

THREE RECENT BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: A LITERARY AND STYLISTIC PERSPECTIVE

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When I ask advice about travel, a car, or any other costly purchase, I hate it when the salesperson says, “So, what are you looking for?” If I knew the answer, I would not have asked in the first place. I want the authority figure to guide me to the best product around, that is all. The salesperson recognizes, however, that his products satisfy a range of different needs, and without knowing that I want good gas mileage and reliability rather than aesthetic appeal and quick acceleration, he cannot recommend the Focus or the new Thunderbird.

“What Bible do you recommend?” is now the same kind of question. In the 1950s and 1960s, the choice for Protestants was largely between the KJV and the RSV. The NASB and NIV complicated our response, but rightly or wrongly many of us felt we could still give an authoritative answer. It seemed like a straightforward question. After all, ours is a faith that is dependent on an authoritative book. But which one is it?

To complicate matters, we live in an age that recognizes no authority, or at best multiple authorities. New readers are profoundly shaped by this, and by the visual and digital cultures that thrive on variety and change. It is therefore neither accidental nor lamentable that Bible translations are proliferating in our age. The energy that these three translations have harnessed are signs of faithfulness, not decline. We will need several different kinds of Scripture in the coming decades. “So, what are you looking for?”

If you need to be shaken up a bit, or you are buying for a friend who is more familiar with the Simpsons than with Samson, you will want *The Message*, Eugene Peterson’s translation. At his best, Peterson is the J. B. Phillips of this generation, presenting God’s message in some of the most effective language of our day. The *New English Translation*, or *NET Bible*, is a study Bible. With nearly 60,000 footnotes on the literal meanings of Greek and Hebrew words and the relevant translation issues, it will be especially helpful to missionaries, translators, students, and expository preachers. Its virtual place of publication (www.netbible.org) highlights the NET’s self-understanding as “leverag[ing] the internet” to enable people worldwide to overcome the cost of biblical materials. A free electronic copy of the *NET Bible* may be downloaded from its website. The *English Standard Version* (ESV) is

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an evangelical updating of the *Revised Standard Version* (1952, 1971). It will appeal to readers who want a translation that is both more literal and elegant than the NIV, but do not require a gender-inclusive translation. I doubt many readers will entirely lay aside their NIV, NLT, or any other translation they have grown to love or rely on, but many will include these Bibles in their reading. What they read will depend upon what they are looking for.

Evaluating the styles of these versions is ultimately inseparable from the translation and theological issues at work in them. To begin nearer the fountainhead of English translations, we owe the much vaunted style of the *King James Version* (1611) to its theological imperatives, not to a stylistic goal. Ironically, its translators went so far as to *disregard* the literary style of contemporary English. Their literary sense, David Norton writes,

was totally subordinated to their quest for accuracy of scholarship and translation. . . . Much of the quality of the [KJV] as English exists because the translators and their predecessors strove for something other than stylish English. Their fidelity to the originals transmitted some, perhaps much, of their alien but real literary quality into English.¹

If you have read the prose of the late 16th or early 17th century, you know that Norton is correct. The *King James Version* reflects neither the flowery “Euphuistic” prose of Lyly, nor the “Ciceronian” structure of Hooker; neither the sinuous rhetoric of Donne, nor the harsh directness of Martin Marprelate. Thank heavens! Because English prose was then in its stylistic infancy, the KJV’s translators could never have produced the Bible they did if they had paid attention to contemporary style.

For modern English translators, however, the situation is entirely different. The burden of our stylistic past is sometimes a blessing, sometimes a curse, but it is always present. Stylistic concerns will therefore rise inevitably and frequently to the surface. Like other versions, the style in these three either draws the modern reader toward the original languages and cultures, or it draws the text toward the modern reader. The ESV aspires to a more literal “formal equivalence” translation and leans toward the first option. The NET text is a dynamic equivalent translation (the footnotes give more literal translations) and leans toward the latter. Peterson’s *The Message* “grew from the soil of forty years of pastoral work,” as he says in the preface. He wanted his congregation to “listen, really listen, to the message in his book.”² That is the formula for an “extreme” dynamic-equivalent version, as one of his own readers might put it. I would put it between J. B. Phillips and the Cotton-Patch gospels.

