

REVIEW ARTICLES*

THREE RECENT BIBLE TRANSLATIONS: AN OLD TESTAMENT PERSPECTIVE

MICHAEL A. LYONS AND WILLIAM A. TOOMAN**

I. INTRODUCTION

A glance at a book distributor's catalog or a publisher's website is enough to confirm that the proliferation of English translations and study editions has reached Brobdingnagian proportions. On the one hand, the seemingly endless marketing of Bibles targeting niche groups based on age, race, gender, marital status, denomination, and addiction can create the dangerous illusion that the people of God do not in fact share the same Word. On the other hand, the Bible has *always* been accompanied by a variety of translations—at an early date by multiple Greek translations, followed shortly by translations in Aramaic, Syriac and Latin. In our opinion, the multiplicity of translations can be a sign of a healthy interest in the Bible and is to be expected where there is diversity in reading habits and abilities.

Historically, motives for producing new translations or editions of the Bible have been numerous: the need to account for a change in language usage (semantic shift, obsolescence, a change in the use of gendered language), a desire to improve readability or accuracy (usually by emphasizing a dynamic or formal equivalence theory of translation), a desire to provide explanation, or the desire to address a perceived lack of biblical literacy or availability. Finally, some translations and study editions may be encouraged by publishers seeking to market a product to a particular target audience. Both doctrinal and cultural differences create an environment ripe for exploitation by those who would have readers believe that “finally there is a Bible that is just for you!”¹

* The three review articles in this issue discuss the following: *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2001), xii + 1328 pp. + maps, \$24.99; *NET Bible: New English Translation* (n.p.: Biblical Studies Press, 2001), 2396 pp., \$39.99; *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language*, by Eugene Peterson (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002), 2265 pp., \$29.95.

** Michael Lyons and William Tooman are doctoral students at the University of Wisconsin, 500 Lincoln Drive, Madison, WI 53706.

¹ It seems to us that while individual translational choices are often doctrinally motivated, it is rare that the systematic representation of or reaction to a particular doctrine is the primary motivation behind the creation of a new translation. The motive behind the marketing of new Bible editions (or existing translations) is another matter.

In the last century, most translations have been a response to a combination of these concerns. The three Bibles reviewed here are no exception. The desire to represent current language usage and follow a particular translation technique is addressed in different ways by all three Bibles. Concerns about biblical availability and literacy are addressed in different ways by two of the Bibles (*The Message* and the *NET Bible*).

This review will focus on the stated goals of each translation, paying particular attention to translation technique and accuracy. While the slogan that “all translation is interpretation” seems to be increasingly used to justify the acceptability of various translations, we believe that this claim is incorrect. Interpretation presumes a choice, whether conscious or unconscious, between alternatives; where there are no possible alternatives, a translational equivalent is not an interpretation. It is obvious that no translation is ever perfectly synonymous with its source text, but this does not mean that all equivalents are interpretive, or that accuracy in translation is unattainable. Even when there is a choice between semantic equivalents (or syntactic equivalents, which constitute a rather different category), the nature of the equivalent selected may be due to the demands of the target language rather than to a desire to explain the text, or to an unconscious ideological position.

When confronted with the question, “Which of these Bibles is best?” or “What translation should I use?” neither of us would give an unqualified recommendation of any translation over another. For reasons that will be apparent below, it is difficult to imagine a situation in which we would recommend *The Message* for regular reading or study. However, the ESV and *NET Bible*—when viewed in their entirety—are in our opinion as good as other widely used translations (e.g. NRSV, NASB, NIV). However, as we shall demonstrate, their strengths, weaknesses, goals, techniques, and target audiences are all quite different from each other.

II. THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

1. *The ESV project.* The English Standard Version (ESV) was prepared by a 14-member translation oversight committee in consultation with 50 translation review scholars and more than 50 members of an advisory council. This team is described as international and interdenominational and is said to “share a common commitment to the truth of God’s Word and to historic Christian orthodoxy.”² The names of the oversight committee and review scholars are available from the publisher.

The preface situates the ESV in the “classic mainstream of English Bible translations,” citing Tyndale’s New Testament, the KJV, RV, ASV, and RSV. The translators state that the ESV is “adapted from the Revised Standard Version,” that the 1971 RSV text is the “starting point” for the ESV, and that each word in the ESV has been compared with the original languages “to en-

² *The Holy Bible, English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001); as reviewed here: *The ESV Classic Reference Bible* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001) ix-x.

sure the fullest accuracy and clarity.” The preface claims that “archaic language has been brought to current usage” and that “significant corrections have been made in the translation of key texts.”³

2. *Textual base.* The preface depicts the ESV’s textual decisions in the following way:⁴

The ESV is based on the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible as found in *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. . . . The currently renewed respect among Old Testament scholars for the Masoretic text is reflected in ESV’s attempt, wherever possible, to translate difficult Hebrew passages as they stand in the Masoretic text rather than resorting to emendations or to finding an alternative reading in the ancient versions. In exceptional, difficult cases, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Septuagint, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Syriac Peshitta, the Latin Vulgate, and other sources were consulted to shed possible light on the text, or if necessary, to support a divergence from the Masoretic text.

The reader might conclude from this that the ESV translators began with an *a priori* preference for the MT, that they used the ancient versions with great reluctance, and that they diverged from the MT only when faced with difficulties. Fortunately, an examination of the text shows that the translators do nothing of the sort. The translators use the MT as a starting point because it is not a translation, not because there is a “currently renewed respect” for the MT. If they “respect” the MT, this is a conclusion, not a starting point. Moreover, the ESV translators are aware that it is in fact quite common to encounter MT readings that are not at all “difficult,” yet that are obviously secondary when compared with the other ancient witnesses.

The ESV translation committee did not follow the textual decisions of the RSV in every case, but reevaluated the evidence. For example, the ESV did not accept the RSV emendation in 2 Sam 1:21 (“nor upsurging of the deep”), but retained the Hebrew “nor fields of offerings.” The ESV at Deut 33:17 reads “a firstborn bull,” following the Septuagint, Samaritan Pentateuch, and evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls; RSV’s “his firstling bull” followed the Masoretic text (MT).

Because textual criticism is an evaluation of evidence, and because textual critics differ significantly in their evaluations, readers will inevitably see room for improvement: in Deut 5:5, the reading “words of the Lord” (LXX, Samaritan Pentateuch, DSS) is preferable to MT’s “word of the Lord.” There is strong versional support for reading “[t]hose who are saved” rather than “Saviors” in Obad 1:21. In Hab 1:17, the reading “unsheathing his sword” (1QpHab 6:8) could be considered as an alternative to MT’s “emptying his net.” However, it is clear that the ESV translators made a genuine effort to consult the evidence and make careful decisions based on that evidence.⁵ Emendations, which are rare, are judiciously made.

³ *ESV Classic Reference Bible* iv, vii.

⁴ *Ibid.* ix.

⁵ In 1 Samuel, the Translation Committee recognized that the MT had suffered a greater amount of textual corruption than in Genesis, for example. According to the footnotes, places where

The use of footnotes to signal the textual basis for the translation is a valuable part of the ESV, since it allows the nonspecialist to understand why English versions differ. The ESV is to be commended for this policy of alerting the reader to alternate readings. In some places improvement is needed: in Isa 10:12 the ESV reads, "When the Lord has finished all his work on Mount Zion and on Jerusalem, he will punish." The MT actually has "I will punish"; the Septuagint has "he will punish." Is ESV following the Septuagint, or assimilating its translation of the MT to the context? No information is given in the footnotes.⁶

3. *Philosophy of translation.* The Preface uses the term "essentially literal" to refer to its translation.⁷ Elsewhere the philosophy of translation is explained in the following way: "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."⁸ The Translation Committee's rationale for this decision shows their desire to respect the historical nature of the text: "A 'thought-for-thought' translation is of necessity more inclined to reflect the interpretive opinions of the translator and the influences of contemporary culture."⁹

