 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 NKJV “eagles”, which is both truer to the Greek and a symbol of the Roman army since 104 B.C. (See <http://www.bible-history.com/archaeology/rome/2-roman-eagle-bb.html>.) Incidentally, an eagle can also eat carrion.
- **Luke 13:15-16** – ESV, “untie” (v. 15) and “loose” (v. 16) 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>.
- **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 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.
- **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 “touch”. Strong’s: “Properly, to attach oneself to, i.e. to touch (in many implied relations):--touch.” Note how this Greek word is used in other passages, to touch the hem of Jesus’ garment or to touch someone’s eyes, and you’ll realize 1 Corinthians 7:1 simply says “to touch” a woman. (See my note above about interpreting instead of translating.)

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.

- **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.
- **Revelation 13:8** – ESV, “names written in the Book of Life before the foundation of the world,” rather than NKJV, “the Lamb slain before the foundation of the world.” While it's true that the plan for Jesus to be the sacrifice for sins was made before the creation of the earth (see Ephesians 3:11), the ESV is more consistent with **Revelation 17:8**.

Different renderings supportable from the same Greek words

- **Matthew 10:32** – ESV, “everyone who acknowledges Me before men,” rather than NKJV, “confesses.”
- **Luke 2:49** – ESV, “I must be in my Father's house,” rather than NKJV “about My Father's business.”
- **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 exposed," 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).