The use of introductory particles, seemingly so insignificant, can begin to illustrate these differences. We still know words like “verily” from the KJV, but “verily” was dropped by the RSV. “Lo” is present in RSV, but not in the later versions I have mentioned. “Behold” and “truly, truly” are retained only in the ESV. The NIV and NRSV have dropped all of these locutions, too,

¹ David Norton, *A History of the Bible as Literature*, vol. 1 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993) 159.

² Eugene Peterson, *The Message* 7.

with the exception of five usages of “behold” in the NIV, four of which are in Revelation.

In these cases we are not dealing with the formal versus dynamic equivalence, nor even asking how far to draw the reader into the cultures of the ancient Near East. We are simply asking whether a new translation should somehow sound a bit foreign to a modern reader. Whether a new translation should continue to use words like “behold” and “truly, truly” when they have dropped out of general usage seems to be a small question. But it will influence the larger ones to come.

Like the NRSV and NIV, *The Message* and the NET replace “behold” with “look,” “see,” “remember,” or “listen.” “Truly, truly” is recast in various ways. Here is how the three translations render John 1:29b, 1 Cor 15:51, and John 5:24a:

<i>The Message</i>	NET	ESV
John 1:29b “Here he is, God’s Passover Lamb! He forgives the sins of the world!”	“Look, the Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world!”	“Behold, the Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world!”
1 Cor 15:51 But let me tell you something wonderful, a mystery I’ll probably never understand. We’re not all going to die—but we are all going to be changed.	Listen, I will tell you a mystery: We will not all sleep, but we will all be changed—	Behold! I tell you a mystery. We shall not all sleep, but we shall all be changed
John 5:24a It’s urgent that you listen carefully to this: anyone here who believes what I am saying right now and aligns himself with the Father, who has in fact put me in charge, has at this very moment the real, lasting life.	I tell you the solemn truth, the one who hears my message and believes the one who sent me, has eternal life.	Truly, truly, I say to you, whoever hears my word and believes him who sent me has eternal life.

The English word “behold” is a metrical “iamb”: an unaccented syllable followed by an accented one. None of the alternatives is an iamb. “Listen” is poetically the opposite, a “trochee.” In addition, “behold” has two long vowels, “listen” two short ones. English ears are accustomed to hear a resonance in iambs and long vowels that cannot be duplicated in any other way. This resonance is physical, aesthetic, and spiritual at the same time. In return for

this resonance, the ESV is saying to the reader: “This is a foreign book. You are going to have to work a little if you want to understand it.” The NET moves toward the middle, eliminating or softening the foreign-sounding language. As the final example shows, there is nothing foreign about the diction of *The Message*. Yet Peterson is quite aware of the emphasis of the introductory particles, and will recast an entire sentence to retain it.

The three examples above, from John and 1 Corinthians, also show that the sentences in *The Message* are frequently much longer than in other translations. Peterson glosses theologically freighted words and concepts—“believe” and “eternal life” in John 5:24a—often by employing an annoying linguistic habit of our day: inventing hyphenated strings of words. His rendering of Rom 4:5 moves from a 21-word translation in the ESV to a 58-word sermonette in *The Message*:

But if you see that the job is too big for you, that it’s something only *God* can do, and you trust him to do it—you could never do it for yourself no matter how hard and long you worked—well, that trusting-him-to-do-it is what gets you set right with God, *by God*. Sheer gift.