A close reading of the ESV reveals that "literal" is understood in different ways. The ESV retains RSV's "speak tenderly" for the Hebrew expression "speak to the heart" in Isa 40:2. The translators correctly recognize that a literal rendering would be confusing here, and provide an equivalent expression in English. Other departures from literal translation are signaled in the footnotes: at Gen 20:16 ("It is a sign of your innocence in the eyes of all"), a footnote states that the verse actually reads "it is a covering of eyes for all." At Jer 17:10 ("I test the mind"), a footnote states that the word translated "mind" is the Hebrew word "kidneys," and at 1 Sam 20:12 ("The Lord, the God of Israel, be witness!"), a footnote states that "be witness!" is not in the Hebrew. In some places, however, nonliteral renderings are not footnoted; in Isa 10:13, "on thrones" is an unmarked interpretive addition to the Hebrew "those who sit."

the ESV departs from MT and follows other textual witnesses include 1 Sam 1:5, 24; 2:29, 33; 6:19 (emendation); 9:24 (emendation), 25, 26; 10:1; 12:3, 6, 8, 11, 15; 13:15, 20, 33, 41; 17:13, 52; 20:19, 25, 41; 22:3, 14; 24:10; 30:2. In the following verses, the translators felt that the versional evidence was significant enough to warrant citation in footnotes: 1 Sam 7:12 (LXX has "Jeshanah" for MT's "Shen"); 8:16 (LXX has "cattle" for MT's "young men"); 9:16; 10:21; 12:9 (LXX has a longer reading in these three verses); 14:18 (LXX has "ephod" for MT's "ark"); 17:4 (LXX, DSS, and Josephus read "four cubits" for MT's "six cubits"); 20:16 (LXX has a longer reading); 25:22 (LXX has "David" for MT's "enemies of David").

⁶ See also Nah 3:9, "Put and the Libyans were her helpers." The MT reads "your helper." The only information given in the footnote to this verse is "Hebrew *your*," which makes no mention of the fact that the Septuagint reads "her helpers."

⁷ *ESV Classic Reference Bible* vii, viii, ix.

⁸ *Ibid.* viii.

⁹ *Ibid.* vii-viii.

In some places, the ESV has given a literal translation that could prove confusing, especially to a casual reader of the Bible. Gen 38:26 reads “And he did not know her again,” giving a literal translation of the Hebrew idiom indicating that Judah did not have sexual intercourse with Tamar again. Even though the expression “to know” is not used to designate sexual intercourse in English, no explanatory footnote is given. Nor is one given in Gen 19:5 or Judg 19:22.

This example can be contrasted with the rendering of Prov 2:16. Here the Hebrew could be rendered “to deliver you from the strange woman, from the foreign woman [who] makes smooth her words.” However, to translate נָכְרִיָּה as “strange” (cf. Prov 23:33 for this sense) suggests that the woman under discussion is odd or unusual, and to translate נִכְרִיָּה as “foreign” (cf. Deut 14:21 for this sense) falsely suggests that non-Israelite women are particularly dangerous. The ESV does not give a literal (and potentially misleading) equivalent here, but renders, “So you will be delivered from the forbidden woman, from the adulteress with her smooth words.” The woman in question is “strange” and “foreign” in that she is a stranger to men other than her husband (whom she has in fact forsaken, v. 17), and is thus forbidden to them. The equivalents “strange” and “foreign” are placed in the footnotes.

4. *Changes in wording, style, and convention.* In attempting to revise an older translation, the ESV translation committee was faced with two challenges: improving on the RSV translators’ understanding of certain Hebrew words and phrases, and finding better current English equivalents. In some cases the ESV provided a new marginal reading: “my punishment is greater than I can bear” (Gen 4:13) is given the marginal alternative “my guilt is too great to bear.” However, sometimes the supplied marginal reading is improbable; is “Be evil” really a likely alternative to “Be broken” in Isa 8:9?

In other cases, the ESV departed from the RSV wording. In Isa 52:15, the ESV translates “so shall he sprinkle many nations.” This replaces RSV’s “so he shall startle many nations,” a rendering that is supported by a forced appeal to an Arabic cognate. However, the use of the word “sprinkle” is not without its own problems, a fact that should have been mentioned in the footnotes.

There remains room for improvement in a number of places. In Isa 7:14, the passage at which the RSV’s translation attracted so much attention, the ESV renders the Hebrew עַלְמָה as “virgin”—without any alternative translation given in the footnotes, as was provided in the ASV, RSV, and even the updated NAS. This is bound to arouse comment, given that the ESV renders the same Hebrew word in Exod 2:8 (referring to Miriam) as “girl.” Also in Isa 7:14, the Hebrew word הָרָה is a predicate adjective that should be translated “is pregnant” (cf. NRSV), not “shall conceive.” In Gen 1:2, the difficult word תֶּהוֹ (rendered as “without form”) should have the marginal alternative “waste place” (cf. Deut 32:10; Isa 24:10). In Gen 6:4, the ESV gives the marginal reading “Or giants” for the word *nephilim*—presumably on the basis of a description in Num 13:33—but the word does not mean “giants.” The ESV’s translation “immoral” (referring to Tamar, Gen 38:24), is too broad for the Hebrew זָנָה, which refers specifically to sexual immorality. The word זָנָה in

Exod 15:2 and Isa 12:2, rendered “song” in older translations, should be given a footnote citing the alternative meaning “strength” (cf. Gen 43:11 “strength of the land,” which ESV renders as “choice fruits of the land”). In Lev 25:10 the word “jubilee” (which is just a transliteration of the Hebrew) should have an explanatory note. The term *עַד-קָמָה* in Num 24:22 means “how long?,” not “when.” The rendering “pomegranate cave” in 1 Sam 14:2 is baffling; what is a “pomegranate cave”? The word *גָּרִים* (Isa 5:17) means “strangers,” not “nomads.” If the word *מְלֵא* in Isa 6:3 is taken as the noun “fullness” (as in Deut 33:16; Isa 8:8), then Isa 6:3 means “the fullness of the whole earth is his glory,” not “the whole earth is full of his glory.” This should be footnoted as an alternative translation. The term *לֶחֶם הַמַּעֲרֹכֶת* (e.g. 1 Chr 9:32; 23:29) should be rendered “arranged bread” or “rows of bread” (cf. NRSV) instead of “showbread.” *חֲסִידִים* is rendered as “faithful ones” in 1 Sam 2:9; “the merciful” in 2 Sam 22:26; “the godly” in Micah 7:2; and “saints” in Prov 2:8, though these words mean quite different things in English.

The representation of certain syntactic features is worthy of note. The preface to the ESV admits that coordinating conjunctions are used far more frequently in Hebrew than would be proper in English. Nevertheless, the translators claim they have translated these connectives because, “Effective translation . . . requires that these links in the original be reproduced so that the flow of the argument will be transparent to the reader.”¹⁰ Unfortunately, the ESV fails to represent the Hebrew coordinating conjunction and the text-segment marker *וַיְהִי* (“and it happened”) at the very places where it is most important for the reader to see connections and text-segment hierarchies (e.g. Exod 1:1; Lev 1:1; Num 1:1; Josh 1:1; Judg 1:1). These markers are not things that can be omitted as a matter of convenience in English translation.

Another goal of the ESV is to bring the language of the RSV up to date. One way in which the language was revised is the updating of gendered references. The preface states that the ESV uses “man”/“men” when a male referent is intended, but “anyone”/“people” when the referent is not gender-specific. It also states that, “The inclusive use of the generic ‘he’ has also regularly been retained, because this is consistent with similar usage in the original languages and because an essentially literal translation would be impossible without it.”¹¹

In keeping with this, ESV has updated the wording in many places to bring it into current usage: in Lev 1:2, “When any man of you brings an offering” (RSV) is changed to “When any one of you brings an offering.” In Isa 66:2, “But this is the man to whom I will look” (RSV) is changed to “But this is the one to whom I will look.” In Job 5:17, “happy is the man whom God reproves” (RSV) is changed to “blessed is the one whom God reproves.” In other places, however, the rendering “man” is retained in the ESV: “Iron sharpens iron, and one man sharpens another” (Prov 27:17); “where no man dwells” (Jer 2:6). Eccl 2:21 reads “because sometimes a person . . . must leave everything,” but 2:22 reads “What has a man from all the toil and striving of heart with which he toils beneath the sun?”

