

Book Review

Alan J. Macgregor, *Three Modern Versions: A Critical Assessment of the NIV, ESV, and NKJV* (The Bible League, 2004): 126 pp.

Introduction

This helpful book provides a clear and thorough critique of three modern translations: the NIV, ESV, and NKJV. Macgregor is pastor of Wickford Reformed Baptist Church in Essex, England and a member of the Bible League Council. He makes plain from the outset his commitment to the traditional text of the Bible and his preference, in particular, for the Authorized Version (KJV). Though his review is not “sympathetic” to the contemporary translations which he reviews, the author’s spirit and tone is irenic throughout. Here is an example from the preface:

I do not assert, as some do, that there is nothing good in these versions. I believe it is right to acknowledge that they have certain strengths, and on occasions improved renderings. It does not weaken the AV case to say so. Many sincere believers use the NIV and the NKJV, and now some the ESV. I do not dismiss them as worldly or heretical (as some of the extreme defenders of the AV do). However, I do believe that the majority of NIV, ESV, and NKJV users are unaware of vital and worrying facts concerning these versions (p. 2).

Macgregor makes the point that the primary issues in choosing a good translation concern both its accuracy *and* the manuscripts on which the translation is based.

Content: Part One

The book consists of eight primary chapters and can be divided into two main parts. In part one (chapters 1-4) the author deals with introductory issues. Chapter 1 is “The Question of Manuscripts.” Here Macgregor argues that the concerns raised and discussions undertaken about Bible translations and texts are not irrelevant or outdated exercises. Critics of modern translations cannot be brushed off as “traditionalists” who are “fighting old battles” (pp. 7, 12). Chapter 2 is “The Westcott and Hort Text.” In this section, Macgregor examines the weight that Westcott and Hort gave to the codices Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, noting that many of the textual variations in these “Alexandrian” texts were theologically driven. Chapter 3 is “Westcott and Hort Disguising their Divergence.” Here the author charges Westcott and Hort both with ignoring their original charge mildly to revise the standard Authorized Version and with attempting to disguise or minimize the extent of their departure from the traditional text. This was done, in part, by moving from a verse-by-verse to a paragraph format. He also charges them with attempting “cleverly” to “manipulate the truth” by claiming that their changes amounted to “*hardly more than a thousandth part of the entire text*” (p. 22). Macgregor concludes that such a statement is essentially dishonest since, “The truth of the matter is that Westcott and Hort’s Greek manuscript is a *radical departure* from the Received Text” (p. 23). He even suggests that

these men used their “expert” status to sway many of their contemporaries, including even C. H. Spurgeon. Finally, Macgregor points out that many have defended Wescott and Hort and their “new” text as following in the line of men like Jerome, Erasmus, and the KJV translators themselves who put aside tradition to seek truth despite criticism and opposition from conservatives who wanted to hold on to their old Bibles. This argument is historically confused. Erasmus was trying to get behind the Latin to the original languages. The KJV translators were making use of essentially the same base texts of the Bible as Erasmus and did not face “great opposition” in their work (p. 28). Again, the issue is the text! Macgregor contends that in the end, “the Westcott and Hort Text appears to be a return to almost the very text which was discarded by those who brought about the Reformation!” (p. 29). In Chapter 4 “Methods of Translation,” the author briefly sketches the difference between “formal” and “dynamic” equivalence and makes clear his preference for the “formal” (word for word) method.

Content: Part Two

In part two (chapters 5-8), the author provides a detailed review of three modern English translations (NIV, ESV, NKJV) and concludes with a review of the KJV.

Chapter 5: NIV

Here is a summary of Macgregor’s critique:

1. The NIV follows the Westcott and Hort influenced modern critical Greek text.
2. As with other modern versions, it uses the paragraph method. Whatever the “perceived merits” of distinguishing poetry and prose, it disguises textual omissions.
3. It uses dynamic equivalence.
4. This leads to “wholesale rejection of words, and even phrases” in addition to omissions due to textual issues.
5. The NIV is influenced by modern copyright and its relationship to publishing profit.

Lastly, he discusses the recent publication of the TNIV and gender neutrality.

Chapter 6: ESV

Here is a summary of Macgregor’s critique:

1. Its copyright mentions the National Council of Churches. “This liberal organization is not friend of Evangelical Reformed Theology” (p. 58).
2. It makes use of the Westcott and Hort influenced modern critical Greek text.
3. It uses the paragraph layout method.
4. While it improved many of the liberal readings of the RSV upon which it is based, it “generally sticks too closely to the original RSV translation, and therefore the text is still tainted by liberal theology” (p. 59).

5. Though purporting to be a literal translation, “it sometimes uses gender-neutral terms instead of showing fidelity to the sacred text” (p. 59).

His conclusion:

Despite all the hype and glowing statements about the ESV, it fails to deliver on its promises. It is in reality nothing more than a very mild revision of a very liberal Bible version. While there are some pleasing improvements over the RSV, not all the changes are for the better. By using the RSV, as their reference point, the translators have started in the wrong place. The leaven of liberalism is still there. The conclusion of the matter must be that it is “weighed in the balances and found wanting” (p. 59).