“Trusting-him-to-do-it” is Peterson’s phrase for “faith.” Yes, this translation avoids theological jargon. He also avoids “justification,” “sanctification,” and “righteousness.” (He does use the equally difficult “consecrate.”) At some point, however, these concepts must be defined, whether in the translation itself or in another setting. The reader must be brought into the theological world of the biblical writers. Even Peterson must use the word “faith” in his version of Hebrews 11. He uses it in Rom 5:1 as well. So why the circumlocution for “faith” in Rom 4:5? I can usually understand and sometimes applaud his decision to avoid jargon, but in cases like this it seems arbitrary. His solutions will irritate many seasoned Bible readers, and soon everyone will find them dated. Stringing together multiple, hyphenated words is a current usage for whose demise one can only say, “Maranatha!” Before that time, however, and among new or jaded Bible readers, Peterson will find an audience that responds favorably even to this aspect of his translation.

The theological terms avoided by Peterson are embraced by the ESV. Its evangelical translators saw the ESV as a opportunity to restore an evangelical flavor that was lost in the RSV. Let me illustrate. A professor once spotted my brother carrying his *Oxford Annotated RSV*, as he walked to class at the University of Edinburgh. “Ah, the *Oxford RSV*,” the professor sighed, “where the text is fallible and the notes are inerrant.”

That implicit critique is partly responsible for the ESV. But the notes in my ESV are technical and explanatory, not theological. So how does the theological character of the ESV’s *text* differ from the RSV or the NRSV? According to its preface, the ESV “retains theological terminology—words such as grace, faith, justification, sanctification, redemption, regeneration, reconciliation, propitiation—because of their central importance for Christian doctrine.”³ The ESV therefore resurrects *propitiation* from the KJV in three places and

³ ESV, Preface viii.

gives it a new role in Heb 2:17. *Regeneration* returns to Titus 3:5, as in the RSV (though not the NRSV or NIV), and the KJV's use of *virgin* returns to Isa 7:14. Apart from these five or six places, however, the RSV and NRSV use these theological terms in ways very similar to that of the ESV. I am not a theological insider, but I find it difficult to believe that these five or six usages could have been very significant motives for producing a new version of Scripture. On the other hand, "Old religious factions are volcanoes burnt out," as Burke wrote. There is still smoke, and maybe a little fire as well in those volcanoes. I am sure we shall see more theological differences in study versions of the ESV.

The old theological battles over these five passages may still be sufficient to prevent some evangelicals from buying the RSV. The active eruptions, of course, are caused by gender. The new fire is over the gender-inclusive language of the NRSV and the TNIV.

Before I began this project, I doubted that any future translators, other than those willing to voice explicit doubts about feminist theology, would continue "[t]he inclusive use of the generic 'he,'" as the ESV preface puts it. Even the ESV translators avoid the cultural and theological battle, and place their decision squarely beneath their translation objectives: The generic "he" . . . is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and . . . an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it. . . . In each case the objective has been transparency to the original text, allowing the reader to understand the original on its own terms rather than on the terms of our present-day culture."⁴ The use of male language for God does not so much as rise to the surface in the ESV's preface, and the NET addresses this aspect of inclusive language only to reject it as "completely foreign to the original authors of the canonical texts."⁵ On the other hand, the ESV frequently replaces the RSV's "man" with "anyone," and "men" with "people," where the original languages lack a word with a male meaning. In fact, the ESV shows the great change in English usage on this matter. Sometimes it goes even further than the NRSV in seeking gender-neutral terms (see 2 Kgs 5:14, for instance). Of course, this will not satisfy those who generally accept, implicitly or explicitly, the feminist critique of language and culture. They will hate the ESV.

If they think, as I did, that the ESV's use of the generic "he" is unrepeatable, however, the NET proves them wrong. The NET calls its approach on this matter "gender accurate," and while it goes further than the ESV does, it generally does not adopt the gender neutralizing tactics (used by Peterson, NRSV, and NLT) of changing singulars to plurals and converting third-person forms to second person. Peterson, by the way, goes one step further and occasionally uses the parallelism of biblical poetry to alternate male terms with female: "It's the men who walk straight who will settle this land, / the women with integrity who will last here" (Prov 3:21). The NET translators reject what they boldly label "'Ideological Gender Inclusivity,' since we do

⁴ Ibid. ix.