¹⁰ Ibid. viii.

¹¹ Ibid. viii–ix.

The Hebrew word בְּנִים “sons” is rendered variously as “sons” (Gen 5:4), “people” (Lev 1:2), and “children” (Gen 18:19). The latter does not work well in Eccl 2:8, where the ESV reads “concubines, the delight of the children of man.” As the footnote correctly remarks, the meaning of the word rendered “concubines” is uncertain. But why render “sons” as “children”? Are concubines a delight to youngsters? And why does Dan 10:16, referring to the angelic messenger, use “one in the likeness of the children of man” (Hebrew בְּנֵי אָדָם) when 7:13 uses “one like a son of man” (Aramaic ܒְּܢܝ ܐܢܫܝܢ)?

Unlike Hebrew, English has no way of distinguishing between singular and plural in second person pronouns and verbs. Where relevant, these distinctions are given in the footnotes (e.g. Isa 7:9 “The Hebrew for *you* is plural in verses 9, 13, 14”). The footnotes also specify where a pronoun has been replaced with what is presumably the antecedent in order to avoid ambiguity: “the fear of the Lord is Zion’s treasure” (Isa 33:6) replaces “the fear of the Lord is his treasure.” Some peculiarities in the use of pronouns for the representation of animals can be noted in the ESV. In Gen 7:2, the ESV translates “male and his mate” rather than “male and its mate.” In Gen 8:7 the raven is referred to as “it,” but the dove as “she” (vv. 9–12).

Another way in which the ESV attempted to revise the RSV was by replacing archaisms. Like other modern versions, ESV replaced the archaic endings (*-eth*, *-est*) and second-person pronouns (*thy*, *thee*, *thine*) that were used when addressing or speaking about God. The RSV’s “firmament” (Gen 1:6, etc.) became “expanse.” The ESV’s “villagers” in Judg 5:7 is an improvement on the RSV’s (and NRSV’s) “peasantry.” The RSV’s “handmaid” (e.g. 1 Sam 25:24) is rendered by the ESV as “servant,” and the RSV’s “seed” (Gen 3:15) is rendered as “offspring.” “Vainglory” became “pride” (Ezek 7:20); “smote” became “struck” (Exod 12:29); and “ass” became “donkey” (Gen 16:12; 1 Sam 9:3).

Some badly needed updates are not made (“Vanity of vanities” in Ecclesiastes is retained), and others are made inconsistently. The word “bosom” is usually replaced with other constructions (e.g. Exod 4:6; Deut 13:6; Ruth 4:16; 1 Kgs 1:2), but is retained in Num 11:12. The archaic “begot” and “begotten” is usually changed to “fathered” (e.g. 1 Chr 14:3), but not always, as in Ps 2:7. The RSV’s “countenance” is changed to “face” in Ps 44:3, but is retained in Num 6:26. “Washer” is used in Isa 7:3, but the archaic “fuller” in Mal 3:2. “Whip” is used in Isa 28:15, but “scourge” in 28:18. We find “piece of bread” in Prov 28:21, but “morsel of bread” in Gen 18:5, 1 Kgs 17:11, and elsewhere. The anachronistic “brass” in the RSV (e.g. Lev 26:19) has been replaced with the historically correct “bronze” in most places, but not in Isa 48:4. Deut 23:13 uses the translation “excrement,” but Judg 3:22, Isa 36:12, and Ezek 4:12 use the term “dung,” which is more suitable for animals than for humans.

The ESV still uses “ears of grain” in Gen 41:5ff. This is a partial correction from the RSV’s “ears of corn” (an acceptable British phrase for grain) that should be rendered as “heads of grain” in American English. The ESV NT translators recognized this (cf. Matt 12:1), but the change was not made in the OT.

These inconsistencies might constitute an understandable failing in an older committee translation, but in an age when texts can be electronically searched and edited, they are hard to fathom. They are even more

problematic in light of the translation philosophy stated in the preface: "Therefore, 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."¹²

The ESV improves on the style of the RSV in a number of places: the RSV's humorous translation "I will accept no bull from your house" (Ps 50:9) became "I will not accept a bull from your house." The RSV's "We will not any of us go to his tent" (Judg 20:8) became "None of us will go to his tent." However, the awkward "all your right eyes" (1 Sam 11:2) is retained. The RSV's penchant for placing the negative after the verb ("Prophecy not to us," Isa 30:10; "Fear not," Gen 35:17) was changed in some places ("Do not prophesy to us"; "Do not fear"), but not in others ("Be not wise in your own eyes," Prov 3:7; "deny them not to me," Prov 30:7).

As in most modern translations, pronouns referring to divinity are not capitalized. "Spirit" is capitalized where it is thought to refer to the Holy Spirit (Gen 1:2). Occasionally some inconsistent choices are made; Pharaoh is made to say that the "Spirit of God" is in Joseph (Gen 41:38), but the Babylonians perceive that the "spirit of the holy gods" (Dan 5:11, 14) is in Daniel. As in most other modern translations, there is no capitalization of "anointed one, a prince" in Dan 9:25. Nor is the word "servant" capitalized in Isa 42:1; 49:3, 5, 6; 52:13; 53:11. However, "Son" in Ps 2:7, 12 is capitalized.

5. *Other features provided.* The *Classic Reference* edition begins with a preface and front matter explaining the translation philosophy, footnotes, and cross-reference system. Each book of the Bible is provided with a short introduction that gives traditional views of date and authorship (where these can be determined) and summarizes plot and theme. This is a helpful feature and is generally well done, though the introduction to the book of Esther spends too much time speculating about the identity of the book's anonymous author.

The ESV uses section headings to give a rough indication of literary structure and content. This feature is used throughout every biblical book with the exception of Proverbs, where it occurs only sporadically. A particularly helpful feature can be found in the Psalms, where individual psalms are given headings that are memorable lines from the poems themselves (e.g. Psalm 51, "Create in Me a Clean Heart, O God"; Psalm 127, "Unless the Lord Builds the House"). Poetry is indented to set it off from prose, and the editors have attempted to represent the parallelism occurring in Hebrew. Some verses that were understood to be prose in the RSV have now been represented as poetry (e.g. Gen 1:27; 2:4; 16:11, 12; 24:60).

In this edition, the cross-reference system is separated from the footnotes. Alphabetical superscripts preceding a word indicate that the word is cross-referenced to identical words or phrases, similar themes (given in square brackets), and "less direct references." These references are located in the center column. Numerical superscripts that follow words refer to footnotes at the bottom of the page. These footnotes include information on variant

¹² Ibid. viii.

readings and manuscript evidence, alternative translations, and explanations of Hebrew and Greek terms. Also given are meanings of names (e.g. Gen 38:29 “*Perez means a breach*”); identification of wordplay (e.g. Isa 5:7; Jer 1:11); clarification of referents (Isa 7:13 “he said,” footnote “That is, Isaiah”); notes on equivalents for weights, measurements and monetary value (e.g. Isa 5:10); and differences in versification with the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Isa 9:1).

Where the sense of Hebrew words or phrases is unknown, the footnotes state: “The meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain.” This is an excellent feature, but is used too sparingly in some books. Why are Isa 14:19 (“like a loathed branch”) and 26:19 (“your dew is a dew of light”) less obscure than Isa 10:27 (“the yoke will be broken because of the fat”)?

The *Classic Reference* edition of the ESV contains a concordance and a series of maps. Like most other modern translations, the ESV text is available in a searchable electronic format for a variety of computer platforms. A full concordance is also available from the publisher.

6. *Conclusion.* The criticisms mentioned in this review, mostly relating to inconsistency, should not be taken as evidence that the ESV is a “bad translation.” The ESV OT is a solid translation, continuing the tradition of excellence displayed by its predecessor, the RSV. It values caution and tradition over innovation. It has largely succeeded in bringing archaic language up to date while retaining the feel of the older translations on which it is based.

