The English Standard Version: A Review Article

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My aim is to assess the quality of the English Standard Version of the Bible (ESV). This can be done by comparing the ESV with other translations. However, such a huge task could not be reported adequately within the scope of an article such as this. A more satisfactory alternative is to measure the ESV against what it was intended to be: that is, to compare the final product with the aims of those who produced it. By concentrating on its characteristic features and studying representative passages, even the limited survey possible here will enable us to reach sound conclusions.

Our first step, then, is to ask what kind of translation the ESV was intended to be. The answer is to be found in the Preface, where the ESV's 'Translation Oversight Committee' explains its goals and procedures.[2] We discover that, like most translators,[3] they aimed to produce a version marked by 'the fullest accuracy and clarity …'.[4] What they mean by 'accuracy' and 'clarity', and how they sought to achieve them, are the crucial issues of course.

A careful reading of the Preface shows that the Committee did its work with goals that are specific enough to provide us with the necessary criteria for measuring its quality. The *first* is that the ESV is intended as an alternative to versions based on the 'dynamic equivalence' theory of translation:

> The ESV is an "essentially literal" translation … its emphasis is on "word-for-word" correspondence ... some Bible versions have followed a "thought-for-thought" rather than "word-for-word" translation philosophy, emphasizing "dynamic equivalence" ...[5]

Closely connected with the goal of achieving 'word-for-word correspondence' with the original languages is a *second* aim: '… 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 ..'..[6] This aim involves the structure as well as the words: the ESV 'seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure ... of the original'.[7]

[1] 'The English Standard Version: A Review Article', *Reformed Theological Review*, August 2003, 62/2, pp. 61-96.

[2] I am working from the *Classic Pew and Worship Edition* (Wheaton: Crossway Bibles, 2002). The Preface occupies pp. vii-x.

[3] It is instructive to compare what the ESV and the NIV Prefaces say about the goals of their project and the character of their translation. The first page of each Preface makes similar statements in similar words!

[4] p. vii.

[5] Ibid.

[6] p. viii.

[7] p. vii.

In effect, these two goals serve to specify what 'accuracy' means, and concern the ESV's connection with the original languages. The ***third*** goal has to do with 'clarity', and concerns the language of the ESV itself. In the Preface, the Translation Oversight Committee refers to the 'classic mainstream of English Bible translations':

> 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 … Archaic language has been brought to current usage …[8]

The Committee then goes on to state:

> 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.[9]

We will now consider each of these three aims in turn. In each of the following sections, our discussion will have two stages. We will begin by assessing how well the ESV achieves the aim in question. We will then consider how valid and valuable this aim is.

For the benefit of the reader, I need to explain one other feature of this review. The first impulse towards producing it was my sense of disappointment with the ESV. This was so strong that my initial response was to put the ESV aside. Some time later I began using it again, resolved to give it a fair and thorough trial. Doing so only confirmed my original disappointment, and created additional concerns as well. For the most part, these centred on claims being made about the ESV by its Australian promoters.[10] The more I used the ESV, the more questionable these claims sounded. I also became increasingly uneasy about the criticisms being made of the New International Version (NIV) as part of the publicity for the ESV. These criticisms seemed to me to be unbalanced and unfair, as did the contrasts drawn between the NIV and the ESV. These concerns were the catalyst that prompted this article. The reader will no doubt detect that much of it involves an implicit dialogue with these promoters of the ESV and critics of the NIV.

Part 1

The ESV is intended to be an 'essentially literal' translation, 'word-for-word' rather than 'thought-for-thought'. What does this contrast with 'dynamic equivalence' translations mean in practice? (Although its Preface does not say so explicitly, it seems clear that the

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[8] Ibid.

[9] p. viii.

[10] I am referring to material produced by Matthias Media, especially its journal *The Briefing* and the *Matthias Media Resource Guide 2002/2003*. For recent criticism of the material in *The Briefing*, see D. A. Carson, 'The Limits of Functional Equivalence in Bible Translation—and Other Limits, Too' in *The Challenge of Bible Translation: Communicating God's Word to the World: Essays in Honor of Ronald F. Youngblood*, G. G. Scorgie, M. L. Strauss, and S. M. Voth (eds.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), pp. 65-113 [at 71-78]. This work became available only after I had submitted this article for publication.

contrast is with the NIV in particular.) How well do the ESV translators succeed in this first of their objectives?

1.1 Assessing the ESV's success

ESV readers who know the biblical languages will quickly find many passages where this first aim has been met. A few examples must suffice. One of many clear examples in the Old Testament is Moses' words, 'I am of uncircumcised lips' (Exod 6:12, 30). The wording 'I am of …' (rather than 'I have …') better reflects the Hebrew construction.[11] The ESV also leaves the reader to work out what 'uncircumcised lips' might mean—a concept that isn't immediately obvious! In both respects, the ESV is true to its translation philosophy. An obvious example for students of Paul is the way the ESV has restored 'the flesh' in important passages like Romans 7-8 and Galatians 5-6, providing a merciful deliverance from the NIV's quite misleading translation of σάρξ as 'the sinful nature'.[12]

However, despite a great many examples of this kind, the ESV regards some biblical expressions as too elusive to be translated literally. As a result, it gives us the thought being conveyed, rather than the words in which it is conveyed. Where this happens, a footnote is often provided, indicating what the text actually says. For example, in 1 Samuel 24:3, the text tells us that Saul went into the cave 'to relieve himself', and the footnote tells us that the Hebrew actually says, 'to cover his feet'. (Personally, I find it much easier to work out what someone who goes into a cave is doing when he 'covers his feet' than what someone with 'uncircumcised lips' is like!)

It is rather puzzling to find that the ESV doesn't do this consistently, for there are many such passages where no footnote is supplied. In 1 Samuel 25, for example, the uninhibited Hebrew of verses 22 and 34 is accurately conveyed in the KJV.[13] However, its 'any that pisseth against the wall' has become the bland 'one male' in the ESV.[14] I presume this is intended to prevent the passage being excluded from lectionaries on the grounds that it is too vulgar to be read in church.[15] This raises an important issue about translation, of course. The Old Testament is often very earthy by our standards, with the result that we can choose either to translate the words (and deal with the fall-out later) or to convey the ideas in a way that avoids such problems. But a translation that commits itself to being 'essentially literal' and 'word-for-word' can't also set about sanitising the biblical text by omitting wording that we might find embarrassing. This would be the 'dynamic equivalence' approach, which

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[11] The Hebrew has the construct adjective preceding the noun: 'uncircumcised of lips'. With this, compare Isaiah 6:5, where Isaiah laments that he is 'unclean of lips'. The Hebrew construction and the ESV translation of this verse are the same as in Exodus 6:12, 30, but the metaphor is less elusive. By way of comparison, the NIV has 'I speak with faltering lips' in Exodus 6:12, 30, but adds a footnote indicating what the Hebrew says.

[12] For the view that σάρξ in Paul refers primarily to 'the old aeon' or 'the mode of existence of the old creation', see H. N. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of his Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), pp. 64-68; also G. D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), pp. 818-822 (with a critique of the NIV rendering). In favour of the NIV rendering—and of multiple renderings of σάρξ—are P. Cotterell and M. Turner, *Linguistics and Biblical Interpretation* (London: SPCK, 1989), pp. 169-170.

[13] The 'King James' (or 'Authorised') Version of 1611.

[14] See also 1 Kings 14:10; 16:11; etc.

[15] A similar 'slimming' of the text occurs in 2 Samuel 16. The KJV's literal, 'my son, which came forth of my bowels' (v. 11) becomes simply (in both the RSV and ESV), 'my own son'.

the ESV Committee sees as reflecting 'the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture'.[16]

There are also passages where the ESV *expands* the text, but does not provide a footnote giving the actual wording. For example, where the Greek of 1 Corinthians 7:1 speaks of 'touching' a woman, the ESV gives us the idea the translators think it is expressing: 'to have sexual relations with a woman'. In verse 9 of the same chapter, the translators interpret the metaphor for us: the ESV has 'to be aflame with passion' where the Greek has 'to burn'. Again, the Greek of Romans 2:4 states that God's kindness 'leads you into repentance'. The ESV translators believe that ἄγει is what grammarians call the 'conative' use of the present tense.[17] Therefore (following the RSV), they give us the wording, '*is meant to lead* you to repentance'.

As it happens, I agree with the interpretive judgments made in these verses.[18] But such judgments are not supposed to characterise the ESV! In contrast to the approach represented by the NIV, this is a translation that seeks to give us the words not the thoughts, so that the reader and not the translator interprets the text. Yet the ESV rendering of Romans 2:4 might even be seen as an attempt to ensure that the reader can't adopt a universalist interpretation of the verse.[19] After all, there is only one way that the translator can reach the conclusion that this particular use of the present tense must be 'conative': the context precludes reading the present tense in the usual way. Paul is not stating that God's kindness does actually lead everyone to repentance, but that failure to repent in the face of his kindness only makes our judgement all the more deserved. But if the context is clear enough for the translator to see this point, why doesn't the translator trust the reader to see it too? A 'conative present' is an interpretation indicated by the context; it is not an 'essentially literal' translation.

There are many other examples of 'dynamic equivalence'[20] tendencies in the ESV, but we can only note one more here. In English, as in many languages, parts of the body stand for cognition or emotion. This can create real difficulties for the translator, especially when the original language and the language of the translation use this figure of speech differently. 'I can't get the car-smash out of my head' and 'You have stolen my heart' may be nonsense—or worse, mean something quite different—when translated literally into Malay or Xhosa. In such a case, does the translator stick to the 'word-for-word' approach,

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[16] ESV Preface, p. viii.

[17] See D. B. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics: An Exegetical Syntax of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 534-535.

[18] On the interpretation of 1 Corinthians 7:1 adopted by the ESV, see G. D. Fee, *To What End Exegesis? Essays Textual, Exegetical, and Theological* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), pp. 88-98; on 1 Corinthians 7:9, see A. C. Thiselton, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000), pp. 516-519; on Romans 2:4, see W. Sanday and A. C. Headlam, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans,* 5th ed. (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1902), p. 56.

