

## Book Review

**Lane T. Dennis, Executive Ed., *ESV Study Bible* (Wheaton, Ill.: Crossway Bibles, 2008): 2750 pp..**

### Taking the evangelical world by storm

The *ESV Study Bible* is taking the evangelical world by storm. Crossway has done a masterful job of marketing this massive work. The leading lights of contemporary evangelicalism have endorsed or promoted the work. The dust jacket includes blurbs from the likes of John Piper, Mark Driscoll, C. J. Mahaney, Jerry Bridges, Albert Mohler, Nancy Leigh DeMoss, and Joshua Harris. Top evangelical scholars have contributed the various articles. Sales are through the roof. *World Magazine* has named it the book of the year for 2008. It is well on its way to supplanting the NIV as the contemporary translation of choice for new evangelicals and for the “new Calvinists” in particular.

Before jumping on the *ESV Study Bible* bandwagon, however, I would raise the following concerns and questions for consideration:

### Translation and Text

The first concern is related to the use of the ESV translation itself. Should evangelical pastors and churches embrace the ESV as the translation to use in its public preaching and worship? Should they commend the ESV to their members for private devotional study and memorization? What lingering spiritual impact is there from the ESV's association with the liberal Revised Standard Version, upon which it is based? Yes, the major disputed liberal readings have been corrected. The ESV's rendering of Isaiah 7:14 reads “virgin” and not “young woman.” Still, the association is there, as the copyright page reminds us: “The Holy Bible, English Standard Version (ESV) is adapted from the Revised Standard Version of the Bible, copyright Division of Christian Education of the National Council of the Churches of Christ in the U. S. A. All rights reserved.”

Like almost all contemporary translations (the NKJV being the notable exception) the ESV is based on a modern reconstruction of an allegedly superior underlying text of Scripture. This is less of an issue in the Old Testament, as even contemporary translations, the ESV included, make use of the traditional Masoretic Text of Scripture.<sup>1</sup> The main issue arises with the text of the New Testament where the ESV is based on the modern critical Greek text and not on the traditional text reflected in the Majority or Byzantine manuscripts.

The ESV articles and study notes take it as a matter of course that the modern critical Greek text is superior and give no credence to any defense of the traditional text. Dan Wallace of Dallas Seminary contributes the article on “The Reliability of the New Testament Manuscripts” (pp. 2587-89). He presents the conventional evangelical view that “Christians can, in fact, have a very high degree of confidence that what they have in their hands today is the Word of God” (p. 2587). A “high degree of confidence” is not,

however, absolute confidence. He notes that Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11 are the most significant textual variants in the New Testament and concludes: “The earliest and best manuscripts lack these verses. In addition, these passages do not fit well with the authors’ style. Although much emotional baggage is attached to these two texts for many Christians, no essential truths are lost if these verses are not authentic” (p. 2588). Wallace has, in fact, openly crusaded for the deletion of these verses from the New Testament. In a 2008 plenary address to the Evangelical Theological Society, Wallace openly crusaded for the removal of these passages from the New Testament claiming that the only reason they remain is a “tradition of timidity” among evangelical translators.<sup>ii</sup> He noted that he hoped to remove them from future editions of the NET Bible (which he serves as NT editor) and boasted that at the least he had succeeded in printing them in a “smaller font with brackets around them” and this “makes it harder to read from the pulpit.”<sup>iii</sup>

This antagonism toward the traditional text also appears in the study notes as well. In some cases it is mildly expressed. For example, in his discussion of the “longer ending of Mark” Hans F. Byer explains that many think Mark 16:9-20 is a “later addition” and concludes:

In summary, vv. 9-20 should be read with caution. As in many translations, the editors of the ESV have placed the section within brackets, showing their doubts as to whether it was originally part of what Mark wrote, but also recognizing its long history of acceptance by many in the church (p. 1933).

Elsewhere a more radical case is made against the traditional text. Andreas Kostenberger offers the following comments on the *pericope adulterae* (John 7:53-8:11):

There is considerable doubt that this story is part of John’s original Gospel, for it is absent from all of the oldest manuscripts. But there is nothing in it unworthy of sound doctrine. It seems best to view the story as something that probably happened during Jesus’ earthly ministry but that was not originally part of what John wrote in his Gospel. **Therefore, it should not be considered as part of Scripture and should not be used as the basis for building any point of doctrine unless confirmed in Scripture** (p. 2039, emphasis added).

Such statements hardly seem likely to build a rousing confidence in the reader in the divine preservation of Scripture.