III. THE *NET BIBLE* (NEW ENGLISH TRANSLATION), VERSION B.911A

1. *The NET Bible project.* The New English Translation is the first English translation of the Bible intended principally for distribution on the internet (hence the twofold meaning of the name “NET Bible”). The editors claim that “[t]he NET Bible truly is the first English translation for the next millennium, representing a step as significant as Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press in 1455.”¹³ As stated in the preface, this is a new translation from the original languages, not a revision or an update. The translation is accompanied by 57,875 translators’ notes, allowing the reader to see the rationale behind the translators’ decisions.¹⁴

The translation and notes are freely distributed over the internet (www.netbible.org), though a print version is available for purchase. Because the format is primarily electronic, the translation and notes can be continually updated and improved. The translation committee invites comments, suggestions, and corrections from the readers, and the working draft of each new revision or note is published on the web before being integrated into the translation.¹⁵ Given the extent of corrections that still need to be

¹³ *The NET Bible, New English Translation* (Biblical Studies Press, 1996) 6.

¹⁴ This number, while impressive, includes many repeated notes. In print form the same note or notes may appear again and again on the same page, whereas when viewed on the NET website, a smaller number of verses and notes are visible.

¹⁵ Borrowing a term from software development, the editors refer to this process of submitting the translation to readers for comments and correction as “beta testing.” The title page of the print copy therefore refers to the contents as the “First Beta Edition.”

made, it may surprise some that the editors released a print version, but the preface states that this strategy is designed to gather more comments and suggestions from users.¹⁶

According to the preface, an electronic medium was selected to make the Bible available to the millions of people in the world who have no access to printed editions of the Bible due to production and distribution costs.¹⁷ One would think that most English speakers with internet access would also have easy access to affordable printed Bibles. However, the translation committee seems to have another situation in mind, since they offer users the opportunity to print up to 1,000 copies of the *NET Bible* without informing or paying the publishers.¹⁸ This is indeed a benefit to missionaries who work in environments where Bible study materials are not available—provided that they are then able to translate the *NET Bible* into the appropriate language. Considering the volume and detail of the translation notes, the editors encourage a second audience to take advantage of their free Bible: “Students of the Bible, future Bible translators, and biblical scholars” will all find information in the notes that is valuable to their work.¹⁹

The translators of the *NET Bible* are an “interdenominational and evangelical” group who first met to strategize about the production of a web-based Bible at the 1995 national SBL meeting in Philadelphia.²⁰ Recognizing the aesthetic weaknesses and production challenges of committee translations, they opted for a small group of translators who follow “generally similar approaches” to interpretive methodology and translation philosophy.²¹ Each book of the Bible was assigned to a single scholar with extensive experience researching, teaching, and writing on the book. The translators then submitted a draft to the OT or NT committee for editing and revision. Following revisions, the translation and notes were resubmitted for final approval. All translations were also screened by an English style consultant. The full translation with notes was then posted on the internet so that readers could comment and was revised again.

2. *Format.* The *NET Bible* consists of the following sections: the text and accompanying footnotes; a lengthy preface (giving the history, goals, and translation philosophy of the *NET Bible*, as well as instructions for use); and end matter (containing the Principles of Translation, list of cited works,

¹⁶ A list of “major issues which will be addressed” can be found on p. 13 of the preface. The fact that this is a work in process makes a review somewhat problematic; depending on the extent of revisions, parts of this review could be quickly rendered obsolete. The reader should remember that the comments below properly apply only to the print version B.911a of the *NET Bible*, the “First Beta Edition.”

¹⁷ *The NET Bible* 4.

¹⁸ *Ibid.* 5.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 4.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 7. The editors are quick to point out (p. 7) that they have worked to eradicate any “doctrinal peculiarities or sectarian bias.” This is the case for the translation overall. However, some readers may disagree with the footnote at Zech 14:1, which attempts to relate the “day of the LORD” to a dispensationalist framework.

²¹ In total, there are twenty translators, two consultants, and nine editors. The project editors freely provided the reviewers with a list of the translators and editors when we requested it.

and text-critical information). Also in the end matter is a table of contents that is detailed enough to be usable as an outline of every book of the Bible.

The somewhat unattractive format of the print version is understandable, given that the *NET Bible* was not primarily designed as a printed Bible. In contrast, the *NET Bible* website is well designed and easy to use. The text runs in one pane and the notes in another, and the user can scroll through the text and notes and jump to different chapters using the links provided in the left-hand frame.

There are three varieties of notes: translation notes, text critical notes, and study notes. Translation notes (marked by “tn”) are the most numerous; these explain the rationale for the translation in question. These notes contain alternative translations (often giving a more formal equivalent of the Hebrew and Aramaic) and provide interpretive options, usually citing relevant scholarly literature.

Text-critical notes (marked by “tc”) discuss readings from the ancient versions, Dead Sea Scrolls or Samaritan Pentateuch that differ from the Masoretic text (MT). These notes justify the translators’ textual decisions, cite textual evidence that is not adopted though thought to be significant, and mention variations in other English versions.

Study notes (marked by “sn”) are intended for nonspecialists. These notes comment on historical and cultural background, clarify obscure phrases, provide brief explanations of context, describe theological points made by the biblical author, and occasionally provide some cross-references. The conventions for citing the original languages has not yet been fully standardized in the footnote system; one can find Hebrew characters, transliteration, and a combination of both. In the print version, the transliteration of Hebrew is frequently incorrect.²²

3. *Textual base.* The translators use *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* as a “starting point,” and “correct” this with the ancient versions and other Hebrew manuscripts. The preface claims that emendation is employed “only where necessary to make sense of the Hebrew text in order to be able to translate it.”²³ Text-critical decisions were made by individual translators, then reviewed by the editors and a textual consultant. The “Principles of Translation” state that “in particularly difficult passages the translator may have followed a variant reading found in the versions.”²⁴ Fortunately, most translators seem to be aware that text critics should not use the versional evidence only when the Hebrew is problematic, but evaluate all variants, problematic or not, to determine the best reading. Significant textual variants and emendations are listed in the footnotes and marked with “tc.”

The “Principles of Translation” state that readings that “lack adequate textual authority (i.e. are almost certainly not part of the autographs)” are

²² The letters נ and ם are incorrectly transliterated in the footnotes to e.g. Exod 2:5, 6, 13, 14, 17, 23; 3:11, 14; 4:10; 5:22.

²³ *The NET Bible* 16–17.

²⁴ *Ibid.* 2347.

set off by double brackets.²⁵ This apparently refers only to passages such as Mark 16:9–19 and John 7:53–8:11, and not to e.g. the pluses in the MT of Ezekiel 1. There are no directions on how to handle what seem to be multiple literary editions, such as the shorter and longer versions of Jeremiah.

In general, the translators evaluate the textual evidence carefully. The first footnote to the book of Hosea gives a thoughtful summary of the textual problems associated with that book. The NET translation of Isaiah is particularly noteworthy for its attempt to introduce new readings that have previously been restricted to technical commentaries. A few improvements could be made: while the Hebrew reading “greater than Agag” (Num 24:7) is discussed in a footnote, no mention is made of the fact that there is almost unanimous versional support for the reading “greater than Gog.” The footnote to Prov 30:1 cites a versional variant, but calls it “an attempt to reinterpret the first two verses,” and fails to take it seriously as an alternative to the Hebrew. The footnotes to Ezekiel 1 mention three variants (a minus in the Septuagint, 1:11; a difference between the Septuagint and MT, 1:13; a plus in MT, 1:20) but do not provide any evaluation of these variants for the reader. Nor do the notes give any indication of the large number of variants actually present in this chapter.