⁵ NET, Preface 11.

not believe the Bible should be rewritten to incorporate gender-inclusive language foreign to the original.”⁶ Presumably these translators have analyzed and rejected the thinking behind *The New Testament of the Inclusive Language Bible* (Crossroads) and *The New Testament and Psalms: An Inclusive Version* (Oxford), where Jesus is the “Child of God,” the Father has “Parent,” and words like “Godself” are invented. Here is what this looks like in the NET’s practice: “How happy is the one who does not follow the advice of the wicked. . . . Instead he finds pleasure in obeying the LORD’s commands” (Ps 1:1a, 2a). An accompanying NET footnote remarks: “The principle of the psalm is certainly applicable to all people, regardless of their gender or age. . . . However, the singular form may emphasize that godly individuals are usually outnumbered by the wicked. Retaining the singular allows the translation to retain this emphasis.”

In his Preface to the first great dictionary of our language (1755), Samuel Johnson comments on those who would attempt to “fix” the language. Johnson has in mind those who wish to preserve the alleged purity of our language, but we can give “fix” its American usage as well to include mending its “linguistic sexism” and “inherent bias” (to quote the preface to the NRSV). “[S]ounds are too volatile and subtle for legal restraints; to enchain syllables and to lash the wind are equally the undertakings of pride, unwilling to measure its desires by its strength.”⁷ As Johnson indicates, the attempt to use language as an ideological tool can never fully succeed. In Exod 20:17, for instance, all three versions (in addition to the NLT and NRSV) warn against coveting your neighbor’s “wife” without an equivalent warning against coveting a husband. They also use the generic “he” in Matt 13:44–46. In *The Message*, for instance, the finder of the pearl of great price “proceeds to sell everything he owns.”

To clarify the stylistic issues in this choice, it may help to look at a translation from secular literature, where literary quality is paramount. There the evidence seems to tip more toward the NET and ESV approaches. Here is Robert Pinsky’s rendering of Dante’s *Inferno*, Canto 11, where the sins of fraud and suicide are described:

. . . But since fraud is found
In humankind as its peculiar vice,
It angers God more . . .

One may lay violent hands on his own being,
Or what belongs to himself. . . .⁸

Pinsky translates the Italian word *uom* as “humankind,” rather than “man” or “mankind,” but he continues to use the generic “he.” His choices show a change in the language, but he has no ideological dogma regarding gender

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Samuel Johnson, “Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*,” in *Samuel Johnson: Selected Poetry and Prose* (ed. Frank Brady and W. K. Wimsatt; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977) 294.

⁸ Dante, *Inferno* (trans. Robert Pinsky; New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1994) 11.24–26, 41–42.

neutrality. He does not even mention the issue in his Translator's Note. Needless to say, his primary audience is a very broad one—hardly conservative evangelicals who are angered by the revision of the NIV.

It must be said that endless attempts to find plural or second-person equivalents for “he” are often ridiculous. Readers have the painful thrill of watching the translator scramble for the golden ring—will it be “person” or “one” this time? Will the entire noun phrase be repeated to avoid the pronoun but keep the singular? This game diverts our attention from the text to the larger cultural game. Nor can we restrict this game to the biblical text itself, for the same game goes on in sermons, liturgies, and lectures where speakers or authors are committed to ideological gender neutrality. In those contexts, the scramble often becomes more serious. It moves from language about man to language about God. We have all been in the audience where the speaker scrambles to avoid the personal pronoun (“he”) for God. We have all heard modalist benedictions to “Creator, Sustainer, and Redeemer” so that the speaker can avoid pronouncing the word “Father.” The Prefaces to the ESV and NRSV simply avoid the issue of male language for God. But it cannot be avoided. The postmoderns are correct to emphasize that discourse shapes our world. When usage, including usage by evangelical translators and scholars, adheres to an ideology of gender neutrality, it affects our view of the Trinity, the personhood of God, and our relation to him. Those who merely adhere implicitly to this ideology out of a wish to avoid controversy will be sorely disappointed: ideologies are never satisfied until they dominate, whether they are political or linguistic. And they never fully dominate even in the most politically correct of tyrannies. In *1984*, Orwell clearly explained the linguistic goals of eliminating “Oldspeak (or Standard English, as we should call it)” thus: “It was intended that when Newspeak had been adopted once and for all and Oldspeak forgotten, a heretical thought—that is, a thought diverging from the principles of Ingsoc [English Socialism]—should be literally unthinkable, at least so far as thought is dependent on words.”⁹ Adhering to an ideology, whether out of conviction or a desire to avoid controversy, ends up furthering it.