[19] A very clear example of 'over-translating' in order to prevent a theologically unsound interpretation is the ESV's rendering of the present tense verbs in 1 John 3:4, 6, 8-9. On the use of the present tense here, see the comment by M. Silva, *Biblical Words and Their Meaning: An Introduction to Lexical Semantics,* rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), p. 160 n. 57.

[20] This terminology appears to be understood in different ways. In the ESV Preface, it is equated with 'functional' as opposed to 'formal' equivalence, and with 'thought-for-thought' as opposed to 'word-for-word' translation. Others use it in a much stronger sense: 'the drive within modern Bible translation is to conform the ancient text to the modern world ... to reproduce the same effect within the modern reader as the original reader experienced' (*The Briefing* #287, August 2002, p. 18). Throughout this article I use the terminology in the former sense.

or translate according to meaning? Despite their commitment to providing an 'essentially literal' rendering, the ESV translators have followed the latter path here. For example, the Greek word σπλάγχνον occurs ten times in the New Testament. Only once is it rendered literally;[21] elsewhere it is translated 'affection',[22] 'compassion',[23] and 'heart'.[24] The latter is especially interesting, because the ESV has retained the figure-of-speech by moving vertically up the human body, regarding 'heart' as conveying to the readers what 'bowels' conveyed to the writer. The KJV's literal rendering of one of these passages (2 Cor 6:11-13) is a clear example of the problem that would be created by not translating according to meaning.

> O ye Corinthians, our mouth is open unto you, our heart is enlarged. Ye are not straitened in us; ye are straitened in your own bowels. Now for a recompence in the same (I speak as unto my children,) be ye also enlarged.

I have yet to find any devotee of the KJV who can make sense of this passage. The ESV gives what can only be called a 'dynamic equivalence' translation, which translates what is meant rather than what is said:

> We have spoken freely to you, Corinthians; our heart is wide open. You are not restricted by us, but you are restricted in your own affections. In return (I speak as to children) widen your hearts also.

How could one object to the ESV's rendering, except on the basis of a rather legalistic adherence to the policy of 'formal equivalence'?

Our discussion to this point has raised some doubts about the ESV—but has it really been fair? After all, it has been based on little more than a handful of examples. These may be unrepresentative, and may therefore give an unfair impression of the ESV. Clearly, we need a suitably objective procedure for testing the ESV against its translators' 'essentially literal' policy.[25] The fairest way to do that within the confines of an article like this is to examine its translation of a sample passage. I have chosen 1 Corinthians 1 for this purpose—not because the ESV translates it better or worse than any other passage of similar length, but because its contents are so important for evangelical Christianity. I have also compared the ESV's renderings with those of the NASB,[26] the NIV,[27] and the NRSV.[28]

How well does the ESV succeed in providing an alternative to dynamic equivalence versions, by giving an essentially literal, word-for-word translation of this chapter? In my judgment, the ESV fails to meet this objective at the following places:

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[21] 'Intestines' in Acts 1:18.
[22] 2 Corinthians 6:12; 7:5; Philippians 1:8; 2:1.
[23] Colossians 3:12.
[24] Philemon 7, 12, 20.
[25] Preface, p. vii (as cited above).
[26] *The New American Standard Bible,* updated ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990).
[27] *The New International Version Reference Edition,* Anglicised ed. (London: Hodder, 1986).
[28] *The New Revised Standard Version,* Anglicised ed. (Oxford: OUP, 1995).

Verse 6:
'The testimony of Christ' (NRSV's literal translation) is rendered 'the testimony about Christ'. Thus the reader is not left to decide the meaning of 'of'—that is, to determine what kind of connection between 'the testimony' and 'Christ' the genitive indicates.

Verse 7:
χάρισμα is translated—wrongly—as 'spiritual gift' (as it is in the NIV and NRSV; NASB's 'gift' is correct). In the remaining 15 uses of this noun by Paul, the ESV translates it as 'gift' eleven times, 'blessing' once, and 'free gift' three times.

Verse 10:
Where a literal rendering would have 'that you all say the same' (note the KJV's 'that ye all speak the same thing'), the ESV has 'that all of you agree'—which gives the idea rather than the words. The ESV is joined here by NASB, NIV and NRSV.

Verse 12a:
The Greek is paraphrased as 'what I mean is' (so also NASB, NIV and NRSV), when an 'essentially literal' translation would be 'I say/am saying this' (compare the KJV's 'now this I say').

Verse 12b:
The slogans (literally 'I am of X': so NASB) are translated 'I follow X' (so also NIV). There are two problems here. The first is that the ESV is inconsistent, for it translates the parallel expressions in 3:23 as 'you are Christ's, and Christ is God's'. (So the NRSV's 'I belong to X' is a better alternative for verse 12.) Secondly, 'I follow X' may well give readers the false impression that the Corinthian slogans are connected with the language of the Gospels, where Jesus calls people to 'follow' him.

Verse 17:
ἐν σοφίᾳ λόγου is paraphrased quite loosely as 'in words of eloquent wisdom'. It also reverses the connection being made: Paul is referring to the 'wisdom' that is (thought to be) found in speech (rather than elsewhere), not of a speaking that is characterised by wisdom (as opposed to foolishness). NASB's 'in cleverness of speech' is better, except that it obscures the important connection with the other references to 'wisdom' in this section.

Verse 17:
In 'be emptied *of its power*' (so also NIV and NRSV), the italicised words are an interpretive addition by the translators—who thus fail again to allow the reader to determine what this 'emptying' could be (unlike the NASB, with its 'be made void').

Verse 21:
The translation 'what we preach' is loose in two respects. First, 'preach' (with its ecclesiastical overtones) is an unsatisfactory rendering of κήρυγμα, a word that refers to public announcement or proclamation (NRSV has 'our proclamation'). Secondly, Paul speaks quite generally here of 'the proclamation', without specifying that it is 'ours' (hence NASB's 'the message preached' and NIV's 'what was preached').

Verse 22:
'Jews demand signs' (so also NIV and NRSV) is unwarranted: αἰτεῖν is an ordinary word meaning to 'ask' or 'request' (as in NASB).[29] By using 'demand' the translators have again become interpreters—and maybe also judges! The Greeks receive more favourable treatment: they merely 'seek' wisdom. In the interests of even-handedness, ζητοῦσιν should perhaps be rendered 'are ambitious for', 'hunt', or even 'covet'—or (as should have happened) αἰτοῦσιν could be translated as 'ask for', with the reader being left to work out what kind of request this is.

Verse 26:
κατὰ σάρκα is rendered 'according to worldly standards' (as in the RSV; compare NIV and NRSV: 'by human standards'), instead of the literal 'according to the flesh' (so NASB). All of Paul's other uses of the expression[30] are translated literally by the ESV (except three,[31] and in each case a footnote indicates the literal sense), so it is hard to explain the translation given here. In addition to being inconsistent, it may also be misleading, as the pejorative overtones of 'worldly' are probably not warranted here.

Verse 30a:
'He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus' (so also NRSV) is a far-from-literal translation of ἐξ αὐτοῦ δὲ ὑμεῖς ἐστε ἐν Χριστῷ Ιησοῦ. Better is NASB's 'by his doing you are in Christ Jesus' or NIV's 'it is because of him that you are in Christ Jesus'.

verse 30b:
The ESV's 'whom God made our wisdom ..'. truncates and reverses Paul's actual wording. NASB ('who became to us wisdom from God'), NIV ('who has become for us wisdom from God'), and NRSV ('who became for us wisdom from God') are all superior by being more literal.

There is another important point to be made about this chapter before we leave it. Of the specific renderings considered above, only two—the second in verse 12, and the first in verse 17—differ from the RSV. Indeed, the ESV is virtually identical to the RSV throughout this chapter.[32]

What results do we get from our examination of 1 Corinthians 1? Clearly, not everything we noted is all that significant. Some involve relatively minor issues, but some are more substantial, and can be regarded as appropriate tests of how well the ESV achieves the aim of providing an 'essentially literal' translation. Overall, I think three important conclusions have emerged.

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[29] Although BDAG (*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and other Early Christian Literature,* 3rd ed., revised and edited by F. W. Danker (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2000)) gives 'demand' as one meaning of the word, a careful reading of this entry and the references it contains shows that this rendering is too strong. In the first place, it is often used in the New Testament of Christian prayer! The other contexts in which it is used usually involve the making of a request, with the expectation of receiving an answer (not, *pace* BDAG, 'with a claim on receipt of an answer'). An expectant request is by no means a demand, even though some requests may be.

[30] Romans 1:3; 4:1; 8:4, 5, 12, 13; 2 Corinthians 1:17; 5:16; 10:2-3; 11:18; Galatians 4:23, 29.

[31] 1 Corinthians 10:18; Ephesians 6:5; Colossians 3:22.

[32] There are sixteen other minor differences: 'which' becomes 'that'; 'on' becomes 'upon'; 'call' is replaced by 'calling'; and so on.

1. At least in this chapter, the ESV is essentially the RSV.
2. The ESV does give thought-for-thought as well as word-for-word translations. As far as this sample chapter is a fair guide, the issue is not whether the ESV uses a 'dynamic equivalence' approach, but how much it uses it. So the difference between the ESV and other translations is at best one of degree, rather than of kind.
3. The NASB often achieves the ESV's 'essentially literal' objective better than the ESV does. To a lesser extent, so do the NRSV and even the NIV!

1.2 Assessing the first aim

Now that we have assessed how successfully the ESV achieves this first aim, we must consider both the validity and the value of the aim itself. We begin by asking whether the aim can be achieved: to what extent can any translation give a 'word-for-word' rather than a 'thought-for-thought' rendering of the original text? Is this a valid objective? Despite its intuitive appeal, this aim involves significant problems.