#### Academic Respectability

The ESV Study Bible is very much an academic resource. It seeks to be in dialogue with and to defend a neo-evangelical view of the Bible over against a more skeptical and critical mainstream academic approach. Although a few of the resource articles are written by scholarly pastors (e.g., Mark Dever of Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, DC wrote “God’s Plan of Salvation” and John Piper of Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis wrote, “Reading the Bible in Prayer and Communion with God”),

the Bible study notes are all written by professional academics. Rather than listing the churches where these authors are members, it lists not only the institutions where they currently teach but also the places where they received their doctoral degrees (see “Contributors” pp. 13-18). The editors clearly want to impress the reader with the academic credentials and respectability of the scholarship underlying the commentary.

The *ESV Study Bible* is to be commended for generally defending traditional views on issues like authorship, dating, and provenance. So, for example, Raymond Ortlund argues for a unified view of single authorship for the book of Isaiah by Isaiah, the son of Amoz (see pp. 1233-34) and Doug Oss concludes, “It is reasonable in light of all the evidence, and clearly supported by the claims of the letter itself, to conclude that the apostle Peter wrote 2 Peter” (p. 2415). One wonders, however, whether so much attention should be given to full explanation of such critical theories, even if they are eventually rejected.

#### Lack of unified confessional identity

This leads to another potential weakness in the *ESV Study Bible*—a lack of confessional unity. The contributors apparently represent a wide range of confessional perspectives. There are Baptists, Presbyterians, Anglicans, Wesleyans, Assemblies of God, etc. The introduction states that the *ESV*’s doctrinal perspective is “in the historic stream of the Reformation.” It adds that the notes “sought to represent fairly the various evangelical positions on disputed topics such as baptism, the Lord’s Supper, spiritual gifts, the future of ethnic Israel, and questions concerning the millennium and other events connected with the time of Christ’s return” (p. 11). Though one might praise the diversity of perspectives, one might also wonder if the lack of confessional unity might also “water down” the doctrinal conclusions offered in the commentary.

#### Too much information?

Finally, the *ESV Study Bible* certainly reflects the spirit of the “Google” generation. It seems to want to put as much information and as many topics as conceivable at the fingertips of the reader. The Introduction boasts that this is “the most comprehensive study Bible ever published” containing “more than 2 million words of Bible text and insightful explanation and teaching—equivalent to a 20-volume Bible resource library” (p. 9). Indeed, the range of issues addressed in the resource articles is expansive and seemingly exhaustive, covering everything from systematic theology to ethics to world religions to liturgy.

One wonders, however, if it might be possible to provide too much information. Do all the charts, graphs, notes, and articles crowd out the most important component of all—the text of Scripture itself? The editors seem to recognize this potential danger. They even warn the reader that the notes “must never become a substitute for the Bible itself” (p. 9). Still, one suspects that the jewel of the Biblical revelation itself might easily become hidden in the avalanche of information. There is a place for edifying, uninspired

writings that make use of the Biblical revelation. But is the best place to display such uninspired writings in a volume bound up with the text of Scripture itself?

Perhaps we could learn a lesson from the past. The Authorized or King James Version of the Bible was in part produced in order to provide an English translation that did not include interpretive commentaries and notes. Conventional wisdom says that King James and his royalist supporters favored such a move in order to supplant the republican sentiments of the popular Geneva Bible, the first real English study Bible. Perhaps, however, even the Puritan members of the translation committee also supported such a move, because they recognized the value of printing a text of Scripture apart from interpretive notes in order to give the reader the advantage of a raw encounter with the Word of God alone.

### Conclusion

The *ESV Study Bible* is a massive work reflecting the current state of the art in neo-evangelical Biblical interpretation. It will, no doubt, do considerable damage to the NIV's place in evangelical churches as the modern version of choice and may well make the ESV the heir apparent to the contemporary translation throne. It is already the darling of the young, restless, and newly reformed ministers who flock to events like "Together for the Gospel." I have traced above, however, some of the reasons why one might hesitate to embrace the ESV (i.e., its association with the RSV and its use of the modern critical text). The theologically trained and seasoned Pastor with well set doctrinal convictions might profit from having a copy of the *ESV Study Bible* for use in preparation for teaching and preaching, or merely for understanding better the current state of evangelical Biblical scholarship. I would stop short, however, of commending it to the lay people in the church who have not been exposed to historical criticism for fear of it undermining rather than strengthening their confidence in the Scriptures.

*Jeffrey T. Riddle, Christ Reformed Baptist Church, Charlottesville, Virginia*

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<sup>i</sup> Though there are significant alterations, even in the Old Testament. Take Psalm 145:13 as an example. Here a bracketed half verse is added that does not appear in the traditional Hebrew text of the Old Testament. A footnote explains: "These two lines are supplied by one Hebrew manuscript, Septuagint, Syriac (compare Dead Sea Scrolls)."

<sup>ii</sup> The address was reprinted in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society (JETS)*. See Daniel B. Wallace, "Challenges in New Testament Textual Criticism for the Twenty-First Century" (*JETS*, Vol. 52, No. 1: pp. 79-100).

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 99.