4. *Philosophy of translation.* In their “NET Bible Principles of Translation,” the editors remark that it is impossible to achieve a completely formal or completely dynamic translation.²⁶ However, in the Preface they state that “the translators and editors used the notes to give a translation that was formally equivalent, while placing a somewhat more dynamically equivalent translation in the text itself to promote better readability and understandability.”²⁷ The translation guidelines mention some techniques that would result in a dynamic translation, including the following: breaking up long sentences; replacing idiomatic and figurative language; avoiding archaisms; replacing pronouns with nouns where a formal translation would be ambiguous; shortening of redundant expressions; and changing passive constructions to active ones where a formal translation is ambiguous.²⁸

Because no other guidelines for achieving a dynamic translation are stated, and because the individual books were assigned to different translators, a wide spectrum of equivalence is represented in the *NET Bible*. Overall, the *NET Bible* reads smoothly, exhibits the features of conversational English, and has a lively and engaging style. In Deut 1:28, the Hebrew idiom “have caused our hearts to melt” is rendered as “drained away our courage.” In Exod 5:17, a literal rendering of the Hebrew פָּרַח happens to be a colloquial English equivalent; Pharaoh’s response to the Israelite foremen is, “You are slackers! Slackers!” Ps 101:5 renders the Hebrew “[one who has] pride of eyes and wideness of heart, him I will not endure” (cited in the footnotes) as “I will not tolerate anyone who has a cocky demeanor and an arrogant

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Ibid. 7.

²⁸ Ibid. 2347–48.

attitude." Ps 106:48 uses "We agree!" instead of the other English versions' "Amen," which is merely a transliteration of the Hebrew. In Cant 1:1 the title of the composition is translated as "Solomon's Most Excellent Love Song." Some footnotes actually inform the reader of the difficulties and decisions involved in the translation process; the note to 1 Sam 20:30 is an excellent example of this.

Some translators occasionally use quotation marks to indicate puns, euphemisms or figures of speech: "lifted up" (Gen 40:20); "fell asleep" (Ps 76:5); "vineyard" (Cant 1:6; 8:12); "myrrh" (Cant 6:12); "navel" (Cant 7:2). This is an ingenious idea, and one can only wish that it were used more extensively. The double entendres in Song of Songs are difficult to render in English, and the use of quotes has the advantage of preserving the words while indicating a euphemistic meaning.

In some places, the dynamic translation results in a questionable rendering: Judg 3:2 renders מִלְחָמָה as "holy war," a word elsewhere translated simply as "war" (e.g. Deut 20:1). Judg 3:10; 11:29; 13:25 refers to empowerment by "the LORD's personal spirit," but Judg 6:34 uses "LORD's Spirit." The footnotes do not give a reason for this difference in rendering. Isaiah's statement at seeing God (Isa 6:5) is rendered as "Too bad for me"—an expression that poorly captures the extent of his despair, given that in the next phrase he says "I am destroyed."

In other places, the dynamic translation has resulted in some heavy-handed interpretive choices by the translators. In Isa 1:27 the NET reads "Zion will be freed when justice is established," but in the footnotes states that the Hebrew reads "with justice." The translator has decided to change an instrumental relationship ("with") to a temporal one ("when"), but offers no reason for the change. In Isa 11:9, the NET renders "for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD" as "For there will be universal submission to the LORD's sovereignty." The footnotes argue that "knowledge of the LORD" is a recognition of sovereignty, which is probably true; but we feel that "knowledge of the LORD" could certainly include more than that.

In Eccl 2:11 the Hebrew word "all" is rendered as "all these secular achievements and acquisitions." While the footnotes remark that the phrase is "supplied in the translation for clarity," one wonders whether the distinction "secular" versus "nonsecular" is a distinction made by the book of Ecclesiastes. In Eccl 2:13, the NET reads "I realized that wisdom has a relative advantage over folly, just as light has an advantage over darkness." The footnotes remark: "The word 'relative' does not appear in the Hebrew text, but is supplied in the translation for clarity." It seems to us, however, that the change is unnecessary, because the following line ("light has an advantage over darkness") already states the nature of the advantage.

The "Principles of Translation" state that Hebrew should be rendered into "formal English" unless the context suggests that an informal style would be appropriate, and state that the unique styles of individual writers should be preserved.²⁹ The NET has largely succeeded in these goals: the

²⁹ Ibid. 2347.

Decalogue in Deuteronomy 5 does sound different from the Decalogue in Exodus 20, and speech is less formal than narration, most noticeably in Judges, Samuel, and Kings. Archaisms (e.g. “fatling calf,” 2 Sam 6:13) are rare. The translators claim that their goal in the representation of gender was to be “gender-accurate” rather than “gender-inclusive,” which means that the NET attempts to preserve the historical gender distinctions and lack of gender distinctions intended by the authors. The translation guidelines relating to gender are stated in the preface, and relevant comments are placed in the footnotes.³⁰

The *NET Bible* contains renderings that are absent in the KJV–ASV–RSV tradition, innovations that are based on a new understanding of Hebrew or on archaeological evidence. Genesis 23:3, 10 uses the word “Hethite” to distinguish between the Canaanite clan and the northern people group properly referred to as the “Hittites.” The Hebrew phrase “iron chariots” (Judg 1:19; 4:3) is rendered as “chariots with iron-rimmed wheels.” 1 Sam 28:8 reads “use your ritual pit to conjure up for me,” and Isa 8:19 reads “Seek oracles at the pits used to conjure up underworld spirits.” In Isa 6:1, God is “seated on a high, elevated throne,” which makes it clear that it is the throne, not God, that is “high and elevated.” Isa 7:15 reads “He will eat sour milk and honey, which will help him know how to reject evil and choose what is right.” The footnote to this verse argues that the preposition $\bar{\text{ל}}$ does not in any other case have a temporal force when used with the verb “to know” (e.g. “before/when the child knows”) and takes the construction to indicate purpose/result. Thus, as the child eats the only food available after the disaster, “he will be reminded of the consequences of sin and motivated to make correct moral decisions in order to avoid further outbreaks of divine discipline.”

5. *Footnotes.* While the *NET Bible* contains formal guidelines for principles of translation, there were apparently fewer principles for the production of the footnotes. As a result, the footnotes are very uneven in nature. Some give a great deal of information on Hebrew grammar; others spend more time discussing meaning and theological implications, and still others shed light on the customs, beliefs, and realia of the ancient world.³¹

The quality of the grammatical discussion is mixed. The footnotes to Nahum show a superb grasp of lexicography, grammar, and textual criticism. However, other footnotes contain outdated terminology (“*futur instans*,” cf. Exod 34:10; “prophetic perfect,” cf. Exod 3:16) and misleading information.

³⁰ See e.g. the footnote to Ps 119:9 (“How can a young person maintain a pure lifestyle?”), which reads: “*Heb* ‘young man.’ Hebrew wisdom literature often assumes and reflects the male-oriented perspective of ancient Israelite society. The principle of the psalm is certainly applicable to all people, regardless of their gender or age. To facilitate modern application, the gender specific “young man” has been translated with the more neutral ‘young person.’”

³¹ The ethnocentric remark about a “primitive religious mindset” in the footnote to Gen 28:11 is inappropriate, particularly in light of the *NET Bible*’s claims to be a Bible for missionaries and Bible translators. See also the claim that “the ancient Hebrew mind did not automatically link daylight with the sun” (Gen 1:15)—a surprising assertion in light of e.g. 2 Sam 23:4 and Isa 13:10.

The footnote to Exod 1:1 states that the book begins with a “*vav* disjunctive . . . whose force is conveyed by the break between the two books.” However, the Hebrew ׀ is a coordinating conjunction; it is not marked for disjunction, nor does it take its “force” from a break between books. If any disjunction is present, it is a result of the semantic content of the surrounding words or clauses.

The footnote to Exod 1:9 notes correctly that v. 9 is the grounds for the exhortation in v. 10. However, it does not follow that the deictic presentative הִנֵּה, used in Hebrew to introduce direct speech, can be translated “because.” The footnote to Ezek 1:5 eschews an attempt at a grammatical or compositional explanation for the vacillation between masculine and feminine forms in favor of the notion that Ezekiel had “difficulty . . . penning these words as he was overcome by the vision of God.” This does not account for the apparent ease that other prophets had in writing down their visions. Nor does it allow for the possibility that Ezekiel wrote his book some time after his visionary experiences.

One danger posed by the footnotes is that it is all too easy to pass from a list of translational options or a justification of one’s own translation to a statement of personal belief. Thus in the footnote to Eccl 2:3, the translator has decided for the readers that “Qoheleth himself did not indulge in drunkenness.” This is a statement not found in or even implied by the biblical text.