In the first place, it threatens to outdo the Bible itself. Some of the biblical authors provide translations within their works, and these are by no means uniformly literal. We find a good example in the first chapter of John's Gospel. In verse 41 we see the 'formal equivalence' approach: 'Christ' is the translation of 'Messiah'. In verse 38, by contrast, we have the 'functional equivalence' approach: 'Rabbi' is rendered as 'Teacher'.[33] Equally distant from an 'essentially literal' approach is Mark 15:22. 'Golgotha' transliterates the Aramaic term for a 'round stone'[34]—so that Mark's 'place of a skull' 'is more of an interpretation than an exact translation'.[35] These and other biblical examples should make us hesitant to regard word-for-word translation as intrinsically more faithful or essential.

Secondly, even an elementary grasp of semantics[36] is enough to indicate that a completely word-for-word translation is impossible. The primary reason is very simple: words are generally spoken or written in combination in order to convey meaning—and the meaning resides in the particular combination of words rather than in the words themselves. Linguistics specialist J. P. Louw insists that meaning 'is not merely a product of the additions of the supposed individual meanings of the separate words constituting a sentence'.[37] He illustrates this by referring to ὁ δὲ ἐμὲ λαμβάνων λαμβάνει τὸν πέμψαντά με (John 13:20). 'If we merely join the meaning of each word together the following will result: "the me receiving, receives the sending me"'.[38]

This is uncomfortably reminiscent of the theological student's first fumbling attempts to 'translate' Greek or Hebrew! Like all beginning students of the biblical languages, we

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[33] Literally, of course, 'Rabbi' means 'my great one'. It came to be used in the sense 'my master' and was the customary title for a scholar and teacher of disciples. The ESV footnote at Mark 9:5, which tells us that 'Rabbi means my teacher, or my master', is rather at odds with its commitment to 'essentially literal' translation.

[34] See C. A. Evans, *Mark 8:27-16:20* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2001), p. 500.

[35] R. T. France, *The Gospel of Mark: A Commentary on the Greek Text* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), p. 642.

[36] I certainly cannot claim any more than this. I am therefore grateful for the comments on earlier drafts of this article by the Right Rev Dr. A. H. Nichols and Professor I. Malcolm.

[37] *Semantics of New Testament Greek* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1982), p. 67.

[38] Op. cit., p. 71. He also reports an exercise in which a translating machine put 'the spirit is willing but the flesh is weak' into Japanese, and then put the Japanese words back into English. The result was, 'there is some good whisky but the roast beef is mediocre'! (ibid.)

tended to be 'glossing' rather than translating.[39] Our initial efforts were much closer to an inter-linear than to a normal English translation, and our grasp of the text's meaning was generally rather slender. Whatever progress we make beyond this initial stage involves a crucial recognition: understanding the words in a document is the result of reading along them, not across them. That is, we do not read them in isolation, as detachable units of meaning; we read them in combination with the words to which they are connected. It is their literary context—their *use*—that enables us to grasp the meaning that attaches to particular words. And understanding the words is a necessary precondition of translating them successfully. This is just as true of the Bible as of any other written material: 'the linguistic bearer of the theological statement is usually the sentence and the still larger literary complex ... and not the word or the morphological and syntactical mechanisms'.[40]

Because there is a significant overlap between these issues and those raised by the goal of 'word-for-word correspondence,' we will give more attention to them in Part 2 below. Our discussion there will give further indications of the inherent difficulties with this aim.

How valid, then, is this first aim governing the production of the ESV? Clearly, it has some legitimacy—but equally clearly, it has some difficulties. In view of these problems, what is the value of setting such an objective? This first ESV aim appears to reflect an ignorance of the way language works. However, it is difficult to believe that its producers are as naïve as this suggests. Even if the contrast they make between translating words and translating thoughts is unfortunate, is this aim nevertheless getting at something important?

A careful reading of the ESV Preface suggests that a major factor in the development of this aim was dissatisfaction with the alternative: the ESV was to be 'essentially literal' because its producers saw too many problems with the 'dynamic equivalence' approach. In particular, they were uneasy about the way this approach 'is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influence of contemporary culture'.[41]

This is similar to the charge that dynamic equivalence translations too easily give priority to the receptors over the text. They are seen as giving too much weight to 'communication with' and not enough to 'communication from', focusing on the translation's destination rather than its origin. By couching everything in a form familiar or accessible to the receptors, translators may well produce a Bible that does not come as 'a Word from outside'. The historical particularity of God's work with Israel and of his incarnation in Jesus of Nazareth may be muted: a dynamic equivalence version may be an 'us now' rather than a 'them then' Bible. The tragic irony is that the desire to give a people 'their own Bible' may come to fruition! In other words, the dynamic equivalence approach may result in a subtle undermining of the Bible's authority.[42] This is clearly of fundamental

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[39] 'Glosses are the initial meanings you assign to words so you can read the text' (M. H. Schertz and P. B. Yoder, *Seeing the Text: Exegesis for Students of Greek and Hebrew* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2001), p. 25).

[40] J. Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language* (London: SCM, 1961), p. 269. In this connection, see the distinction between 'literacy' and 'letterism' in K. Vanhoozer, 'Language, Literature, Hermeneutics, and Biblical Theology: What's Theological about a Theological Dictionary?' in *A Guide to Old Testament Theology and Exegesis,* W. A. Van Gemeren (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), pp. 12-47 (at p. 37).

[41] p. viii.

[42] There is a valuable discussion of these important issues in A. H. Nichols, *Translating the Bible: A Critical Analysis of E. A. Nida's Theory of Dynamic Equivalence and its Impact upon Recent Bible Translations* (unpublished Ph.D thesis, Sheffield University, 1996).

importance—so the commitment to a 'formal equivalence' approach has value as an implicit rejection of these problems and errors.

It may also have a more positive value as well. Does the aim of achieving a 'word-for-word' translation indicate a determination to convey, as far as possible, not just what the text means but the way it says what it means? And is the reason for this the belief that the translator should intrude between the reader and the text to the minimum degree possible? As far as I can tell, something like this does seem to underlie this first ESV objective. If so, several comments need to be made. First, this hardly distinguishes the ESV from any other mainstream translation!

Secondly, a great deal hangs on the proviso, 'as far as possible'. There is no problem about telling people that a translation has such goals—*if* they have a realistic idea of the extent to which it is *not* possible to achieve them.[43]

Thirdly, there may well be an implicit confusion here between 'literal' and 'accurate', as though 'more literal' also means 'more accurate'. This equation is true to some extent—but only to some extent! There comes a point in translation beyond which 'more' is less: more literal will mean more obscure, and thus potentially quite misleading to the reader.[44] Indeed, a very literal translation may often be quite inaccurate, by conveying a different meaning from that of the original. The most obvious example is the translation of idioms. What will the non-English-speaker make of a literal translation of such expressions as 'I smell a rat,' 'I've got butterflies in the stomach,' or 'I'll give you a piece of my mind'? The ESV implicitly recognises this problem by choosing not to give a literal rendering of some idiomatic expressions.[45] On the other hand, it gives a literal translation of other expressions that are no less idiomatic and no more transparent.[46] There does not seem to be any clear rationale at work here, as it is not obvious why idioms are sometimes dealt with in 'formal equivalence' mode and sometimes in 'dynamic equivalence' mode.

Worth noting in this connection is the distinction V. Philips Long makes between 'lexical accuracy' and 'rhetorical accuracy'. He refers to the famous 'pun' in Amos 8:2 with two key words that sound alike. The obvious difficulty facing translators is whether it is possible for the pun to be retained. Long compares the NRSV and NIV translations of the verse, and observes that the

> first rendering is *lexically* more accurate than the second, but not
> immediately comprehensible without further research. The second is less

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[43] For a brief but helpful discussion of some of these issues, see D. A. Carson, *The King James Version Debate* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1979), ch. 9; A. H. Nichols, op. cit., pp. 17-26; M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture: Reading the Bible in the Light of General Linguistics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990), pp. 133-139.

[44] As argued by H. M. Wolf: 'When 'Literal' is not Accurate' in *The NIV: The Making of a Contemporary Translation,* K. L. Barker (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986), pp. 127-136. Note his comment (at p. 130): 'By occasionally moving away from a literal translation, [the NIV translators] have produced a more accurate translation that captures the meaning of the original languages with greater precision … a literal translation can at times be misleading rather than helpful'. Cf. also M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, p. 138f.

[45] To give just one example from each Testament: in 1 Kings 3:9, the Hebrew's 'a hearing heart' is rendered 'an understanding mind'; in Matthew 22:16, the Greek's 'you do not look at people's faces' becomes 'you are not swayed by appearances'.

[46] Note, for example, the expression 'cleanness of teeth' in Amos 4:6. It is not immediately obvious to the non-specialist that this refers to lack of food as a result of famine, rather than to dental hygiene.

precise ... but it is comprehensible and *rhetorically* more accurate than the first. Neither translation is categorically 'more accurate' than the other.[47]

Fourthly, there seems to be an implicit attempt in this first aim to distinguish translation from interpretation. Again, this is not problematic—if it is clear that this distinction is possible *only up to a point*.

> Translators who view their work as pure renderings rather than interpretations only delude themselves; indeed, if they could achieve some kind of non-interpretative rendering, their work would be completely useless.[48]

It is no accident that the person who translates a speech into the language of the hearers is regularly known as an 'interpreter'! A few examples will make the point clear. First, when confronted by a verbless clause, the translator must decide how to fill the gap. Is the Greek of Hebrews 13:4 (literally, 'honoured marriage among all and the marriage bed undefiled') a statement or an exhortation? That is, is the implied verb in the indicative or imperative mood? Or, when its indicative and imperative forms are identical (as is the case with ἐραυνᾶτε in John 5:39), how is a verb to be translated? It is, of course, the context that governs the translator's choice—which means that translation is a product of (at least some) exegesis.

Secondly, there is a consensus in modern study of Hebrew that its verb-system has aspect but no tense. However, since English verbs do involve tense, translating Hebrew into English requires determining the time frame—but this can only be done from the lexical and syntactical context, not from the Hebrew verb form as such.[49] Here is another clear case where exegesis is inseparable from translation.

