

WELS Review of the Evangelical Heritage Version Bible Translation

General Background

Interest in an English translation of the Bible produced by Lutherans goes back at least as far as the late 1950's, when Dr. William F. Beck of Concordia Seminary, St. Louis, began work on a modern English translation. His *The New Testament in the Language of Today: An American Translation* was published by Concordia Publishing House in 1963. Thirteen years later his translation of the entire Bible was published posthumously.

Revisions of Beck's work by confessional Lutheran professors led to the *God's Word* translation, published in 1995. Late changes to that translation made by English stylists on the editorial staff at God's Word to the Nations Bible Society led some contributors to the revision to become critical of the end result.

In 1984 Julian Anderson, a former seminary professor and a pastor in the Evangelical Lutheran Synod, published his own translation of the New Testament, *A New Accurate Translation of the Greek New Testament into Simple Everyday American English*. This translation found use in Lutheran elementary schools as well as WELS prison ministry.

In 2013 the WELS had recently completed a review of three translations in response to a major revision of the New International Version (NIV), the translation of choice for most WELS congregations and institutions since the late 1970's or early 1980's. The revision to the NIV in 2011 created some concerns among WELS pastors and members, especially for the way it dealt with changing gender language in our society. Should we choose a different English translation for our publishing, preaching, and teaching, and would it be any better? Should we attempt to produce a translation of our own? Could we find a translation that would satisfy everyone? The WELS convention in 2013 chose an eclectic approach for our synod going forward. Our publishing house would make decisions about which translation to use on a case-by-case basis. Pastors, teachers, congregations, and lay members of the synod remained free to use the translation of their choice, as had always been the case. Despite the relative uniformity of choice that had existed, the WELS has never had an "official" translation. The synod convention in 2013 chose not to commission an official Bible translation project supported by the WELS.

Interest in creating a translation produced by WELS and ELS talent, however, remained. Late in 2013 a private invitation went out from some members of the WELS ministerium seeking volunteers to participate in a translation project neither funded nor sponsored by the WELS. All the participants, however, would be WELS or ELS members. The project adopted the name "The Wartburg Project," a nod to the fortress from which Martin Luther produced his first German translation of the Bible. The project also was anticipating the 500th anniversary of the Reformation in 2017. The translation team managed to complete and publish the New Testament by that anniversary year, but the complete Bible had to wait two more years. It reached completion and publication in 2019. The translation itself has been dubbed the Evangelical Heritage Version (EHV).

It is no secret that The Wartburg Project has stirred some strong feelings in the WELS, both for and against. Those who were opposed to the project were not opposed to theologically trained men in the WELS taking part in translating Scripture per se. Faculty at our ministerial training schools have contributed to other translation efforts in the past. Rather, some expressed concern that involving so many men in an undertaking of this size and scope is not good stewardship of our resources when very serviceable English translations of the Bible already exist. Others felt that an in-house translation of the Bible reinforces the stereotype that WELS is sectarian and separatist. Most other modern English translations utilize translators from a number of different denominations to guard against denominational bias being imposed upon the text.

Those who supported the project were eager to produce a translation that avoided just those kinds of biases that can occasionally be identified in other English versions. Many regarded work on the EHV as an opportunity to develop and sharpen their language skills, an exercise in continuing education that required a very high level of scholarly effort. Whether or not the translation ever came to publication, they believed their work would have a positive effect on their ministries to the people they serve.

We reference these differing opinions over the advisability of producing a translation using only our own laborers, not because we intend to take a side or resolve the tension in this report. We feel it is necessary to mention because we once again asked over a hundred men to participate in evaluating various parts of the translation. That is a sizable percentage of the pastors in the WELS. Every reviewer who contributed to this review of the EHV agreed to make his analysis on the basis of the words in the text, not on his opinion about the merits of such a translation existing. However, it is difficult to lay one's bias aside entirely, if we are honest, and to work completely free of it. It is possible that this has had some influence on the reviews we received, for which we are faulting no one. Opinions are a fact of life. We simply want to be upfront about the impact this may have had on the input we received, both positive and negative. We see no way to get around this if we are going to evaluate a work produced within our own circles.