Despite what the ideologues tell us, life is not a series of ideological choices, nor does the world conform to their theories. Ordinary users of English do not live in the Manichean world of the ideologues. Many, though not all, of my students use the generic “man” quite unconsciously. I have developed a parlor game of recording the use of generic male terms in liberal news media, such as National Public Radio and *The New York Times*. Perhaps I am deceived, but I hope that usage will one day triumph over ideology and leave us a messy, unpredictable, and free tongue. On the other hand, the use of “they” to refer to singular antecedents and avoid this issue altogether has gained popular acceptance in speech, although not in much published material. I am not aware of any composition textbook that endorses it in written English (although they all dutifully condemn the generic “he” as sexist). The TNIV is the first Bible to endorse this usage, maintaining that it

⁹ George Orwell, *1984* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1983) 246.

“actually has a venerable place in English idiom. . . .”¹⁰ This is wishful thinking. You can find “they” in reference to singulars in a number of places—Jane Austen, Thackeray, and elsewhere. But it is not common and hardly “venerable”—not like dear old Bede, at any rate. In fact, it is jarring, and the TNIV translators acknowledge this by their defense of it. Yet they have the power of common speech on their side, and (to quote Johnson’s Preface again), “the pen must at length comply with the tongue.”

Unlike reviewers and speakers, translators must make a hard, permanent choice on the generic “he.” Their choice will be apparent for all to see. Their political and cultural commitments will strongly influence the choice, and the resulting style will strongly influence the meaning of the text. Compare Eccl 1:2–3 and 3:18–19, this time including the NRSV:

<i>The Message</i>	NET	ESV	NRSV
Eccl 1:2–3			
Smoke, nothing but smoke. [That’s what the Quester says.] What’s there to show for a lifetime of work, a lifetime of working your fingers to the bone?	“Futile! Futile!” laments the Teacher, “Absolutely futile! Everything is futile!” What gain does anyone have in all his work in which he labors on earth?	Vanity of vanities, says the Preacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What does man gain by all the toil at which he toils under the sun?”	Vanity of vanities, says the Teacher, vanity of vanities! All is vanity. What do people gain from all the toil at which they toil under the sun?
Eccl. 3:18–19			
I said to myself regarding the human race, “God’s testing the lot of us, showing us up as nothing but animals.” Humans and animals come to the same end—humans die, animals die. We all breathe the	I also thought to myself, “It is for the sake of people, to clearly show them that they are like animals. For the fate of humans and the fate of animals are [<i>sic</i>] the same; as one dies, so dies the other. Both have the same breath;	I said in my heart with regard to the children of man that God is testing them that they may see that they themselves are but beasts. For what happens to the children of man and what happens to the beasts is the	I said in my heart with regard to human beings that God is testing them to show that they are but animals. For the fate of animals is the same; as one dies, so dies the other. They all have the same breath, and

¹⁰ “A Word to the Reader,” *Today’s New International Version: New Testament Preview Edition* (Colorado Springs: International Bible Society, 2001) vii.

same air. So	there is no	same; as one	humans have no
there's really no	advantage for	dies, so dies the	advantage over
advantage in	humans over	other. They all	the animals for
being human.	animals, for both	have the same	all is vanity.
None.	are fleeting.	breath, and man	
Everything's		has no	
smoke.		advantage over	
		the beasts for all	
		is vanity.	