6. *Conclusion.* Like all Bibles, the NET has both strengths and weaknesses. However, because of its electronic format it has potential to improve at a rate and to a degree that other versions cannot. The translation is genuinely fresh; it preserves the unique style of the biblical authors and escapes the monotone quality of some committee translations.

The footnotes provide what every translator dreams of: a chance to have one’s cake (an engaging, dynamic translation) and eat it too (the chance to cite the formal equivalent and justification for the translation in the notes). Some of the notes clarify problems in a succinct manner and shed light on the decisions and difficulties faced by Bible translators; others are banal or misleading. They are of such a mixed character that they will be valuable to some and unintelligible to others.

IV. *THE MESSAGE*: THE BIBLE IN CONTEMPORARY LANGUAGE

1. *Motivation and presuppositions.* The motive that led Eugene Peterson to produce *The Message* was an observed lack of interest in the Bible by laity. He states: “My intent here . . . is simply to get people reading it who don’t know that the Bible is read-able at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again.”³² Peterson

³² Eugene Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2002) 8. Peterson adds: “I became a ‘translator’ . . . daily standing on the border between two worlds, getting the language of the Bible that God uses to create and save us, heal and

hopes that translating the Bible into colloquial American English will lead to increased biblical literacy.

His controlling presupposition is that the Bible was originally composed in a conversational idiom. It is not high art, replete with complexity, subtlety, and mystery. Rather, it is direct address, fully accessible to the first-time reader:

The reason that new translations are made every couple of generations or so is to keep the language of the Bible current with the common speech we use, the very language in which it was first written. We don't have to be smart or well educated to understand it, for it is written in the words and sentences we hear in the marketplace, on school playgrounds, and around the dinner table.³³

According to the title page and the preface, *The Message* is an original translation from Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Peterson has a romantic view of these biblical languages:

All the time those old biblical languages, those powerful and vivid Hebrew and Greek originals, kept working their way underground in my speech, giving energy and sharpness to words and phrases, expanding the imagination of the people with whom I was working to hear the language of the Bible in the language of Today and the language of Today in the language of the Bible.³⁴

This is important for understanding Peterson's translation technique. Although he is describing the art of translation, nothing is said about grammar, syntax, lexicography, or semantics. His final test of the quality of the translation is that it reflects the intangible traits of "energy and sharpness" he believes characterize the biblical languages. Linguistic precision is not a stated priority.

Peterson claims that "*The Message* is a reading Bible. It is not intended to replace the excellent study Bibles that are available. . . . [A]t some point along the way, soon or late, it will be important to get a standard study Bible to facilitate further study."³⁵ This raises an important question: if, as Peterson argues, his translation is an accurate representation of its Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek progenitors, why should any other Bible be necessary? He does not specify what is missing in *The Message* that can be supplied by other English versions.

2. *Format.* Each book of the Bible and certain collections of books (e.g. "Books of Moses," "History Books") are provided with their own introduc-

bless us, judge and rule over us, into the language of Today that we use to gossip and tell stories, give directions and do business, sing songs and talk to our children."

³³ Ibid. 10.

³⁴ Ibid. 8. Peterson's depiction of the biblical languages as "powerful and vivid" is reminiscent of 18th- and 19th-century Romanticists; see e.g. J. G. Herder's "The Spirit of Hebrew Poetry," in *Against Pure Reason: Writings on Religion, Language and History* (trans. and ed. Marcia Bunge; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993) 158-75; or H. Ewald, *Syntax of the Hebrew Language of the Old Testament* (trans. J. Kennedy; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1879) 3.

³⁵ *The Message* 8.

tions. The function of these introductions is to introduce the basic subject matter of the book and to point out its relevance for readers. Some of these introductions are wise and helpful. Others are bewildering. In the introduction to Leviticus, Peterson stresses the holiness of God and his intimate concern with every detail of our lives. In the introduction to Esther, he attempts to characterize Haman's plan as a "god" killing, that is, an attempt to "get rid of God himself" by "killing people who worship God." He appears to be confusing ethnic cleansing with religious persecution (note his reference to similar acts in the 20th century), and it is troubling that he does not address the Jewish slaughter of their enemies in this regard.

The layout of the text is clean, without any superfluous characters. There are no verse numbers, marginal notes, or cross references. Chapter divisions have been retained, and individual pericopes are given headings that attempt to thematize the reading. The absence of traditional features encourages rapid reading but makes it a chore to locate the same verse(s) in another English version.

Peterson makes some creative and curious formatting decisions. As is now traditional, poetic texts and prose texts receive different formatting. Poems are laid out in lines that reflect the parallelism. One of his more helpful decisions is to format lists as such (see e.g. the materials lists for the priestly garments and the tabernacle in Exodus 39). Likewise, the "thirty aphorisms" in Prov 22:17–24:22 are outlined by the simple expedient of numbering each unit. Other formatting decisions are less impressive; for example, Genesis 1 is formatted as a poem. Regardless of one's judgment about the *poetics* of Genesis 1, it is clearly not a *poem*.

3. *Translation technique.* On the title page this description of *The Message* appears: "*The Message* is a contemporary rendering of the Bible from the original languages, crafted to present its tone, rhythm, events, and ideas in everyday language."³⁶ Apart from this, no description of the principles that guided the translation is offered. As a result, we chose to begin our analysis of Peterson's translation technique with an extended example. The passage we selected, Ezek 11:14–21, is reflective of Peterson's translation style.

The answer from God came back: "Son of man, your brothers—I mean the whole people of Israel who are in exile with you—are the people of whom the citizens of Jerusalem are saying, 'They're in the far country, far from God. This land has been given to us to own.'

"Well, tell them this: 'This is your message from God, the Master. True, I sent you to the far country and scattered you through other lands. All the same, I've provided you a temporary sanctuary in the countries where you've gone. I will gather you back from those countries and lands where you've been scattered and give you back the land of Israel. You'll come back and clean house, throw out all the rotten images and obscene idols. I'll give you a new heart. I'll put a new spirit in you. I'll cut out your stone heart and replace it

³⁶ Ibid. 1.

with a red-blooded, firm-muscle heart. Then you'll obey my statutes and be careful to obey my commands. You'll be my people! I'll be your God!

"But not those who are self-willed and addicted to their rotten images and obscene idols! I'll see that they're repayed in full for what they've done." Decree of God, the Master."

In the MT, Ezek 11:14–21 contains two oracles. The oracle in 11:14–16 is a disputation between God and the population that remained in Judah following the first deportation. Because it was spoken to the exiles about the community in Judah, it was composed in the third person. The oracle in 11:17–21 responds directly to the accusations made by the Judeans in verse 15. It is an oracle of hope directed to the exiles, Ezekiel's immediate audience. In *The Message*, Peterson makes extensive revisions to the MT to assist the reader by simplifying this complex utterance.

Peterson has combined the two oracles into a single one addressed to the exiles, highlighting its logical unity. He does this by eliminating the prophetic formula, "therefore thus says Lord Yhwh," from verse 17 and by recasting the entire passage in the second person (in the MT, only verse 17 is in second person). These alterations appear to reflect the translator's awareness that 11:16–17 are a response to the two lines of the dispute in verse 15:

distance yourselves from Yhwh → I have been a temporary sanctuary
the land is given to us → I will give you the land of Israel

These alterations appear to serve the goals of the translation, namely, to provide a Bible that facilitates casual reading. However, Peterson makes other alterations to the consonants and vowels of the Hebrew text that do nothing to facilitate easy reading. In verse 15 Peterson reads גְּלוּתְךָ "your exile" (following the LXX) instead of the MT's גְּאֵלֶיךָ "kindred."³⁷ He mistakes (or emends) the Piel imperative רְחֹקֵךָ in verse 15 for a Qal perfect verb, and he mistakes the preposition plus noun לְמוֹרֶשֶׁה ("for a possession") in the same verse for an infinitive construct. Finally, he changes the MT's "one heart" (לֵב אֶחָד) to "new heart" (לֵב חָדָשׁ), perhaps to harmonize it with Ezek 18:31.