Overview of the Translation

It goes without saying that WELS does not have the kinds of human resources available that other modern Bible translations have harnessed. Recognizing this, the Wartburg Project decided to produce what they called a "translation/revision." As they stated in their February 2014 report, "It will not exactly be a 'translation' because it will not be totally from scratch, but it will not exactly be a 'revision' because it will not be based on any single template. Although our translation will be based on the Hebrew and Greek texts, templates are being used as a starting point in the translation process." They employed two such templates: the World English Bible (WEB) and the Concordia Translation (CT). The WEB is a modernization of the ASV, itself the result of a revision of the KJV, and is available in the public domain. The CT consists of the translations produced by the authors of the *Concordia Commentary* series, and was shared with the Wartburg Project by Concordia Publishing House.

The word the editors of the EHV have chosen to describe their approach to translation is *balanced*. The translators of the EHV have attempted to strike a balance between terminology that is old and is new. They have preserved many descriptions or terms that are familiar and

traditional. But if something does not communicate clearly, “providing a translation that more clearly reflects the original meaning takes priority over preserving traditional language” (*EHV*, Introduction, p. ix). Rather liberal use of footnotes helps the reader identify the connection between new terminology and traditional terms.

Another balance the translation seeks is a happy medium between two translation theories, *literal* or *dynamic equivalence*. A “literal” translation tries to follow the word order and grammar of the original more closely, but sometimes at the expense of comprehensible English. Dynamic Equivalence takes more freedoms in finding ways to express the thoughts or message of the original in a way English readers can easily understand, but sometimes with the consequence of adding the translator’s own interpretations to the text. After discussing some of the merits and pitfalls of each approach, the *EHV* introduction states, “The translator has to weigh on a case-by-case basis whether a more literal approach or a freer approach better conveys the divinely intended meaning” (Introduction, p. x).

A third balance the *EHV* translators are trying to achieve is a balance between *formality* and *informality*. They do not intend to give each book of the Bible the same English “style,” since God used many different writers and their styles to compose the Bible. The reading level can vary between easy and difficult from book to book, and even from passage to passage within a book. Literary style also varies.

A fourth set of poles between which the translators aim to find a balance consists of *following guidelines* and *exercising good judgement*. While the translation team developed rules and guidelines to govern their general approach, as well as for handling specific words and expressions, they also realized “that it is hard to imagine a rule or rubric which can be applied without exception” (Introduction, p. xi).

Proper handling of gender language has been a particular interest to translations and revisions of translations over the past decade. The *EHV* describes its approach this way: “In using so-called ‘gender-accurate language,’ our translation strives to be inclusive where the original is inclusive and exclusive where the original is exclusive” (Introduction, p. xi). While that is a commendable goal, it is hard to imagine any other translation team disagreeing, at least in theory. What those translators individually or as a group believe about current English usage may still vary and will determine how gender language is handled. Since this involves some amount of personal judgment, we do not have complete uniformity of opinion on the matter within our own circles. Our review of the text itself will look at the way the *EHV* handles gender language more closely.

One final feature of the *EHV* worth noting before looking at the text itself is the way in which its translators determined which text to translate, especially in the New Testament. An appendix describes their approach as seeking the middle ground between two “camps.” One follows the *Textus Receptus*, with its reliance on late medieval manuscripts of the Byzantine text-type (as did the KJV). The other uses critical editions of the New Testament like UBS and Nestle/Aland, which sometimes display a preference for older Greek manuscripts, with an emphasis on certain texts from Egypt (they cite the CSB, NIV, and ESV as examples). *EHV*’s stated approach is to weigh the evidence on a case-by-case basis and choose the “reading that best fits the criteria of having manuscript evidence that is early and that is distributed throughout more than one

geographical area of the church.” This description employs language familiar to many of our pastors, and indeed, some reviewers appreciated textual decisions that differed from other modern translations.