Thirdly, there are significant differences between Greek and English in their use or non-use of the definite article.[50] This is due in part to the fact that, unlike Greek, English has an indefinite article. This and other factors mean that faithful translation into English will often involve including the definite article where the Greek lacks it, or omitting it where the Greek uses it.[51] Grasping the significance of the presence or absence of the Greek article is therefore an obvious precondition of faithful translation.

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[47] 'Reading the Old Testament as Literature' in *Interpreting the Old Testament: A Guide for Exegesis*, C. C. Boyles (ed.) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001), pp. 85-123 (at p. 99, italics his).

[48] M. Silva, *God, Language and Scripture*, p. 134.

[49] See the discussion in R. B. Chisholm, Jr., *From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), p. 85f; B. K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 346-348, 458-477.

[50] The most famous example, of course, is the fact that the absence of the article before 'God' in John 1:1c is (*pace* the Jehovah's Witnesses) not the Greek way of saying 'a god'. See especially the lengthy discussion of the Greek article in D. B. Wallace, op. cit., pp. 206-290; see also D. A. Carson, *Exegetical Fallacies*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), pp. 79-84; S. E. Porter, *Idioms of the Greek New Testament* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), pp. 103-114.

[51] In Greek, the article often marks a noun as generic (D. B. Wallace, op. cit., pp. 227-230), but English may prefer the indefinite article in many such cases: 'a rose by any other name ...'. We see this illustrated in the ESV's correct translation of τὸν ἐπίσκοπον as 'an overseer' (1 Timothy 3:2). However, an anarthrous Greek noun may still be generic (Wallace, pp. 253-254)—as may an English noun with the definite article. So the absence of the article in the three questions in 1 Corinthians 1:20 does not prevent the ESV from translating (rightly), 'Where is the wise man? … the scribe? … the debater …?' There are many other cases where the ESV's treatment of articular or anarthrous nouns is not so straightforward. In 1 Corinthians 11:7, for

In these three instances—and a great many others—the translator has to be an interpreter, in order to make a principled choice about which rendering to use. To sum up our discussion to this point: this first ESV objective has some validity and value; it also involves some problems. In assessing this aim, I have suggested that there cannot be a pure word-for-word translation of the Bible: all translations are hybrids. The key issue, then, is not *whether* a dynamic equivalence approach is employed, but *how much* it controls the translation process. The ESV Preface implicitly acknowledges as much: 'Every translation is at many points a trade-off ... between 'formal equivalence' in expression and 'functional equivalence' in communication, and the ESV is no exception'.[52]

That is, because translators are translating meanings, translating isn't a matter of substituting this English word for that Hebrew or Greek word. Moreover, all translations range along a spectrum between 'very literal' and 'very readable'.[53] The difference between them has to do with how far they are weighted towards one end of this spectrum or the other: that is, what 'trade-off' they make between the competing claims of accuracy and intelligibility. As Bruce Metzger observes, effective translation involves 'the art of making the right sacrifice'.[54]

By their own admission, the ESV translators have used 'functional equivalence' as well as 'formal equivalence' in their rendering of the original text. So the only difference here between the NIV and the ESV is what trade-off they were prepared make, and how consistently they achieved it. Rating the ESV against the NIV will thus be a case of 'more than' and 'less than', not of 'other than'. They will prove to differ in degree, but not in kind.

Before we leave our consideration of this first aim, we should observe that there is a significant theological issue that can be related to it. Classically, one of the defining characteristics of evangelicalism has been its commitment to the 'verbal inspiration' of the Bible and to 'propositional revelation'.[55] These convictions have important implications for an evangelical understanding of Bible translation.

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example, it follows the RSV in rendering the first anarthrous use of ἀνήρ as 'a man' and the second as 'man', while giving 'woman' as the translation of ἡ γυνή. Clearly, there is a good deal of interpretation underlying these translations!

[52] p. viii. It is no doubt the necessity for such trade-offs that led to the Italian slogan, 'traduttore traditore' (the translator is a traitor).

[53] Note the comments of D. A. Carson: 'What ... is the difference between a 'literal' translation and a paraphrase? ... precisely where is the dividing line between the two? In point of fact, there isn't one. There is a spectrum, a gradation ... Translation is not a purely mechanical process. In a paraphrase from one extreme end of the spectrum, attention is focused on the drift of what a passage means; but even in the most 'literal' of translations, the translator must on occasion make decisions as to the meaning of a passage. Or if he rightly understands the meaning, he may nevertheless be forced to choose among several options in the receptor language, all of which may leave something to be desired' (*KJV Debate*, pp. 87-88).

[54] Cited in V. P. Long, art. cit., p. 99.

[55] Both of these expressions have received careful definition by evangelical theologians, to guard against misunderstanding. Unfortunately, this has not prevented frequent misrepresentation of what evangelicals mean by them. Just as 'verbal inspiration' does not mean that the biblical writers took dictation from the Holy Spirit, so 'propositional revelation' does not mean that the Bible consists only of propositions. For a helpful discussion of the latter issue, with a proposal to speak of 'divine discourse acts' rather than 'propositional revelation', see K. J. Vanhoozer, 'The Semantics of Biblical Literature: Truth and Scripture's Diverse Literary Forms' in *Hermeneutics, Authority and Canon,* eds. D. A. Carson and J. D. Woodbridge (Leicester: IVP, 1986), pp. 53-104. For a contemporary defence and restatement of an evangelical understanding of revelation and inspiration, see K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology: God, Scripture and Hermeneutics* (Downers Grove: IVP, 2002), pp. 127-158.

In the first place, the distinction between 'verbal' and 'propositional' is crucial. The fact of inspiration secures the revelation in a particular public form: all of these writings (the 'script'-ures) are θεόπνευστος (2 Tim 3:16). As a result of the Spirit's unique activity, these particular written words are God's words—and God's Word. That is, this γραφή is a coherent message from God: these words give us the revelation of God. But this revelation does not consist simply of words, like beads on a string: it is propositional. The words of the Bible mean something and teach something. It is not words as such that constitute revelation, but 'propositions': that is, revelation has to do with what these particular words, in these particular combinations and sequences, in these particular writings, actually mean. Bernard Ramm draws attention to a helpful distinction made by dogmaticians of a past era:

> The external *forma* of the Scripture is the original language, the idiom and style; the internal *forma* is the inspired meaning, the truth of God ... the function of inspiration is to secure the inner *forma* of Scripture through the medium of the outer *forma*.[56]

This distinction is not in any way intended to qualify or undermine confession of the Bible as the Word of God, as though the Bible merely 'contains' or 'becomes' God's Word. What it does do is to prevent an inappropriate reverence for the original texts and the languages in which they were written—as though the Bible were the Koran. One of the corollaries of this distinction is the fact that, unlike the Koran, the Bible can be translated.[57] To distinguish the 'inner forma' ('propositional revelation') and the 'outer forma' ('verbal inspiration') of the Bible gives us the freedom to translate it: it shows that Bible translation is theologically legitimate.

Secondly, in freeing us to translate the Bible, this distinction between the 'verbal' and the 'propositional' also creates some tension for us. The 'outer forma' is no husk that we discard in order to get at the kernel: we have God's Word *only* in this γραφή. This means that an evangelical approach to Bible translation has an inherent pull towards 'formal equivalence'—*these* words are given by inspiration. On the other hand, the 'outer forma' is there to convey the 'inner forma' to us: what we have in this γραφή is not a great many inspired words, but God's revelation. So an evangelical approach to Bible translation also gravitates towards 'thought-for-thought correspondence'—these words are grouped together in these ways in order to mean something in particular. The tension between 'accuracy' and 'communication'—the need for a trade-off between 'formal equivalence' in expression and 'functional equivalence' in communication'[58]—is thus not the result of pragmatism or bias: it has its roots in the nature of the Bible as the Word of God. The translators' maxim, *so frei wie nötig, so treu wie möglich*,'[59] fairly reflects the realities of propositional revelation and verbal inspiration.

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[56] *Special Revelation and the Word of God* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1961), p. 196f (italics his).
[57] On which see A. H. Nichols, op. cit., p. 27f.
[58] ESV Preface, p. viii.
[59] 'As free as necessary, as faithful as possible'.

Part 2

The second aim specified by the ESV translators is that of capturing 'the precise wording of the original text ... As such, its emphasis is on 'word-for-word' correspondence ...'.[60] What this means is given greater precision when the Committee states, 'we have sought to use the same English word for important recurring words in the original ...'.[61] This raises an obvious and quite crucial question: which of the Bible's recurring words are 'important'—and 'important' in what sense? By what criterion do we distinguish between the important words that should be translated consistently and other words? Unfortunately, the Committee's Preface doesn't enlighten us on this point. In addition, the use of 'possible', 'permits' and 'allows' in this section of the Preface leads to another important question: how far is it 'possible' to translate the same Greek or Hebrew word by the same English word? What 'permits' it—and what prevents it? To what extent can any translation achieve word-for-word 'consistency'?

Without knowing how the ESV publishers would answer these questions, how are we to assess any particular failure to achieve 'consistency of translation'? Does such a failure merely show that we are dealing with words that weren't considered 'important'? Or is it one of the instances where this 'consistency' wasn't 'possible'? In other words, what seems to be a failure to achieve this second aim may not be a failure at all. However, despite the uncertainties involved, we will do our best to measure the ESV fairly in relation to this goal.

2.1 Assessing the ESV's success

Once more, I conclude that the ESV does not excel here. We have already seen that it is not always 'transparent to the original text' and does not always 'capture the precise wording of the original text'. Before providing further support for this conclusion, however, it is only fair to acknowledge that the ESV does achieve 'consistency of translation' with some very important biblical words. For example, the Hebrew word *y*ᵉ*shu'ah* is translated as 'salvation' in all but four of its seventy-eight Old Testament occurrences.[62] Again, δικαιοσύνη is translated as 'righteousness' in all but four of its fifty-eight uses by Paul.[63] Many other examples could be given.