If you are committed to gender-neutral language, you must make the Preacher shift back and forth between singular and plural pronouns throughout Ecclesiastes, for much of the book arises from his personal experience. But the pathos of the book depends in part upon conveying that the reader's own, individual experience is like that of the Preacher. Plural pronouns cannot convey the pathos of our individual loneliness and vanity. We are born as individuals. We die one at a time. By converting so much of the text into plurals, the gender-neutral translations shift our attention to the futility of the masses. That's not Qohelet's point. Nor is he criticizing the sort of person found in the masses—"mass man," as Ortega y Gasset described him. You may think yourself wiser than "people," after all. Who does not? You may be wiser than most "humans." But Qohelet is trying to tell you that you are not wiser than "man." He is speaking to you, male or female, as an individual example with respect to the generic type. He is not speaking to you with respect to "people."

In addition to losing the pathos of our individual lives, the gender-neutral translations sacrifice a more general solemnity as well. They must, of course, prefer "human" and a variety of other terms to "man." In normal usage at this point, however, "human" is a more strictly biological term than "man." "Humans" are indeed on the same continuum with the animals, and to use those words in Eccl 3:18–19 registers only a blip on the screen. "Man" retains a much broader range of meanings. Man is a creature who inhabits economic, political, spiritual, and aesthetic worlds, along with the biological one. For "man" to be no different from beasts is solemn indeed. My own preferences, then, lie with the ESV, and I hope that usage will reject the ideological straitjackets that most new Bible translations gladly assume. But I could be wrong. To close this issue with a final, plaintive word from Johnson: "It remains that we retard what we cannot repel, that we palliate what we cannot cure. . . . [T]ongues, like governments, have a natural tendency to degeneration; we have long preserved our constitution, let us make some struggles for our language."¹¹

These two passages bring out some of the other differences among the translations as well. The *NET Bible* has a tin ear for poetry. When I picked up my NIV for the first time and read "Meaningless! Meaningless!" I knew I could never love such a translation. The NET is likewise deaf to the sound of

¹¹ Johnson, "Preface to *A Dictionary of the English Language*" 296.

English words and speech rhythms, and often disregards genre. In Eccl 3:2 we read of:

An appropriate time to be born, and an
appropriate time to die;
an appropriate time to plant, and an
appropriate time to pluck up what was
planted.

I have reprinted the manner of the NET's presentation to illustrate its failure to use indentation in continuing a poetic line. Far more serious, however, is the NET's disregard of genre in this case. As proverbial sayings, Eccl 3:2–8 must be concise, their meanings compact. The NET is neither. Even the manner of presentation obscures the rapid antithesis between the first phrase and the second, which is central to the generic effect of a proverb. Instead, the NET amplifies the meaning of the verses to aid the reader's understanding at the expense of his imagination.

Peterson's use of "Smoke" in Eccl 1:2 illustrates his occasionally inspired and often quirky choices. I remember an OT scholar who began his class on Ecclesiastes by lighting a cigar and literally blowing smoke at us. It is a lesson I will never forget, and Peterson's rendering makes it similarly vivid for his chosen audience. Comparably vigorous word choices abound in Peterson: the master of Prov 27:18 becomes a "boss"; eating bread by weight in Ezek 4:16 (ESV) becomes "starvation rations"; and Judah's casual attitude toward human relationships is conveyed when he "hooked up" with Hirah (Gen 38:1). Already people explain obscure or overly familiar passages by saying, "Peterson puts it this way. . . ." That is about as great a tribute as any translator could wish for. Sure, much of this will be dated by the next generation, but Peterson is writing for this one.

