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THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION—A REVIEW ARTICLE

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The English Standard Version (ESV, 2001), is a revision of the Revised Standard Version (RSV, 1946 NT, 1952 OT). Approximately 9% of the RSV has been modified, so the ESV does not differ greatly from the RSV. Thus, some worthy features, as well as some criticisms, may simply reflect the RSV in the text. But when criticisms arise, they could/should have been resolved by the ESV translators.

I appreciated a number of features in the OT. 1 Sam 13:1 uses an ellipsis (. . .) twice, in conjunction with a note to demonstrate the present nature of the Hebrew text—the uncertainty of the age of Saul and how long he reigned. At least interesting, is the translation of 2 Sam 11:2 which says David spied on Bathsheba “late one afternoon.” This would make Bathsheba as much an exhibitionist as David was a voyeur.

I have heard not a few sermons on the sin of Peter in only letting down a single fishing net in Luke 5:5, when both the UBS and the TR have “nets” in the plural. The RSV-ESV notes that Peter obeyed in letting down the nets. John 5:16, 18 has a nice translation of the imperfect tense. In contrast, however, “makes a practice of sinning” (1 John 3:9), is a clumsy way of saying “practices sinning” to accurately reflect the linear action of the present tense. Rom 9:5 rightly maintains the deity of Christ, and in Gal 6:16 “and upon the Israel of God” is a proper rendering, rather than equating Israel with the church.

Rather troubling to this reader, however, is the large number of inconsistencies in the translation. These were found in punctuation, the use of Arabic numbers, use of transliterated words, replacement of pronouns, the addition of words or the substitution of words not in the actual text, and inconsistencies in the textual critical notations.

I. INTRODUCTIONS, CHAPTER TITLES, AND NOTES

Each book carries a brief introduction that highlights such things as authorship, contents, and date. The early date of the exodus (1445 BC) is presented in Genesis. Inaccurate, however, is the note that says Philippians was written about AD 61 by Paul “from prison in Rome,” when Acts informs us that Paul lived “in his own hired dwelling” (Acts 28:30). Similarly, to have Paul say, “I am in prison,” (Col. 4:3) is not a good translation of “I am in chains.” “In prison” conveys the wrong idea to the modern reader. Paul had freedom to receive guests and speak to large groups in his rented home in Rome. Paul was a prisoner, but he was not “in prison” (Col. 4:10). In 2 Timothy, the ESV has Paul writing from a Roman “jail,” an understatement, when he was actually in the Mamertine dungeon.

The note on Ephesians says it was written “to the churches around Ephesus,” the circular letter view, but Eph 1:1 still has “in Ephesus” in the text.

Shockingly, the introduction to the Gospel of John states, “The author was probably the apostle John.” Wow! Who else did they have in mind? Yet the notes on John’s epistles clearly hold that the writer was John the apostle.

The introduction to 2 Pet says, “Peter probably wrote this letter from a Roman prison”—based on what evidence? Is this an accommodation to Roman Catholic tradition? There is no hint in the text that Peter was imprisoned. The introduction to the book of Revelation says, “The church is depicted under great stress.” This might agree with preterist, historical, or idealist hermeneutics, but it is objectionable to those who see the church as distinct from Israel.

Brief chapter and/or paragraph titles are found in bold print. Most are helpful, accurate and informative, such as Lev 10, “The Death of Nadab and Abihu”; Lev 11, “Clean and Unclean Animals”; or 1 Sam 3, “The LORD Calls Samuel.” But the proliferation of such titles in the NT seems to be without pattern in places. In Matt 5 they function as paragraph headings, but in John 8 they devolve into a listing of catchy phrases, e.g v. 12, “I Am the Light of the World”: v. 31, “The Truth Will Set You Free”; and v. 48, “Before Abraham Was, I Am.” The title at Luke 16:19, “The Rich Man and Lazarus,” avoids calling the story a parable. The title at 2 Sam 16:1 is “Ziba Lies to David.” Actually, the text says no such thing. That interpretative view may be correct, but it should not be forced onto the text.

Most objectionable are the titles at Gen 1:1 and 1:3. The former reads, “The Beginning of Creation,” while the latter says, “The Six Days of Creation.” This would lead a reader to believe that Gen 1:1-2 were *not* part of the six days of creation, a clear contradiction of Exod 20:11, “For in six days the LORD made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them.” The six days title should begin with Gen 1:1, not two verses later to accommodate the gap theory.

II. USE OF PRONOUNS

Some use of pronouns was inconsistent, and particularly objectionable were cases where the translators felt it necessary to replace a pronoun with some other noun. In Gen 30:35, for example, “Laban” is used instead of “he,” but without a note to signal the change. This might seem like a small addition that improves clarity, but in reality, the translators try to improve upon the words that God gave us without informing the reader of the change.