There are, however, a great many failures to adhere to this 'consistency of translation' principle, as I discovered when I did a series of 'test drillings' in the Greek New Testament. (This seems a better metaphor than 'taking soundings,' as we are dealing with solid rock, not shallow water!)

I began with the Greek verb εὐαγγελίζεσθαι, which is an important New Testament word by any standards. It occurs fifty-four times, and is one of the primary words used for the communication of the Gospel. The ESV translates it *eleven* different ways (while the NASB uses five, the NIV nine, and the NRSV thirteen). These are:

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[60] Preface, p. vii.

[61] p. viii.

[62] These are Psalm 28:8 ('saving refuge'); Psalms 67:2 and 78:22 ('saving power'); and Isaiah 26:18 ('deliverance').

[63] These are Romans 9:30 (where the second use of the word is replaced by 'it' for stylistic reasons); 10:10; Galatians 2:21 (where a footnote indicates this meaning); and Ephesians 5:9.

- announce [Revelation 10:7]
- bring good news [Luke 1:19; 2:10; Acts 14:15]
- bring the good news [Luke 8:1; Acts 13:32; 1 Thessalonians 3:6]
- good news comes [Hebrews 4:2]
- preach [Acts 5:42; 8:4; 11:20; 15:35; 17:18]
- preach good news [Luke 3:18; 7:22; Acts 8:12; 10:36]
- preach the good news [Luke 4:43; 16:16; Romans 10:15; 1 Peter 1:12, 25]
- preach the gospel [Luke 9:6; 20:1; Acts 8:25, 40; 14:7, 21; 16:10; Romans 1:15; etc]
- proclaim good news [Luke 4:18]
- receive the good news [Hebrews 4:6]
- tell the good news [Acts 8:35]

It may be possible to make a good case for varying the translation in this or that passage because the context requires it. (Indeed, I think this is unavoidable, as I will indicate below.) However, it is hard to see why *eleven* different translations of this word are needed throughout the New Testament. It is even harder to see the justification for using four different renderings of the word in one chapter. Yet in Acts 8 we find the word being translated as 'preach' (v. 4), 'preach good news' (v. 12), 'preach the gospel' (vv. 25, 40) and 'tell the good news' (v. 35). Why is this? Is it because the ESV translators, by paying careful attention to the specific context, have discerned different nuances in each verse? It is hard to see how this would be so. In fact, the explanation is more prosaic: the ESV has simply retained the RSV wording in each case. There is no intrinsic problem with this—except that the RSV's wording does not meet the ESV's 'consistency of translation' objective! Regrettably, the ESV translators do not appear to have applied this yardstick in this chapter—or anywhere else, as further tests showed. Looking beyond Acts 8, we find that the ESV differs from the RSV's translation of this verb in only *one* of its remaining forty-nine occurrences.[64] Such a result makes it very difficult to believe that the ESV is based on a thorough review of the RSV, or an independent study of the Greek New Testament, despite the claim that 'each word and phrase in the ESV has been carefully weighed against the original ... Greek, to ensure the fullest accuracy ...'.[65]

The obvious discrepancy between this claim and the findings just outlined raises questions about the way the production team pursued their task—an issue that will be raised again by the remainder of this investigation.

I then followed the same procedure with a range of other New Testament words.[66] For reasons of space, and because the results were compatible with those just indicated, I have not included the details of those tests here.

Three clear conclusions emerged from my 'test drillings'. First, the dominant pattern in the ESV is that *the wording of the RSV is seldom altered.* This finding supports the conclusion suggested by our study of 1 Corinthians 1 above. In the Preface, the Translation Oversight Committee indicates that 'the 1971 RSV text provid[ed] the starting point for our

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[64] This is in Luke 4:18, where 'preach good news' has become 'proclaim good news'—presumably in order to achieve a threefold use of 'proclaim'.

[65] Preface, p. vii.

[66] Other words tested include ἁγιάζειν, ἐξουσία, μένειν (in the Gospel of John), παρρησία, πείθειν, πληροφορεῖν, τελειοῦν, ὑπομένειν, φανεροῦν.

work ...'.[67] My difficulty is that too often the RSV text seems to be the end-point of their work as well—even where it does not conform to the ESV's stated objectives.

Secondly, where the RSV's wording has been altered, the *changes do not seem to flow from the consistent application of any particular criterion or principle* (further examples of these tendencies will be found in Part 3). Based on the material we have surveyed, *the ESV turns out to be a rather uneven revision of the RSV*. It is uneven in relation, first, to how much of the RSV text has been changed, and secondly, to how consistent the changes are with the ESV's stated objectives.

Thirdly, with regard to 'consistency of translation,' *the ESV is, on average, not as good as the NASB and little or no better than the NIV or NRSV*.

2.2 Assessing the second aim

There is an important issue that needs to be considered here: how sound is this second of the ESV's aims? No less a scholar than J. B. Lightfoot formulated the translator's goal as, 'the same English words to represent the same Greek words' and 'as far as possible in the same order'.[68] At the very least, then, it needs to be treated with great respect. In embracing this goal, the ESV is clearly not choosing an eccentric or novel pathway.

Because this aim involves two aspects ('the same words'; 'the same order'), we will discuss each of them separately. We begin by asking, how possible—or desirable—is it to achieve 'word-for-word correspondence' in a Bible translation? Although there seems to be an inherent rightness about such a goal, and although it has the backing of a J. B. Lightfoot, it involves major linguistic problems. The first is the heterogeneity of languages.

> Languages differ so much in vocabulary, word-formation, word order, verb systems, methods of declension and conjugation, prepositional systems, and idioms in an almost endless profusion that a simple word-for-word reproduction as the standard for translation is totally unrealistic and impossible.[69]

Accordingly, J. P. Louw describes as 'this astonishing view' the belief that 'a word has to be constantly rendered by one particular gloss if the translation is to be really "faithful"'.[70] He goes on to explain the semantic principles that make this view untenable.

> To always award one meaning to one word is incorrect since it denies the basic fact of polysemy ... a word does not have a meaning without a context, it only has possibilities of meaning ... a word does not have many possible meanings in a particular context. If contexts are identical then a word can be consistently translated by the same word.[71]

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[67] p. vii.
[68] J. P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV: A History and Evaluation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981), p. 320.
[69] B. Ramm, op. cit., p. 203.
[70] Op. cit., p. 21.
[71] Op. cit., p. 40.

This involves several fundamentally important ideas. The first is that words are generally polysemous: they have a semantic range.[72] That is, a word is not a bullet-point of meaning but a zone of potential meaning. What this means in practice can be seen by considering a simple example. What is the meaning of 'run'? The only correct answer is, 'It depends on the context'. Why? Because an athlete runs, but so does a tap and a car engine. The athlete runs a race, the businessman runs a company, and the newspaper editor runs a story. The athlete runs on a track, a car runs on petrol, and a train (sometimes) runs on time. The jogger might enjoy a long run, but so might a popular play. The jogger might run into a ditch (and thus into trouble), or into an old friend. A mouse and a dressmaker might run up a curtain; the dressmaker might also run up a large debt. You can run for fun, for a bus, or for Parliament. You can run through a tunnel or a piece of music. You can run out of a burning building, or out of food, or out of time ... and so on. Anyone who insisted on translating the English word 'run' by the same French or Russian word throughout this paragraph would produce something unintelligible to the hearer or reader. Imagine now compounding the problem by using the same word for 'after' in translating, 'My dog runs after the ball, and my make-up runs after a good cry'.

All translators have to face the problem that the semantic range of a word in one language seldom corresponds exactly to its 'gloss' in another language: 'no two languages have vocabularies that coincide so that every time a word of one language appears in a text it can be rendered by the same word in the other'.[73] So, as Ramm and Louw insist in the quotations above, complete 'word-for-word correspondence' is an impossible ideal.

The fact of polysemy means, secondly, that context is crucial in determining the meaning of a word. Moisés Silva makes the point strongly, when he says that linguists 'assign a *determinative* function to context; that is, the context does not merely help us understand meaning—it virtually *makes* meaning'.[74]

Words cannot generally be translated consistently by the same word in another language *irrespective of the context in which they are being used*. Most can be translated by several different words, depending on the sense that is uppermost in a particular context. So, while 'grace' is a correct rendering of most of Paul's uses of χάρις, it must also be translated as 'thanks'[75] and even as a preposition ('for the sake of').[76] Conversely, several different words in one language can be translated by one word in another. We see this in the ESV's translation of Romans 5:15-17, for example, where δωρεά, δώρημα and χάρισμα are all translated as 'free gift'. In short, one word can express several meanings, and one meaning can be expressed by several words: '... there is no one-to-one relationship between words and meanings; not between languages, and not even within the same language'.[77]

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[72] For helpful treatments of lexical semantics that focus on biblical interpretation, see D. A. Black, *Linguistics for Students of New Testament Greek* (2nd edition) (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1995), pp. 120-142; R. B. Chisholm, Jr., op. cit., pp. 31-56; P. Cotterell, 'Linguistics, Meaning, Semantics, and Discourse Analysis' in W. A. Van Gemeren (ed.), op. cit., pp. 131-157; P. Cotterell and M. Turner, op. cit., pp. 106-185; J. P. Louw, op. cit., pp. 33-66; G. Osborne, *The Hermeneutical Spiral: A Comprehensive Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Downers Grove: IVP, 1991), pp. 64-92; M. Silva, *Biblical Words,* pp. 101-178; idem, *God, Language and Scripture,* pp. 77-97.

[73] A. H. Nichols, op. cit., p. 19.

[74] *Biblical Words*, p. 139 (italics his).

[75] For example, in 2 Corinthians 2:14; 8:16; 9:15.

[76] For example, in Galatians 3:19; Eph.3:1, 14.

[77] J. P. Louw, op. cit., p. 45.