Peterson also makes a number of curious semantic decisions. Some appear to be interpretive; others are inexplicable. In verse 16, Peterson translates the MT's "I have been a temporary sanctuary for you" as "I've provided you a temporary sanctuary." This interpretation agrees with the Targum, which understands it as a reference to synagogues, but it does nothing to clarify the verse. Indeed, "I have been a sanctuary" is clearer for a first-time reader than Peterson's reference to a mysterious sanctuary never mentioned elsewhere in the book. In verse 18 he translates הִסִּיר twice ("clean house, throw out")—for emphasis, one assumes. Similarly, "heart of flesh" in verse 19 is amplified to "red-blooded, firm-muscle." Finally, mention must be made of verse 21a. The MT is impossible ("and to a heart their detestable things and their abominations their heart is going"). Many solutions have been proposed

³⁷ Although Peterson does occasionally follow the versions rather than the MT (e.g. Deut 32:8; 2 Sam 1:2), he overlooks many passages where English Bibles commonly accept the versions or other Hebrew witnesses (e.g. 1 Sam 12:6; 13:1).

by the versions and by commentators. Nevertheless, Peterson's translation, "those who are self-willed and addicted to their rotten images and obscene idols," is unprecedented. Rather than consult the versions, he simply replaced the difficult segment with a repetition of verse 18b.

Ezekiel 11:14–21 is representative of the frequency and range of alterations and errors in *The Message*. Those alterations that ease the reading process through adaptation and expansion are in keeping with the stated intent of the translation and are not uncommon in the history of Bible translation. However, the frequency of emendations and errors in grammar is highly troubling.

4. *Idioms, metaphors, and "contemporary language."* Peterson's efforts to produce a translation in the "language of today" create a number of startling effects. These effects are most noticeable in poetic texts because of the density of metaphors and idioms in this genre and because of his unpredictable approach to them. For example, in the Hebrew of Mic 1:10–15, we encounter word play involving the names of various towns. In English translations, this word play is lost, because the names of the towns are transliterated (e.g. "Gath," "Beth-Ophrah"). Peterson attempts to preserve the wordplay:

Don't gossip about this in Telltown.
 Don't waste your tears.
 In Dustville,
 roll in the dust
 In Alarmtown,
 the alarm is sounded

In this case, *The Message* is not any more "free" or "literal" than versions that transliterate the place names. Because English cannot reflect both features of the Hebrew, the word play and the geographical name, every translation is forced to choose between the two. To his credit, Peterson takes the road less traveled and provides a memorable translation that reflects the word play in Hebrew.

It is Peterson's practice to attempt to replace Hebrew metaphors with equivalent English metaphors.³⁸ In rare cases, the two languages share metaphors with the same denotation. So, for example, Ps 119:168b, "all my paths are before you," is rendered, "my life's an open book before you." In most cases, however, English and Hebrew do not share equivalent metaphors. In such cases, Peterson attempts to supply an English metaphor that "roughly" depicts the same image: Peterson renders "I hate the double-minded" (Ps 119:113) as "I hate the two-faced," and "Your name is oil poured out" (Cant 1:3) as "The syllables of your name murmur like a meadow brook." "He will become . . . a trap and a snare for the inhabitants of Jerusalem" (Isa 8:14) is rendered "a barbed-wire Fence preventing trespass to the citizens of Jerusalem."

³⁸ This is an uncommon approach. Most versions choose to replicate the metaphor (e.g. "God is my rock") or its denotation (e.g. "God is my strength").

Peterson also renders non-metaphorical Hebrew with English metaphors. Jer 1:17b, “Do not be terrified of them, lest I terrify you” is rendered as “Don’t pull your punches or I’ll pull you out of the lineup.” This rendering is problematic because the sports metaphors do not make sense together; one belongs to boxing and the other to baseball. Nor do the English metaphors correspond well to the meaning of the Hebrew. In the Hebrew text, God summons Jeremiah to be courageous, whereas in Peterson’s translation God requires him to give full effort.

As in this example, where one sports metaphor leads to another, Peterson’s substitute English metaphors often take on a life of their own, spawning other related English metaphors whose connections to the Hebrew become increasingly tenuous. In Ps 9:5–6, for example, we see a series of sports metaphors sustained for six lines:

- 5a You blow the whistle on godless nations;
- 5b you throw dirty players out of the game,
- 5c wipe their names right off the roster.
- 6a Enemies disappear from the sidelines,
- 6b their reputation trashed,
- 6c their names erased from the halls of fame.

In this case the English metaphors in verses 5c and 6b are well matched to the Hebrew: “wipe their names right off the roster” renders the Hebrew “you blot out their name forever,” and “their names erased from the hall of fame” renders “you destroy their reputation.”

However, the connection between the other English metaphors and the meaning of the Hebrew is not so obvious. The decision to thematize the strophe with sports metaphors has overridden concern for semantic accuracy. The Hebrew of verse 6a (“the enemy—they have come to an end [in] eternal ruins”) is rendered by “enemies disappear from the sidelines,” and the Hebrew “you root out their cities” with “their reputation trashed.”

In the case of euphemisms and curses, Peterson is to be congratulated for going beyond any other English version to render them clearly. Where “feet” is a euphemism for genitals, Peterson consistently offers the appropriate English equivalent (e.g. Exod 4:24; Isa 7:20). Curses are not softened (e.g. 1 Sam 20:30; 2 Kgs 9:34), and Peterson gives a vivid translation of 2 Kgs 18:27. However, the graphic image “great of flesh” in Ezek 16:26 was freely revised to “seeking them out in their sex orgies.”

5. *Errors and unusual renderings.* As noted above, *The Message* is replete with mistranslations and free alterations of the Hebrew. The following examples serve not only to point out weaknesses of the translation but also to demonstrate the range in deviations from the Hebrew text. In Isa 7:14, *The Message* reads “a girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant.” Here Peterson translates עַלְמָה twice and misreads the predicate adjective הָרָה (“is pregnant”). In Ps 68:8 the exegetical clause זֶה סִינַי (“this is Sinai”) is rendered “even Sinai,” but in Judg 5:5 it is rendered “the Sinai God.” In Ps 119:176, “Seek your servant, because I have not forgotten your commands”

is freely revised to “seek me! I’ll recognize the sound of your voice.” The אֵשֶׁת־הַיֵּל of Prov 31:10 is feebly rendered “good woman” (as opposed to the more accurate “capable woman”), and קֹדֶשׁ in Deut 33:8 is rendered with the anachronistic “loyal saint.”

Although names and titles have become increasingly standardized in English translations, Peterson has chosen to go his own way, particularly in the representation of the deity. For the divine name, Peterson offers “God” as opposed to the traditional “Lord.” אֲדֹנָי is rendered as “Master,” and יהוה אֱלֹהֵי־צְבָאוֹת (traditionally “Lord of Hosts”) is rendered as “God-of-the-Angel-Armies.” מַלְאָךְ is double-translated as “Angel-Messenger” or “Messenger-Angel.” בַּעַל is the “sex god Baal” (Jer 11:13), and קְוֵלֶת is (outrageously) “the Quester.” Peterson also eliminates object names that have become traditional in English translations: the “ark of the covenant” becomes the “Chest”; the “ark” of Noah is a “teak ship”; and the tabernacle is “The Dwelling.”

6. A “rewritten Bible”? The stated motive behind the production of *The Message* is a response to an observed lack of interest in the Bible by the laity.³⁹ This is certainly a laudable goal. However, from the history of English Bible translation, it seems apparent that archaic or wooden translations do not result in lay disinterest and that colloquial translations do not result in increased biblical literacy. For example, many features of the language of the Authorized Version were already archaic in 1611, the year of its publication.⁴⁰ Nevertheless, it enjoyed a wide ecumenical readership unsurpassed by any subsequent version. It became, in the words of Peter Theusen, the “sacred lexicon” of the English-speaking world, and it enjoyed this status for more than two centuries.⁴¹ Likewise, many translators have attempted to render the Bible into “everyday English” in an effort to entice new readers, yet the decline in biblical literacy has continued unabated.