Similarly, in Luke 7:3, the pronoun “he” is replaced with “the centurion.” This is bulky and unnecessary. It adds no clarity, but rather contorts the simplicity of the original writing, especially since there is now a note to draw the reader’s attention away from the text to the bottom of the page, only to be informed that the extra words were arbitrarily and unnecessarily inserted.

In Luke 8:42, as a new story begins, there is no note to tell us that “Jesus” replaces the pronoun “he” in the text. An unsuspecting reader would assume that this was what the original stated, but he would be wrong. It also distorts using a concordance to learn how many times the name Jesus appears in each Gospel.

Yet in Luke 9:51-55 the pronouns he, him, or his occur nine times without the word “Jesus” appearing once. Why no insertions here? But in Luke 22:33-34, the names of Peter and of Jesus replace the given pronouns when not needed at all. This highlights the randomness of these pronoun replacements. They are arbitrary and inconsistent.

Again, the two beasts of Rev 13, one that rises from the sea and the other that rises from the earth, are both referred to with the pronoun “it” in chapter 13. But in Rev 19:20, the pronoun “it” is still used of the first beast, but the second beast, the false

prophet, is referred to as “he.” Yet, both are individuals as is seen by their punishment in the lake of fire (Rev 19:20).

III. TRANSLITERATIONS

Some Hebrew words were transliterated into English words, but without much consistency, and in most cases without even a good explanation as to why. For instance, Gen 6:4 has “Nephilim,” not even italicized to indicate a foreign word, but with a footnote that says, “Or giants.” How is that helpful? But in the same verse, “the mighty men” are not transliterated into *Gibborim*. In Gen 6:14 the ark is made of “gopher wood.” A note explains that “gopher,” again no italics, is simply a transliteration of the Hebrew word for “an unknown kind of tree.” This note might help former KJV readers, but it is not useful in translation. Why not at least explain that it was something like cypress timbers?

1 Chr 1:8 lists the sons of Ham. But the ESV substitutes a transliterated Gk word, Egypt, for only one of the Heb names, *Mizraim*. The reader is not informed of this switch.

Problems abound with the use of words for weights, measures, and money. Should these be given in modern recognizable equivalents, or should the original foreign word be transliterated into the text? John 12:3 has a “pound” of ointment with a note that says “*litra* (or Roman pound) was equal to about 11 ½ ounces or 327 grams.” But two verses later, the cost of the ointment is given as so many “denarii” with a note telling about how much that would be. This is inconsistent. Again in Luke 21:2, the translators say, “two small copper coins,” but with a note that it is really two *lepta*. If one uses

denarii, then why not *litra* and *lepta* also? Again in John 21:8, “about one hundred yards” is used instead of the note’s “Greek *two hundred cubits*.” But the translators use cubits in Genesis and elsewhere freely. Why not convert all cubits to yards and be consistent? Or, if this version is intended for other English-speaking peoples, not just Americans, why not use meters instead of yards?

Hos 3:2 has one and a half “homers” (KJV), but this is converted into “a homer and a lethech.” Rather than a helpful addition, it is a clumsy use of another foreign word with a lengthy footnote.

IV. PUNCTUATION

Regarding punctuation, no explanation is given for why the following words are capitalized in Gen 1: Day and Night (v 5), Heaven (v 8), Earth and Seas (v 10), but **not** capitalized after that in the same context, such as “earth” (vss 11-12), “day” and “night” (v 16), and “seas” (v 22). No capitalization was used for pronouns referring to God, following the pattern of the KJV, RSV, and NIV, but differing from the NKJV.

In the NT, Creator is capitalized in 1 Pet 4:19, as is Helper, referring to the Holy Spirit in John 14:15. But Jesus as the door (John 10:9), or the way, the truth, and the life (John 14:6) remain in the lower case. In John 8:50 it is strange to see One (referring to God), capitalized, but not “he is the judge” in the same verse. In Rev 19:11, Jesus is called Faithful and True, and in Rev 19:13 the Word of God, all capitalized. But in Rev 22:16, “I am the root and descendant of David, the bright morning star”—all uncapitalized. Christ is “an advocate,” in 1 John 2:1, but it is not capitalized.

In John 6:67, 70-71, “The Twelve” is capitalized. But after Judas’ death, when the similar term, “the eleven,” appears in Luke 24:33 and in Acts 2:14 it is in lower case. But when “the twelve” are mentioned again in Acts 6:2 the capitalization disappears and consistency fails.

Readers may also notice that the quotation marks for Jesus’ words in John 3 end at v. 15. This indicates that Jesus did not speak John 3:16-21. It is a matter of interpretation, but many readers will disapprove of this decision.