One feature of context that has particular relevance here is what is known in linguistics as the syntagmatic or collocational dimension of meaning. This refers to the fact that a key indicator of a word's meaning is the particular grouping of words in which it occurs: 'you can tell the sense of a word from the company it keeps'.[78]

Finding words together in certain combinations enables us to discern which of their possible meanings is intended—or at the very least, to see which of those meanings cannot be intended. So τὸ ἅγιον πνεῦμα does not mean 'the pure breath' in the New Testament, despite the fact that the New Testament does use ἅγιος to mean 'pure' and πνεῦμα to mean 'breath'. Again, the meaning of the Hebrew root *hgh* depends on the collocations in which it occurs (that is, on whether it is followed by the prepositions *b*, *k*, or *l*, or whether it is used without a preposition).[79] The same applies to the sense in which χάρις is being used: when attached to ἔχειν and/or followed by a dative or a prepositional phrase beginning with ἐπί, it will mean 'thanks'. To aim at 'word-for-word' translation in a straightforward sense is to overlook this syntagmatic aspect of meaning.[80]

A third obstacle in the way of word-for-word translation is the distinction between denotation and connotation. In John 2:4, for example, the translator is confronted by γύναι in Jesus' reply to his mother. To render it as 'Woman' would give speakers of modern English the false impression that Jesus was being rude or harsh. How can the translator balance the competing claims of denotation and connotation in such cases?[81] For the translator to use a word with an equivalent denotation may well distort the sense of the passage when the connotations of the two words concerned differ markedly. In such cases, 'functional equivalence' may prove to be a more faithful approach than a strict adherence to 'formal equivalence'.

A similar issue is created by the gap between what an idiom says and what it means.[82] Here too the translator may need to give priority to meaning over form, because a literal translation would transmit a different meaning from that intended by the text.[83] Other idioms may resist consistent translation because they are used for different purposes in different situations. Again, John 2:4 provides a good example. The expression τί ἐμοὶ καὶ σοί (or its near equivalents) is found in secular Greek as well as the LXX,[84] and it occurs six times in the Gospels. In the other five passages,[85] the ESV translates it as 'what have you

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[78] P. Cotterell and M. Turner, op. cit., p. 156.

[79] This example is taken from J. H. Walton, 'Principles for Productive Word Study' in W. A. Van Gemeren (ed.), op. cit., pp. 158-168 (at p. 164f).

[80] On which see P. Cotterell and M. Turner, op. cit., pp. 155-156; M. Silva, *Biblical Words*, pp. 119f, 141-143.

[81] On this passage and the issue it raises, see P. Cotterell and M. Turner, op. cit., p. 47; C. D. Linton, 'The Importance of Literary Style in Bible Translation Today' in K. L. Barker (ed.), op. cit., pp. 15-33 (at p. 16f), and H. M. Wolf, art. cit., p. 130. In this connection, see also the discussion of Psalm 22:6 ('I am a worm, and not a man') in P. Cotterell, art. cit., p. 148.

[82] See our discussion on pp. 4f and 10 above.

[83] I am aware that this statement is in conflict with the dominant approach in contemporary hermeneutics. However, as its advocates see no problem about disseminating the view in their writings, I see no problem about assuming that the biblical writers intended to communicate something in particular in theirs. For a helpful discussion of the supposed 'death of the author' and the reality of authorial meaning, see K. J. Vanhoozer, *First Theology*, pp. 159-184.

[84] R. T. France calls it 'an OT formula of dissociation' (op. cit., p. 102).

[85] Matthew 8:29; Mark 1:24; 5:7; Luke 4:34; 8:28. In each of these passages, Jesus is being addressed by demonised people.

to do with me/us?'; in John 2:4 it has 'what does this have to do with me?' Interestingly, this is the only passage in which the ESV does not retain the sense of direct connection between the speaker(s) and the addressee(s)[86]—despite the fact that its form points to a 'me-you' rather than a 'this-me' connection. The choice to use a different rendering here, as well as in Judges 11:12 and 1 Kings 17:18, implicitly concedes the inadvisability of 'consistency of translation' in this case. The rendering preferred in the majority of passages also demonstrates the difficulty of achieving 'essentially literal' translation in any thorough-going fashion: 'what have I/you to do with you/me?' is (of necessity) an interpretive paraphrase of an expression that yields no literal sense.

To sum up our discussion of this point: some word-for-word consistency is both attainable and desirable in a translation—and my testing showed that the ESV could have done much better in this area. However, complete 'consistency of translation' is both unjustifiable in theory and unattainable in practice: words are not the same as numbers, and translating is not like doing algebra ('let x equal 3 and y equal 2'). This being the case, it is difficult to see why the ESV translators espoused this particular objective so specifically. It may be due, as we noted in Part 1 above, to perceived flaws in the dynamic equivalence approach, and a consequent desire to distance themselves from it. Could it also reflect an implicit belief that word-for-word consistency in translation will enable readers to trace biblical concepts? In this post-Barr era, one can only hope that this was not what motivated them.[87]

In relation to the ESV objective under discussion, we need to ask, secondly, how possible or helpful is it to let the reader 'see as directly as possible the structure ... of the original'. As always, 'as directly as possible' are the crucial words. How attainable is this objective? The simple answer is that a translator's ability to do this is in direct proportion to the degree of formal similarity between the two languages concerned. 'Since each language has its own distinctive forms and patterns, the same meaning may have to be expressed in another language by quite a different form'.[88] The greater the differences in their forms and patterns, the harder it is to retain the structure of the original in the translation.[89] The significant formal differences between English and the biblical languages make it very difficult for the ESV to achieve this objective consistently.

We also need to ask what the focus of this objective is: does 'the structure of the original' refer to clauses and simple sentences, or to complex sentences? In either case, as Moisés Silva observes, 'English translations are often unable to represent the formal

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[86] In the Old Testament the ESV renders it as 'what do you have against me?' (Judges 11:12; 1 Kings 17:18), 'what have I to do with you?' (2 Samuel 16:10; 19:22; 2 Kings 3:13), or 'what have we to do with each other?' (2 Chronicles 35:21).

[87] On the non-equivalence of word and concept, see J. Barr, op. cit. (especially pp. 206-262); also P. Cotterell and M. Turner, op. cit., pp. 115-125, 146-154, 161-164; M. Silva, *Biblical Words*, pp. 18-30. Whatever the motivations of the ESV translators, its Australian promoters appear to hold the erroneous view that words and ideas are co-extensive. So we are told that the NIV's failure to translate σάρξ as 'flesh' throughout Romans 'remove[s] the connection between the ideas … [and doesn't] … allow the reader to build up an idea of what Paul means by "flesh"' (*The Briefing* #278, November 2001, p. 14).

[88] A. H. Nichols, op. cit., p. 23.

[89] I discovered this by personal experience while working in Malaysia. When preaching with a Chinese interpreter, I could not pause in the middle of a complex sentence (for example, at the conclusion of the protasis of a conditional sentence) and expect the interpreter to take over. Because of the structural differences between English and Mandarin, the interpreter was unable to express my meaning until I had given him a complete sentence to work with.

structure of sentences in the original text'.[90] There are some obvious barriers in the way of reproducing the structure of the Hebrew or Greek text in readable English. Greek and (to a lesser extent) Hebrew are inflected languages—so the form of the words is a more critical determinant of meaning than their order. Because Greek case-endings distinguish a verb's subject from its direct and indirect objects, greater flexibility in word order is possible than would be the case in English. So, for example, the combination of Greek words that would be translated into English as 'the man loved the woman' can occur in six different sequences.[91] In English, to reverse the sequence of these nouns would be to change the meaning of the utterance. As a result, the English translation of a simple sentence in Greek can only seldom reproduce the order of the Greek words. But how have readers of the Bible been deprived by this, since they want to know what the Greek *means*, not how it was written?

Neither of the biblical languages was entirely flexible, however; both involve customary or more frequent word orders. Changes to the common word order (the 'unmarked order') are used to express focus or emphasis.[92] But the reader of the English Bible will not know the unmarked order, and therefore will not see the significance of any changes to it. This is another reason why the translator's task is to capture the meaning conveyed by the word order of the original, rather than to replicate that word order. It may even be that retaining the original word order obscures the meaning. For example, the question in 2 Peter 3:4 is not, as it appears to be, a request for information about the location of the promise: the questioners are scoffers, not seekers. The question refers instead to the non-occurrence of what was promised. The best translation is that which gives the meaning by reversing the word order: 'Where is his coming that was promised?'[93]

These considerations apply primarily to word order in clauses and simple sentences. However, it may be that the real focus of this second ESV objective is on the next level of complexity: that is, it may be concerned to reproduce the order of the clauses. Yet even here there are difficulties. Just as word order within clauses is freer in Greek than in English, so is the order between clauses in complex sentences. Another obvious difference is the extent to which Greek employs hypotaxis: 'Greek has much greater capacity than English ... for extended subordination ... Compounding the translator's difficulty is the fact that subordinate clauses may be linked in 'chains of dependence' more complex than English will normally accommodate'.[94] All of this means that translators will often need to depart

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[90] *God, Language and Scripture*, p. 126. Both 'often' and 'unable' deserve to be taken seriously.

[91] This example is used by M. Silva (*God, Language and Scripture*, p. 101).

[92] On word order in the biblical languages, see M. H. Schertz and P. B. Yoder, op. cit., pp. 38-39, 173-185. On word order in Hebrew, see C. H. J. van der Merwe, J. A. Naudé and J. H. Kroeze, *A Biblical Hebrew Reference Grammar* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), pp. 336-350. On word order in Greek, see D. A. Black, op. cit., pp. 102-114; S. H. Levinsohn, *Discourse Features of New Testament Greek: A Coursebook on the Information Structure of New Testament Greek* (2nd edition) (Dallas: SIL International, 2000), pp. 1-67; S. E. Porter, op. cit., pp. 286-297; R. A. Young, *Intermediate New Testament Greek: A Linguistic and Exegetical Approach* (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994), pp. 214-218.