In its translation technique, *The Message* defies the typical distinction between formal and dynamic equivalence in translation. In general it can be said that formally equivalent translations treat the word or phrase as the unit to be translated. They tend to sacrifice conceptual clarity and semantic quality for unit-for-unit correspondence and consistency in rendering particular lexemes. Dynamic translations, on the other hand, tend to sacrifice unit-for-unit correspondence and consistency in rendering for semantic quality. One would think that *The Message* falls into the latter category. It is true that Peterson makes no attempt to maintain a unit-for-unit translation, nor does he consistently render lexemes with a fixed battery of English equivalents. However, semantic accuracy or quality is not the object. The

³⁹ “My intent here . . . is simply to get people reading it who don’t know that the Bible is readable at all, at least by them, and to get people who long ago lost interest in the Bible to read it again” (*The Message* 8).

⁴⁰ This is due, in part, to the efforts of the translators to produce a rhythmic translation suited to public reading. See Lane Cooper, *Certain Rhythms in the English Bible* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1952).

⁴¹ Peter J. Theusen, *In Discordance with the Scriptures: American Protestant Battles over Translating the Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999) 30.

object is to render the Bible into contemporary speech, and to do so with as much “energy and sharpness” as possible. As a result, Peterson also sacrifices semantic quality through free adaptation, error, and the substitution of Hebrew metaphors with English ones. He has produced what can only be described as a “rewritten Bible.”⁴²

There is a long tradition of “rewritten Bibles,” going back to the last centuries before the Common Era. These texts attempt to anticipate difficulties in reading and comprehension and to solve such problems in advance.⁴³ *The Message* is, perhaps, most analogous to the Targums of the Hagiographa in style and translation technique.⁴⁴ There is, however, a key difference between the rewritten Bibles of antiquity and Peterson’s translation. Rewritten Bibles were a unique genre; they contained biblical text, but they also functioned as commentary on that text.⁴⁵ As such they were not substitutes for their Hebrew progenitors. Considering Peterson’s own admission that his version is not a substitute for a “standard study Bible,” perhaps it is time for translators and publishers to revive the distinction between a Bible translation and a rewritten Bible. On a popular level, this distinction is sometimes maintained by the distinction between “translation” and “paraphrase.” *The Message*, however, perhaps due to the word’s pejorative overtones, never refers to itself as a paraphrase.

V. CONCLUSION

The three English versions reviewed here—the ESV, the *NET Bible*, and *The Message*—have very different goals, translation techniques, and audiences. A synoptic comparison of Ps 20:5–6 will reveal some of these differences immediately:

⁴² In James Barr’s landmark study, “The Typology of Literalism,” he delineated six “modes of difference” between literal and free translations. With regard to those modes that apply to English Bible translation, *The Message* falls on the “free” end of the scale in every case. Generally speaking, “free” translations are able to be more semantically accurate than “literal” translations because they are not simultaneously attempting to preserve formal patterns. As we have seen above, however, this tendency does not hold for *The Message*. See James Barr, “The Typology of Literalism in Ancient Biblical Translations,” *Mitteilungen des Septuaginta-Unternehmens* 15 (1979) 279–325.

⁴³ Ancient texts that belong to this genre include, for example, the Palestinian Targums, Pseudo-Philo, Jubilees, and the Genesis Apocryphon. See Geza Vermes, *Scripture and Tradition in Judaism* (Leiden: Brill, 1961) 67–126, and M. Jan Mulder, ed., *Mikra: Text, Translation, Reading and Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Ancient Judaism and Early Christianity*, *Compendia Rerum Iudaicarum ad Novum Testamentum* 2/1 (Assen/Maastricht and Minneapolis: Van Gorcum and Fortress Press, 1990), especially 339–518 and 595–634.

⁴⁴ The Targums of Canticles, Lamentations, and Ecclesiastes fuse free translation and mid-rashic expansions into an inseparable whole. See A. Sperber, *The Bible in Aramaic*, vol. IVa: *The Hagiographa* (Leiden: Brill, 1992) 123–205.

⁴⁵ This is true even for the Targums. The Targums were not originally produced to compensate for a community that did not speak Hebrew. They were composed in Aramaic to distinguish them from biblical texts. See A. D. York, “The Targum in the Synagogue and in the School,” *JSJ* 10 (1979) 74–86; Steven D. Fraade, “Rabbinic Views on the Practice of Targum, and Multilingualism in the Jewish Galilee of the Third–Sixth Centuries,” in *The Galilee in Late Antiquity* (ed. L. I. Levine; New York: Jerusalem, 1992) 253–86.

ESV	<i>NET Bible</i>	<i>The Message</i>
May we shout for joy over your salvation, and in the name of our God set up our banners!	Then we will shout for joy over your victory; we will rejoice in the name of our God!	When you win, we plan to raise the roof and lead the parade with our banners.
May the Lord fulfill all your petitions!	May the Lord grant all your requests!	May all your wishes come true!
Now I know that the Lord saves his anointed; he will answer him from his holy heaven with the saving might of his right hand.	Now I am sure that the Lord will deliver his chosen king; he will intervene for him from his holy heavenly temple, and display his mighty ability to deliver.	That clinches it—help’s coming, an answer’s on the way, everything’s going to work out.

The *ESV* is a revision of an existing translation, a product of a committee whose goal was to be “essentially literal” in rendering. Because it situates itself in a translation tradition, it is governed by a certain inertia. It lacks the flow of contemporary language, avoids startling or dynamic renderings, and will probably appeal most to those who are long-time users of Bibles similar to the *KJV*, *ASV*, and *RSV*. The *ESV* seems to be aimed at two groups of readers: the first is a group that wants an updated version of the *RSV*, but dislikes the representation of gender in the *NRSV* and *TNIV*. The second is a group that wants a translation more fluid than can usually be found in the *NASB*, yet wants more formal equivalence than can be found in the *NIV*. Only time will tell whether the *ESV* will in fact become an “English Standard.”

In contrast, the *NET Bible* is a new translation from the original languages. It strives to provide modern equivalents; in the example above, the *NET*’s renderings “victory” and “requests” stand in contrast to the *ESV*’s “salvation” and “petitions.” It is also notable for introducing new readings (note the emendation of לָגַל, traditionally “we will set up banners,” to לָגַל “we will rejoice”). Its attempt to give dynamic renderings and to preserve the unique styles of the biblical compositions will appeal to many readers. As mentioned above, it is doubtful whether one part of the target audience (those who cannot afford or access printed Bibles) will be directly affected by this project. Because of the footnotes, the *NET Bible* will probably see more use from seminary students, pastors, and those involved in translation projects.

The Message is also an original translation, but it places even more emphasis on rendering the Bible into colloquial language (note the phrases “raise the roof” and “that clinches it”). The result is a very modern-sounding translation, often at the expense of the biblical text. In the example above, verse 6 is devoid of any reference to the “anointed” or to the fact that God is

the source of help. Peterson's pervasive attempt to find equivalent contemporary English images to replace Hebrew images has the following effect: in many places, *The Message* resembles a series of devotional meditations on the Bible rather than a translation of the Bible. As such, it will probably be used by Bible readers who consciously or unconsciously share Peterson's assumption that "We don't have to be smart or well educated to understand it"—an assumption that stands in contrast with the footnotes of the ESV and NET, which frequently admit that the meaning of the biblical text is uncertain.⁴⁶

Considering the addition of three new English Bible translations to the host of others already available, the reviewers would like to conclude by addressing an issue of concern. According to Wycliffe Bible Translators, only 392 languages out of the world's 6800-plus languages have an adequate translation of the whole Bible.⁴⁷ In the current climate of niche marketing, every word of Scripture has been translated, footnoted, and published in English many times over. In light of Wycliffe's sobering calculation, this effort seems largely misplaced. Each generation of evangelicals must determine at what point the need for new translations in other languages outweighs the need for new English translations. Our current embarrassment of riches should prick our consciences and motivate us to focus the attention and energies of this generation on the production of Bibles for those who have none.

⁴⁶ *The Message* 10.

⁴⁷ Source: <http://www.wycliffe.org/language/statistics.htm>, cited 2/25/03.