Yet although Peterson may print more of the Bible as poetry than any translation, he has little concept of the nature of poetry and the poetic nature of language. Lifting up the cup of salvation and calling on God's name becomes "a toast to God" (Ps 116:13). You "give them their food in due season" (Ps 104:27) becomes you "give them their meals on time." Peterson alone renders Gabriel's words to Mary in Luke 1:28–29 as poetry:

Good morning!
You're beautiful with God's beauty,
Beautiful inside and out!
God be with you

She was thoroughly shaken, wondering what was behind a greeting like that.

I would be shaken too: does not an angel have access to more resources of language than that? The name for these shortcomings is bathos, or "sinking," a rhetorical term invented by Alexander Pope to describe the sinking feeling we get from bad poetry. It is not that all poetry needs to adopt high diction. In fact, none of these Bible translations matches the earthy vigor of *The Living Bible's* excellent rendering of Esau's words in Gen 25:30: "Boy am I

starved! Give me a bite of that red stuff there!” “The sound must seem an echo to the sense,” as Pope wrote. “Good morning” is too pedestrian for the Annunciation, the repetition of “beautiful” makes Gabriel sound tongue-tied, and the greeting as a whole is both too long and made up of phrases that are too short. The lack of connectives in *The Message* often gives a clipped feeling to its spoken parts. Like this, in fact. Best way to translate? Not much variation. Exciting, yes. But all the time?

A friend of mine with a good deal of experience in this area told me that the problem with a one-person translation is that an individual has no one to laugh at him. When someone from his group would read a particularly bad suggestion aloud, the rest of the team would simply laugh. It was brutal but effective.

Another defect of the one-person translation is the tendency to adopt the same tone throughout. Truly great authors can manage many different tonal qualities, both in dialogue and description. Think of how much is conveyed below the surface and between the lines of Mark Twain, Flannery O’Connor, and Robert Frost. For an individual literary genius to achieve such a range of tone, working in his or her own language, is miracle enough. Translating this element is more formidable still. “It gets lost in the translation.” Not surprisingly, a more literal translation, like the *ESV*, can do a better job in rendering the linguistic and tonal variety of the originals than a dynamic translation—even if that variety in English is somewhat different from its Greek and Hebrew counterparts. When the version rests upon a single dynamic translator, however, the result is often tonal monotony.

From Genesis to Revelation, you never forget that *The Message* is “Peter-son.” It speaks with one voice, and it is often shouting: “And [Abram] believed! Believed God! God declared him “Set-Right-with-God” (Gen 15:6). Its more daring word choices often call more attention to their own wit—sometimes bathetic—than to the biblical subject matter: “Your clothes smell like the wild outdoors, / the ozone scent of high mountains” (Cant 4:11b). At other times, the voice slaps us in the face with current turns of phrase: acts of faithfulness in 2 Chr 32:1 become an “exemplary track record.” At still others, it cajoles us: “You worked hard and deserve all you’ve got coming. Enjoy the blessing! Revel in the goodness!” (Ps 128:2). No, thank you. Just dodging the exclamation points is so exhausting that the reveling will have to wait.

Of these translations the *ESV* is by far the most attentive to poetry and figurative language. Occasionally it is betrayed by its dependence on the *RSV* and its penchant for high diction, but it is generally a pleasure to read. If you exclude the occasional particle (“behold”), its diction is often lower and bolder than that of the *NRSV*.

In Canticles, for instance, the *ESV* conveys a sense of the foreignness of the characters’ fierce erotic love by preserving the imagery of the Hebrew lilies, sapphires, alabaster, and gardens. It gives a clear sense of waiting for love by not explaining its imagery: “his banner over me was love,” compared to the *NRSV*’s “his intention toward me was love” (Cant 2:4). The beloved “lies between my breasts” in the more suggestive *ESV*, but is merely “spending the night” in *NET* and “resting” in *The Message*. Unlike the *NRSV*, the *ESV*

changes “palanquin” (Cant 3:9, RSV) to the more familiar “carriage.” It likewise changes the uncertain word “arsenal” (Cant 4:4, RSV) to the more understandable “rows of stone,” while the NRSV chooses the difficult word “courses.” The beloved is “comely” and “terrible” in the NRSV and RSV, but “lovely” and “awesome” in the ESV (Cant 6:4). If you bracket the battle over gender neutral language, the ESV pays more attention to current usage than the NRSV.