[93] In agreement with the NIV, against the NASB, NRSV, and ESV. Note also the Revised English Bible's, 'What has happened to his promised coming?' Compare the way different versions treat 'the promise of the Father' in Acts 1:4.

[94] These points are made in K. L. McKay, *A New Syntax of the Verb in New Testament Greek: An Aspectual Approach* (New York: Peter Lang, 1994), p. 68.

from the structures of the underlying Greek, simply in order to achieve a result that is readable, intelligible English.[95]

Given the obvious difficulties in the way of achieving this goal, it needs to be asked why it was embraced in the first place. Why do the ESV translators believe it to be important to let readers see the *structure* of the original text, as well as its sentences? Again, one hopes that this does not reflect an underlying commitment to the view so comprehensively refuted by James Barr: namely, the idea that 'the grammatical structure of a language reflects the thought structure of those speaking it ...'.[96] Without further elaboration and explanation, therefore, this cannot be viewed as a valid objective for Bible translation.

What then of its value: how helpful is it for the structure of the original text to be visible in the translated version?[97] When we from German into English translating are, must we the verbs at the end of the clause put? Is there any value in a literal rendering of the Hebrew construction found in Genesis 2:16 ('dying you will die'), when the *function* of the infinitive absolute here is adverbial, indicating certainty? What point is there in rendering Matthew 1:21b as 'he for will save the people his from the sins theirs'?[98] The ESV implicitly recognises the limited value of this goal by altering the original structures quite often. In Romans 2:4, for example, instead of the literal, 'in the day of wrath and of the revelation of the righteous judgment of God', the ESV (following the RSV) has 'on the day of wrath when God's righteous judgment is revealed'. The sense is the same—but the structure isn't. This is a rather trivial example, of course, but it raises an important issue about translating. Can a translation provide a thorough-going 'word-for-word correspondence' without making itself unsuitable for public use, and ensuring that it will be used only for private study by the reader who can handle stilted, awkward prose? That is, if a translation is to be read out—to be used by whole groups and churches as their Bible—won't it have to make some concessions to the way modern English is spoken and written? This is discussed more fully below.

This leads us back to a conclusion we reached in Part 1. In relation to this second aim as well, the difference between the ESV and other translations can only be one of degree. Translations vary in the extent to which they aim to achieve 'word-for-word correspondence'. One extreme is the 'concordant literalism' that simply glosses the original words and retains their order. The result, of course, is an 'interlinear'—which is not what is normally meant by a 'translation' of the Bible.[99] An English translation is meant to be in

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[95] This is just as true of the ESV as it is of any other translation! True, it makes fewer concessions than the NIV—but this comes at a cost. To give just one example: its rendering of Luke 1:1-4 demands a great deal more of the reader, and especially of the listener, than does the NIV. However, the ESV does have to make such concessions, dividing lengthy passages of hypotactic Greek into separate English sentences. This can be seen by contrasting the NASB and ESV renderings of such passages as Romans 1:18-32.

[96] J. Barr, op. cit., p. 39.

[97] Here too *The Briefing* makes misguided claims about the ESV. It notes that the producers of the ESV placed 'a very high value on preserving the structures of the Bible's original languages …', and tacitly assumes that they succeeded in doing so. It goes on to claim that the ESV is therefore 'an excellent choice for those who are reading Scripture closely to prepare talks …' (February 2003, p. 4). The logic of this view is that Bible students should normally use an interlinear (on which see notes 99-101 below).

[98] For further comments on this subject, with helpful examples from both the Old Testament and the New, see M. H. Schertz and P. B. Yoder, op. cit., pp. 173-185.

[99] As D. W. Baker observes, an interlinear is so literal 'that it is of no practical use to an English reader who has no Hebrew competence, and a person who knows Hebrew does not really need it' ('Language and Text of the Old Testament' in C. C. Broyles (ed.), op. cit., pp. 63-83 (at p. 81)).

English![100] This is precisely the reason that the British RV and its American counterpart, the ASV, were not widely used.[101] As a result, the RSV represented a marked shift away from this approach: it

> represents a different concept of the translator's task from that followed in the ASV … The idea of a mechanically exact, literal word-for-word translation which attempts to follow the order of Hebrew or Greek words is abandoned in favor of an idiom and word order more natural to English.[102]

This is a particularly important observation. It means that claims being made by its promoters align the ESV much more closely to the RV than to anything that can legitimately be claimed for the RSV.[103] Yet, as we have observed, the ESV is a slightly modified version of the RSV. These claims about the ESV's accuracy are therefore subject to an additional criticism: they are based on a misapprehension of the character of the RSV.

Part 3

The third aim governing the production of the ESV was a literary one: that of 'maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence'.[104] The ESV Committee indicates that this includes changing archaic language to English in current usage.[105]

3.1 Assessing the ESV's success

In Part 1, we found that the NASB is superior to the ESV when judged by the 'essentially literal' criterion. However, it is here that the ESV may be thought to have an advantage. The NASB's literal accuracy is achieved at some cost: it does not always read naturally or smoothly. So the ESV might be defended on the grounds that, compared with the NASB, it achieves a better balance between accuracy and readability.[106] This was certainly what the ESV Committee sought to achieve, as their Preface shows.[107]

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[100] Note Spurgeon's comment that the RV was 'strong in Greek, but weak in English' (cited in J. P. Lewis, op. cit., p. 76). Lewis himself says, 'The language of the ASV is translation English, not the native idiom. It is a language that was never spoken or written in any country at any time' (p. 97).

[101] An anonymous reviewer of the RV complained, 'The revisers were not appointed to prepare an interlinear translation for incompetent schoolboys' (J. P. Lewis, op. cit., p. 122). A. H. Nichols observes that the RV and ASV 'gained acceptance only amongst the scholarly elite who could appreciate the translation because of their familiarity with the original languages' (op. cit., p. 8). I suspect that the same will be true of the ESV.

[102] J. P. Lewis, op. cit., p. 122f. Note also F. F. Bruce, *The English Bible: A History of Translations from the Earliest English Versions to the New English Bible*, rev. ed. (London: Lutterworth, 1970), p. 190f.

[103] Note, for example, the claim that 'the ESV ... maintains a close, accurate, word-for-word translation of the text …' (*Matthias Media Resource Guide 2002/2003*, p. 4).

[104] Preface, p. viii.

[105] p. vii.

[106] This is precisely one of the claims being made by its promoters (see the *Matthias Media Resource Guide 2002/3*, p. 4).

[107] See pp. vii-viii.

After reading the ESV for many hours, I can only conclude that, like beauty, 'archaic language' and 'readability' must be in the eye of the beholder! When measured by its own language-criterion—that of 'current usage' or 'clarity of expression'—the ESV seems to me to fail far too often. There are passages that do read well, but there are also a great many that do not. The following paragraphs are a brief account of how and why this is so.

In the first place, it is not uncommon to find ESV verses that are pure KJV, or KJV filtered through the RSV with little change. This is in line with the translators' stated intention of continuing the Tyndale/King James/RSV legacy, of course.[108] There would be no problem about this *if* the wording in question were still as clear and current now as it was four centuries—or even two generations—ago. It should be obvious that there is little likelihood that our language would remain this stable, especially given the combined impact of the media and the international use of English during the last fifty years. Why, then, did the ESV producers think that such a conservative approach to the language of their base-text would be appropriate?[109]

How well does the language of the KJV (or RSV) serve today? A few examples must suffice. First, the KJV's 'behold' and 'it came/shall come to pass' survive amazingly often, despite being anything but 'current usage'. Secondly, in Psalm 24:1, the ESV's, 'The earth is the LORD's and the fullness thereof, the world and those who dwell therein' is very close to the KJV, identical with the RSV—and not like modern English at all! The same is true of its 'Judge not, that you be not judged' (Matt 7:1)—to give one example from each Testament. ESV readers will find many other such remnants of a bygone era—comforting to some, perhaps, but strange for many. Thirdly, in all three versions, the end of Job 1:5 reads, 'Thus Job did continually'. Most ESV readers are likely to react, 'Thus Job did *what* continually?' In current usage 'thus'—especially when it occurs at the beginning of a sentence—has the sense 'so, therefore', not (as in former days) 'in this manner'. Also, 'acted' or 'behaved' would be clearer here than 'did', which in modern English is predominantly an auxiliary to the main verb ('But I did remember!'). Unfortunately, ESV users will find many other such examples of archaic and misleading phraseology, like street signs pointing in the wrong direction. Why would a translation that is committed to bringing archaic language 'to current usage' and 'maintaining clarity of expression'[110] retain such language?

Secondly, there are problems with much of the ESV's 'diction'. Too often, it ranges from the quaint or slightly odd (the way a rather pedantic and elderly English teacher might speak) to the awkward and unnatural (and often archaic as well). At the former end of the spectrum, I would include the following examples: 'much joy' (Acts 8:8); 'much trembling' (1 Cor 2:3); 'and behold, there arose a great storm' (Matt 8:24); 'and behold, there appeared to them Moses and Elijah' (Matt 17:3). (All of these—and many others of the same kind—are carried over from the RSV.)

A little further along the spectrum comes language like that of the 'Christmas stories', which the ESV has obviously been reluctant to modernise. So, as in the KJV and/or RSV, Mary is 'with child' (Matt 1:18; Luke 2:5); Joseph 'took his wife, but knew her not ...' (Matt 1:24-25); while the shepherds are told, 'For unto you is born ... Christ the Lord ... you

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[108] p. vii.

[109] Coleridge's observation is pertinent: 'A truth couched in archaic diction is largely or wholly, to some or to many, out of view' (cited in J. P. Lewis, op. cit., p. 97). His diction makes the observation self-validating!

[110] Preface, pp. vii, viii.

will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths ...' (Luke 2:11-12). The danger with such obviously archaic language is that it too easily gives the impression that these narratives are like fairy-stories. It doesn't just distance the events from the modern world (reminding us that they happened *then*, not now); it may well remove them from the real world, implying that they didn't happen *here*.