Chapter 7: NKJV

Here is a summary of Macgregor’s critique:

1. NKJV departs from TR (by alteration, addition, or omission of words) c. 1,200 times.
2. It makes use of extensive textual footnotes: “Surely, constantly referring the reader’s attention to these footnotes is bound to put doubt into their minds as to the preservation and authenticity of the Word of God” (p. 62).
3. Though it claims to build on the merits of the AV it often sides with modern renderings (e.g., “dumb and deaf” in Mark 9:25 becomes “deaf and dumb” agreeing with NIV).
4. Rejection of many words in AV, but more seriously in traditional text (e.g., NKJV avoids use of the word “reprobate” for Greek *adokimos*; see p. 72).
5. Omission of words and phrases (e.g., “to do them” in Deut 27:26; often omits translation of *kai* “and” in Mark).
6. Confusing use of oblique text for OT quotations and italic text for added words not in original language text. This can lead to mistaking one for the other.
7. Capitalization of pronouns for Deity can lead to confusion and misinterpretation.

Chapter 8: AV

In the final chapter, Macgregor offers a critique of the AV. He points out that the AV was providentially translated at a time when there were men of such scholarly stature as has never again been met or surpassed. In particular, the translators had not been infected by “higher criticism.” This does not mean that Macgregor is a “KJV Only”-ist. He writes:

Now the question on your lips might be, “Are you suggesting that the AV is perfect and needs no alterations?” The answer is no. Neither I, nor the council of the Bible League, hold to the view that the AV is perfect and needs no emendation (p. 93).

He acknowledges that there have been various editions and revisions of the AV since 1611, most dealing with “emendation of printing errors, standardizing the use of italics and spelling, correcting punctuation, and updating certain words” (p. 95). He continues, “I repeat, I am not

against a mild and sympathetic revision, such as was carried out by Blayney” (p. 97; note: Blayney’s 1769 edition was the “final revision” giving us the AV we have today). Macgregor suggests, for example, that words like “publick,” “heretick,” and “musick” could have their spelling updated (p. 97). Other words might have been updated. Examples: “minish” to “diminish” (Exod 5:19); “wist” to “knew” (e.g., Exod 16:15); and “bewray” to “betray” (Isa 16:3). He laments that such a “minimal revision” of the AV was derailed by Westcott and Hort. Such might have taken place in 1881 “in the same sympathetic manner as Blayney’s work” (p. 98). Alas, the duplicity of Westcott and Hort “has made many godly people very wary of any other update” (p. 98).

He concludes:

Even as the AV now stands, we believe it is by far the safest and most accurate translation of the Scriptures available to us. Such an honest, mild, sympathetic, God-fearing revision of it may be a long time coming (many modern scholars are too radical in their revisions). We, however, should not be deterred from using the AV or encouraging others to use it. There are many who make the usual claims about the unintelligibility of the old English, and yet children all over the English-speaking world learn Shakespeare at school without apparent difficulty, and pass exams successfully. The language of the AV is simpler than Shakespeare is, and Christians have the aid of the Holy Spirit to teach and enlighten them as to Scripture’s meaning. Yet they are deemed (by many supporters of modern versions) incapable of understanding the AV. Surely, such a notion cannot be substantiated (p. 99).

Conclusion

In his conclusion, Macgregor is sure to note that his praise of the AV is not to be misunderstood as KJV-Onlyism:

However, we must also say that believing the AV itself to be infallible and above improvement (commonly called “KJV-onlyism” in the USA and “AV-onlyism” in the UK) is an untenable position that only backs its advocates into a corner. It often leads to the same ungracious remarks that come from the more radical supporters of modern versions (p. 100).

That said, however, Macgregor refuses to believe that raising serious questions about texts and translations is divisive (contra, for example, the compilers of *From the Mind of God to the Mind of Man* [Ambassador-Emerald International, 1999]). Yes, the gospel must be central and we must preach Christ above all, “but are we going to sit back and let the Reformation Text disappear?” (p. 100). The author makes the appeal that If we lose the use of traditional text and of the AV translation we will be losing a significant part of our “Protestant heritage” (p. 101).

The work concludes with an appendix that offers brief comment on nine related subjects: (1) a defense of Erasmus; (2) a critique of Westcott and Hort's "transcriptional probabilities"; (3) a refutation of the idea that there is modern Roman Catholic plot against the AV; (4) a note on an early papyrus (p 64) fragment of Matthew that supports the traditional text; (5) an evaluation of several expanded readings in non-TR texts; (6) a note on the NKJV/NIV use of "Servant" rather than "Son" (AV in Acts 3:13, 26); (7) a note on the translation of 1 Corinthians 1:18; (8) a note on the use of pronouns in the AV; and (9) a defense of the traditional ending of Mark.

Final Analysis

Macgregor writes this book as a pastor and churchman and not as a credentialed textual critic toiling in the "academy." I see that as a plus and not a negative. He deals with complicated issues of text and translation in a popular and easily accessible manner. He defends the use of the traditional text of Scripture and the venerable Authorized Version deftly and charitably. His critique of recent modern versions reveals a thoughtful and careful reading of these translations and not a knee-jerk rejection. Neo-evangelical Calvinists who have jumped on the ESV bandwagon, in particular, will do well to give careful consideration to Macgregor's critique of this translation and the questions he raises both about it National Council of Churches copyright statement and its association with the liberal RSV translation. Macgregor rejects the doctrinally and spiritually unhealthy aspects of the KJV-only movement, while making a winsome appeal for the continued use of the traditional text of Scripture in general and for the AV in particular as *the* Reformed and Protestant legacy text and translation of choice. Many in our day are rediscovering Reformed theology. Will there also be a rediscovery of the Reformed Bible?

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