A good example of the ESV’s boldness comes in its translation of Cant 8:6:

ESV	NRSV	NIV	NET	<i>The Message</i>
Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm,	Set me as a seal upon your heart, as a seal upon your arm;	Place me like a seal over your heart, like a seal on your arm;	Set me like a cylinder seal over your heart, like a signet on your arm.	Hang my locket around your neck, wear my ring on your finger.
For love is strong as death, jealousy is fierce as the grave.	For love is strong as death, passion fierce as the grave.	its jealousy unyielding as the grave.	For love is as strong as death passion is as unrelenting as Sheol.	Love is invincible facing danger and death.
Its flashes are the flashes of fire, the very flame of the LORD.	Its flashes are flashes of fire, a raging flame.	It burns like blazing fire, like a mighty flame.	Its flames are ferocious, it is a mighty flame.	Passion laughs at the terrors of hell. The fire of love stops at nothing—it sweeps everything before it.

Here, the ESV follows only the NASB in hinting at a link between erotic love and love for God. This link becomes explicit, pronounced, and troubled in medieval Western culture, and the two were only partly reconciled by the exaltation of marriage during the Reformation and the writings, somewhat later, of Milton. This the ESV stylists know. Their willingness to accept the most daring and unusual translation in this passage makes for more than good reading. It can challenge the reader to enter the complex history of love in our cultural heritage.

Still, the ESV is often content to let the obscurities of the RSV stand. People still fear “before” God in Eccl 3:14, while they “fear him” in NET and “worship in holy fear” in *The Message*. Occasionally, when the obscurity is

in the original text, the ESV fails to give any guidance to the bewildered reader, as in Zech 6:8's treatment of the patrolling horses:

ESV, RSV	NET	<i>The Message</i>
Then he cried to me, "Behold, those who go toward the north country have set my Spirit at rest in the north country."	Then he cried out to me, "Look! The ones going to the northland have brought me peace about the northland."	Then he called to me and said, "Look at them go! The ones going north are conveying a sense of my Spirit, serene and secure. No more trouble from that direction."

The ESV is both antiquated and obscure. Is God's Spirit wholly at peace (not just in the north) because of what is going to happen in the north, as the NET suggests? Or is the north receiving serenity due to an equine visitation (*The Message*)? Either interpretation is possible, but I don't see how any reader of the ESV could come up with either of these interpretations—or any interpretation at all.

At other times, the ESV shrinks from a bold translation. Joseph makes the Egyptians into slaves in *The Message*, NET, and RSV (Gen 47:21), but they become mere "servants" in ESV. Since the Israelites are enslaved a couple of chapters later in Exodus 1, when a new Pharaoh arose who knew not Joseph, the ESV loses the bitter irony that is latent in the Genesis passage of the LXX and Samaritan Pentateuch (the MT is obscure). For a translation that wants to preserve "the stylistic variety of the biblical writers" and enable readers to follow key words in its text, this is a shortcoming.¹²

The Message has become so dear to my father that he sent his copy to Eugene Peterson with return postage and asked him to sign it. My wife uses the NET if she has to do some teaching. I have begun using the ESV on a more regular basis, though I am not sure I would buy it for my children. Perhaps I am concluding, with the Dodo in *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, that "Everybody has won, and all must have prizes." But these versions of the Bible are competing for very different audiences, after all. The result is not chaotic, like the spectacle witnessed by Alice. The world has become chaotic, and these translations are trying to reach different parts of it—faithfully and creatively. So, what are you looking for?

¹² ESV, Preface viii.