“Law” is capitalized in 1 Cor 14:37, but not at all in Rom 7, nor at Psa 19:7, but again at Gal 3:2, 5, and 10. There seems to be no reason for these variations. Heb 7:19 and 28 have “the law,” but why not “Law” since it refers to the law of Moses.

V. TEXTUAL CRITICAL MATTERS

In the OT text there is a surprising resort to following the LXX rather than the Hebrew text. In 1 Sam 9:25 words are added from the LXX, as occurs in 1 Sam 12:8. At 1 Sam 10:1 the text follows the LXX rather than the Hebrew, as is the case with 13:11 and 29. Another questionable case of this switching of texts is at 1 Sam 17:1. In 2 Chron 9:7 Solomon’s “men” become “wives” in a reading of the LXX rather than the Hebrew, going against even the parallel text of 1 Kgs 10:8. Neh 4:23 follows a “Probable reading” claiming the Hebrew meaning is uncertain.

In the NT some unfortunate textual problems exist in the ESV. On the first page of Matt, Asaph and Amos are substituted for the real kings, Asa and Amon in 1:7-8 and 10. This ascribes errors to Matthew as the original author. The translators here follow the Nestle/United Bible Society (NU) text. But strangely, they retain Luke 22:43-44

(which the NU omits entirely), where an angel comforts Christ in Gethsemane as he sweats blood. This unevenness is demonstrated again in Luke 24:53 where “and praising” is omitted without mention, yet in 24:42, it is noted that some mss add “and some honeycomb.” This latter is not nearly as significant as 24:53, which is one of Westcott and Hort’s eight supposed conflation examples!

It is hypocritical to place a *double* bracket around John 7:53-8:11 with a note that the earliest mss do not include it, then leave it *in* the text rather than omit it as with John 5:3-4, 1 John 5:7-8, and many other passages. The same is the case with Mark 16:9-20, which the translators believe is spurious, but yet leave in the text. Acts 15:34 is omitted entirely as is Rom 16:24.

Another illustration of unevenness in textual matters is 1 Tim 6:7. There, “it is certain that” is omitted with a note saying that some MSS “insert” the phrase, but then at the end of the verse these translators add three additional words, “:of the world, which are *not* in the original text and are only redundant. Yet, no note explains this unnecessary addition. In 1 Tim 4:13, Timothy is to devote himself to three things, each in a nice parallel construction of two words each. The simple original word, “reading,” becomes “the public reading of Scripture.” Several words are added to the text, again with no note. The translators must feel that God needs help, or that he would have been clearer if he had said it their way.

VI. POOR GRAMMAR

The text of Rev 6:14 which has dual subject, plural object, and plural verb is unnecessarily rendered with singulars.

VII. UNFORTUNATE MISPRINTS

Most Bibles have its misprints, and the ESV is no exception. The “you” in “do not let you hands be weak,” (2 Chr 15:7), should obviously be “your.” The footnote (#3) in 1 Thess 2:5 should be #4, but the #4 never appears in that verse’s text or elsewhere on the page.

VIII. STRANGE RENDERINGS

Why is there a “temple” at Shiloh in 1 Sam 3:3 rather than the tabernacle? It is disappointing to see Nicodemus’ night visit changed to “had gone to him before” in John 7:50, when *vuktos* is clearly in the text. The same word is properly translated “by night” in 3:2. This is strange and should not be changed, because John thrice highlights that Nicodemus came by night.

Apparently the translators thought Paul was being redundant in Romans 10:3 where he uses the word “righteousness” three times, so they cut it down to two. If God wants to emphasize a word by repeating it three times, why should men tamper with God’s intentions? Again, Rom 16:7 has “Junia,” but the note suggests “Or Junias.” The translators choose the feminine Junia, but cannot simply say, or Junias, the masculine, (as RSV). The note would indicate that an equal choice is possible here. That is simply not the case—it must be one or the other, but the translators hedge on their choice.

Incredibly, Paul’s “I have been crucified with Christ,” is placed in Gal 2:19, rather than in 2:20! This is in opposition to the KJV, ASV, RSV, and NIV.

Heb 11:31 says “Rahab the prostitute,” gave “a friendly welcome to the spies.” It would be less racy to translate it more literally “received the spies with peace.” Noah is no longer “the eighth person,” but is simply “with seven others” (2 Pet 2:5).

IX. GENDER NEUTRAL LEANINGS?

Questionable are numerous renderings which seem to go out of the way to avoid the plain sense and instead insert a feminist understanding of the text. The “natural man” of 1 Cor 2:14 becomes the “natural person.” “Behaving like mere men” is changed to “behaving only in a human way” (1 Cor 3:30). Even “are you not carnal?” is rendered “are you not being merely human?” (1 Cor 3:4). “Men who practice homosexuality” (1 Cor 6:9) is restricted to men, whereas “homosexuals” would be more accurate and includes women who do such things.