Near the other end of the spectrum is wording that I find very stilted. (To be honest, I find much of it irritatingly unnatural.) My first example is the pattern seen in 'to cut off nations not a few' or 'they answered him not a word' (see Isa 10:7 and 36:21). Although found in many other places as well, it is especially obvious in the Psalms. This has the unhappy effect of distancing me from the Psalms, rather than drawing me to them. Frankly, I find it hard to treat with appropriate seriousness a prayer that appeals to God, 'cast me not off' (Ps 27:9), or a threefold exhortation, 'fret not yourself' (Ps 37:1, 7, 8). This is clearly not the way English is spoken or written now. The ESV has derived it from the KJV via the RSV and retained it often, despite its claim that archaic language 'has been brought to current usage ...'.[111]

It is here that another unfortunate feature of the ESV appears. It is clear that some members of the ESV team were uncomfortable about this phraseology, because it has been updated—sometimes! However, because these changes have not been made uniformly, they create obvious inconsistencies. For example, Psalm 22:11 has 'be not far from me' (as in the RSV), while verse 19 has the amended 'do not be far off ...'. Again, Psalm 28:1 has 'be not deaf' (as in the RSV), while verse 3 has been modernised to 'do not drag me off …'. Such inconsistencies within the one Psalm—and ESV readers will find many other examples—raise questions about the whole process by which the ESV was produced. Why were such changes made in some places and not others? And why was there no checking for consistency before publication? There are so many examples of this kind of discrepancy, that the ESV appears to have been produced in haste and without the necessary 'quality controls'.[112]

My second example from the 'irritating' end of the spectrum is the ESV's retention of pedantic speech-patterns that are misleading as well as unnatural—this despite its professed aim of 'maintaining clarity of expression'.[113] For example, what will readers make of 'When goods increase, they increase who eat them ...' (Eccl 5:11)? Based on 'current usage', I think most will understand this to be saying, 'When goods increase, these goods increase the number of people who eat them ...'. No, it doesn't make much sense! But neither does the ESV, in its puzzling retention of the RSV here, and its avoidance of the NRSV's perfectly clear and accurate, 'When goods increase, those who eat them increase ...'. Or consider 2 Kings 7:3, which says that 'there were four men who were lepers at the entrance to the gate'. Their problem, of course, is that they were 'lepers' everywhere![114] The ESV's rendering of 1 John 2:19 ('But they went out, that it might become plain that they all are not of us') will leave most readers unsure about what is being said.

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[111] Preface, p. vii.

[112] It is instructive to compare the details given in the ESV and NIV Prefaces. The latter gives a fairly full account of the process that produced the NIV, while the ESV Preface gives very little comparable detail.

[113] Preface, p. viii.

[114] Again, the ESV simply reproduces the RSV. Decidedly better are 'There were four leprous men' (KJV, NASB and NRSV) or 'There were four men with leprosy' (NIV).

A third problem is created by the ESV's vocabulary (much of it simply carried over from the RSV). Consider the following list of words used in the ESV:

> abhor, abide, abode, adjure, ascribe, chide, confute, convocation, counsel (as both a noun and a verb), entreat, exult, festal, haughty, invoke, kin, ordain, portent, rail (as a verb), rend, revile, sated, smitten, sojourn, stripes, swaddling, swear.

And now consider the claim that the 'English of the ESV ... is rated at a Year 8 reading level ...'.[115] I am not sure who provided this rating—but I am sure that it isn't right. Even well-read Year 8 students would struggle to define more than a few of these words accurately. Indeed, I think most adults would feel the need for a dictionary more than once or twice on their way through the list. Some of these words are being used in an unfamiliar way; many are somewhat archaic; most are rarely used today. This is not a list that reflects 'current usage'! At least in such cases, the ESV's vocabulary will tend to obscure the meaning of the text from all but the highly literate reader. There is no real justification for this, because the 'plain English' referred to in the ESV Preface[116] contains perfectly adequate alternatives to each of these words.

Because of its unfamiliarity, this kind of vocabulary is also likely to mislead some readers as to the meaning of the text. What does the verb 'counsel' convey to most people in our highly therapeutised society? And why is 'advise' not a suitable alternative? When is 'smitten' (Isa 53:4) used today, except as a reference to 'falling in love'? Who but those reared on the Bible would guess that 'stripes' (Isa 53:5) refers to a flogging? What is the average person to make of 'The LORD of hosts has sworn in my hearing ...' (Isa 5:9)?

Measured by the third of the its aims, the ESV fails often, partly because of its tendency to retain archaic expressions derived from the KJV (via the RSV), partly because of its diction, and partly because of its vocabulary.[117]

3.2 Assessing the third aim

Every translation should aim to be clear and readable—and the ESV Committee is right to follow this path. But they go further than this, specifying their intention to achieve other literary goals as well. The reasons for the ESV's inadequacies in this whole dimension are probably due largely to inherent tensions between these various goals. How realistic is it to aim simultaneously to continue the diction of the KJV and RSV and to produce a 'current usage' translation? In my view, because it was based on two such widely divergent aspirations, the ESV was almost bound to fail.

Furthermore, the ESV is intended to achieve 'beauty' and 'literary excellence' while also allowing 'the stylistic variety of the biblical writers fully [to] express itself ...'.[118] But this can only be done if the biblical writers expressed themselves with beauty and literary

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[115] *The Briefing* #283, April 2002, p. 24.

[116] p. viii.

[117] I am at a loss to understand how anyone who had spent many hours reading the ESV could say, 'The English of the ESV is not impenetrable or difficult—it is flowing and readily understandable … [it] does not stretch the skills of the average reader beyond their ability … (*The Briefing* #287, August 2002, p. 20). Even more mystifying is the claim that 'the ESV manages to achieve a level of literary beauty, excellence and readability that is outstanding' (*Matthias Media Resource Guide 2002/2003*, p. 4).

[118] Preface, p. viii.

excellence. Some did, but the majority did not. Although there is a range of literary levels in the New Testament, its language and style is not that of a literary elite: it is vernacular literature.[119] Why, then, were 'beauty' and 'literary excellence' thought to be desirable characteristics of a translation? Is there not a danger here of confusing the reasons for which the KJV was produced and the reputation that it came to have over time? Do we want people to admire the beauty of the Bible's language or to heed its message? Bible translators must surely aim at the kind of intelligibility that conveys the message of the text accurately, without wanting to be remembered as the creators of great literature.

Something more substantial than style or taste is at stake here, therefore. In my judgment, unacceptable consequences flow from the ESV's choice of language. In practice, it is an elitist translation. As such, it may well be 'user-friendly' for the highly literate. It may also be preferred by older Christians, for whom it will satisfy any lingering nostalgia for the RSV. But I doubt that it will be easily understood by believers under thirty-five or so, especially if they come from an unchurched background and have not already been enculturated into 'church-speak'. If they have to use the ESV regularly, such people will need to learn two 'languages': the great words that speak of who God is and what he has done for us—and 'high-English' or 'olde-English'. They will be glad to learn the first; they should not need to learn the second.

Conclusion

In this article, I have attempted to assess the quality of the ESV. I have done so by examining the extent to which it achieves its own objectives. In Part 1, I measured the ESV against its goal of being an 'essentially literal' translation. In Part 2, I considered the related aim of providing 'word-for-word correspondence' or 'consistency of translation'. In Part 3, I looked at the ESV's intention of offering 'clarity of expression', especially by replacing 'archaic language' with that in 'current usage'.

A set of consistent findings has emerged across all three parts of this investigation. These are:

1. The ESV is essentially the RSV, with only minor changes overall.
2. Where there are variations from the RSV, they seem to be quite haphazard, and don't appear to reflect the consistent pursuit of any of the primary goals the ESV Committee set for itself.
3. The ESV's substantial retention of the vocabulary and phraseology of the RSV gives it a rather dated, awkward 'feel'. It doesn't obviously commend itself as a 21st century version.[120]
4. Measured by its own aims, the ESV is not a great success.
5. Of necessity, all mainstream translations are hybrids, a mixture of the 'formal equivalence' and 'dynamic equivalence' approaches. There are not two ways of translating or two kinds of translation—as the ESV's own Preface, and especially

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[119] See S. E. Porter, 'The Greek Language of the New Testament' in *Handbook to the Exegesis of the New Testament*, S. E. Porter (ed.) (Boston/Leiden: Brill Academic Publishers, 2002), pp. 99-130 (especially pp. 105-109).

[120] Despite its being recommended as the Bible 'for the next generation' (*Matthias Media Resource Guide 2002/3*, p. 4).

publicity for the ESV, might imply. The difference between the ESV and other translations is one of degree only, in relation both to what their objectives emphasise and to how well they achieve them.

If these conclusions are sound, several others follow from them:

6. The claim that the ESV is superior to the NIV (or any other modern translation) needs to be demonstrated, and not just asserted.
7. Committing a congregation to use the ESV may mean putting unnecessary obstacles in the way of new Christians, of people from unchurched backgrounds, and of people without an unusually high degree of literacy.
8. We might still get the version that the ESV was supposed to be if the team that worked on it (or another team) did the job again. It appears that the ESV was produced in record time.[121] At least some of the features I have drawn attention to appear to be signs of haste, and doing the task more carefully would undoubtedly yield more consistent and worthwhile results.

This final conclusion leads me to raise one more issue. Are the NIV and NRSV really so inadequate, or a redone ESV really so essential, that we can happily accept many thousands of hours and dollars being poured into yet another translation for the English-speaking world? We already have more than we need, and an increasing range of special editions of many of them. How can we keep diverting for our own benefit resources that should be used to ensure that our fellow-Christians in the two-thirds world have just one edition of one translation in their own language? Surely it is time for us to say (at least for a while), 'Enough is enough!' '... as a matter of fairness, [our] abundance at the present time should supply their need …' (2 Cor. 8:13-14, ESV).

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[121] Apparently, in only three years (cf. *The Briefing* #283, April 2002, p. 24). Compare this with the time taken to produce the RSV (1937-1952), the NIV (1967-1973) and the NRSV (1974-1989).