Why is it “Dan their ancestor,” rather than the more literal “Dan their father” in Judg 18:29? The ESV has “Ruth the Moabite,” rather than “Moabites,” NKJV (Ruth 1:22). 2 Kgs 4:1 has “my two children,” while the KJV and NKJV have “my two sons,” and the NIV has “my two boys.” Yet in vv. 5-7 the ESV correctly notes the sex of the sons. Why the inconsistency? “The sons of men” is awkwardly turned into “the children of mankind” in 1 Kgs 8:39.

It seems stilted in Peter’s mention of the Balaam incident to say, “a speechless donkey spoke with a human voice” (2 Pet 2:16), but this leaves open the possibility that it was a *girl’s* voice, and not a man’s. But why isn’t Jesus “Son of a human,” rather than “Son of Man?” Why does 1 John 5:9 have the testimony “of men,” rather than “of

people,” as elsewhere, since it is translating the plural of *anthropos*? In Rev 9:5 *anthropos* is rendered as “someone.”

Strange indeed, is the rendering of 1 Tim 4:10, which makes Jesus the “Savior of all people,” instead of “all men,” as in the RSV. I can almost heave one of the ESV translators ask, “Is not ‘man’ the noble name of the human race?” Similarly, and consistently, the “all men” in the RSV of 1 Tim 2:1, 4 and Titus 2:11 are replaced with “all people” in the ESV. But in 1 Tim 5:24, why say the sins “of some men” and not “of some people”? Are these male only sins? Again, 1 Tim 2:5 has Jesus as the one mediator between “God and men.” Why not between God and people? 1 Thess 2:4 has men (plural of *anthropos*), and one would expect the ESV to translate it as “people,” but instead it is converted to a singular (man). There is little consistency.

X. USE OF NUMBERS

Years ago I found the Berkeley Version’s use of Arabic numerals fascinating. It was easier to read the ages of the patriarchs (Gen 5), how many fighting men made up a tribe of Israel (Num 1-2), and so forth. The ESV uses this same procedure, but in a hopelessly inconsistent manner—so much so, that one’s concentration on the text of Scripture can be swept away by the fickleness and the rapidity of the changes in usage. In Neh 7 the use of numbers includes 98, 95, 42, 52, 74, 50, and 67. In Num 7, the Arabic numerals 10 and 70 are used many times, but in Exod 26 the following are *written out*: ten, twenty-eight, fifty, thirty, eleven, twenty, forty, six, eight, sixteen, five, and four. In 1 Chr 15, the Arabic numbers include 80, 112, 120, and 130, but in 1 Chr 16:38 the ESV spells out sixty-eight. Num 12:4 has “seventy-five years,” after chap. 11 uses

Arabic 29, 30, 32, 34, 35, 70, 119, and many more for “years.” Num 23:1 has “127,” but 23:14 has “four hundred.”

From Genesis to Revelation this problem persists. In Gen 23:1 Sarah lived “127 years,” but in vv. 15-16 her burial field is purchased for “four hundred shekels.” Gen 50:3 has “forty” and “seventy,” but we find “110” on vv/ 22 and 26. In Rev 4-5, the numbers 6, 7, and 24 all appear several times, but are written out. In Rev 20:1-7 the thousand years is written out six times, but in chap. 21:16-17, one encounters “12,000 stadia” and “144 cubits,” while the number “twelve” is written out six times in vv. 12 and 14. Even large numbers like 10,000 are sometimes spelled out, as in Rev 9:16 (twice). These inconsistencies are so prevalent that one wonders how they could have so blatantly passed by editors and made it to the printer. It would take many pages to enumerate more of these bothersome little flaws, so I will not trouble the reader further.

XI. UNNECESSARY WORD SUBSTITUTIONS

It is not fitting for a translator to replace God’s words with his own improvements, yet this practice is found in the RSV/ESV. Several rivers are named in the Bible—the Euphrates (21 times from Gen 2:14 to Rev 16:12), the Jordan (over 180 times between Genesis and John), and a few others. The Nile River is *never* named in Scripture. It will not be found in any Heb or Gk concordance. Yet the word Nile is randomly substituted for the word river in Exod (1:22; 4:9, twice; 7:15, 17-18, 20-21, 24-25; 8:3, 9, 11), and in Gen 41:1-3, 17-18). But in Exod 2:4, twice the word “river” remains. Thus, in the ESV, one cannot tell what God actually said—river or Nile. To compound the matter, no note tells the unsuspecting reader of this substitution. The issue

is, can one trust this translation? Where else does this practice occur? Why is there not a note? Similarly, Moffatt, JB, NASB, and NIV follow this practice with Nile in many of the aforementioned verses, in contrast to the KJV, ASV, and NKJV which mirror God's choice of words in their translations of these texts.