At the same time, other reviewers questioned some of the EHV’s decisions when the translation includes words or verses that coincide with the text of the KJV but not with most recent modern English translations. The translators of the EHV themselves note in the appendix a preference for including longer readings when the other kind of evidence (how early; how widespread) is ambiguous: “If there are cases in which the evidence for or against inclusion is not clear-cut, our default option is to include the reading in the text with a footnote that not all manuscripts have it. The result is that the EHV New Testament is somewhat longer than many recent translations of the New Testament, since it includes readings that they relegate to the footnotes or omit” (p. xvi). Unlike the “early and widespread” standard mentioned above, a preference for including longer readings “preserved for us by the church” (p. xvi) has not been part of the methodology taught to our pastors. Though an approach that leans less heavily on the very earliest manuscripts may well lead to the inclusion of some longer readings, it may not be apparent to readers how much this default to longer readings influenced a decision. Perhaps this could be discussed in more detail in the appendices or footnotes of future editions.

The Methodology of the WELS EHV Review

The method our committee used to analyze the EHV was essentially the same one it used to analyze the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) a year ago, and that was used to evaluate the New International Version (NIV 2011), the English Standard Version (ESV) and the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) in 2012. We used the same 34-part division of the Bible text originally developed by the WELS Translation Evaluation Committee (TEC) in 2011-2012. Three men were invited to read and evaluate each of these 34 parts, for 102 total reviewers. These men were asked to study the English translation alongside the Greek or Hebrew text, then note English renderings they believed were particularly good or particularly poor. We asked them to report the five best and the five worst to our committee with some brief explanation. At the end we asked each man to rate the translation on a scale of 1 to 10 in two areas: appropriateness of English style, and overall acceptability for WELS publications.

This is now the third time WELS pastors have been called on to carry out such a review in less than a decade. It appears that we are experiencing some degree of translation-review fatigue. Our committee contacted many more than 102 men in an attempt to have three reviewers for each section. In the end, we succeeded in recruiting 70. That means, on average, each section still had two reviewers, but our cross-section of input is diminished compared to past reviews. Since the EHV itself has been translated by pastors of our own fellowship, we hope the reduced number of men involved in the analysis will have less impact on our conclusions.

Critique of EHV Old Testament Translation Choices

The Old Testament reviewers gave scores that averaged 7.5 out of 10 for both the appropriateness of the English style and for the overall acceptability of the EHV for use in WELS publications. Many of the comments received had to do with wording choices.

- The EHV chooses to use the translation “LORD of Armies” instead of “LORD Almighty.” Three reviewers liked that translation much better. One reviewer felt the opposite, noting that the use of the word armies was prone to conjure up bloody battle connotations.
- Two reviewers liked the choice of the translation “seren” and its accompanying footnote when referring to a Philistine leader.
- The reviews of the Psalms appreciated the way in which the EHV translates *selah* as “interlude.”
- The translation of *yada* as “was intimate with” was well received. One reviewer viewed it as “a dignified, accurate, and meaningful choice.”
- A few reviews expressed appreciation for the way in which the EHV converted weights and measures in the text, putting the Hebrew equivalent in the footnotes. One reviewer disagreed with this approach, since many parts of the English-speaking world use the metric system rather than so-called English measures.
- Several reviewers noted instances where they felt that the EHV overreacts to the gender-neutral philosophy of other translations by going too far in the other direction, using masculine translations where a mixed audience seemed to have been intended.
- One review disliked the translation “God of the Amen” in Isaiah 66.
- A few reviewers noted places where the EHV uses terminology in referring to human anatomy that they felt was simply too blunt for reading publicly in worship or in a class setting.
- Recent English translations have wrestled with the proper way to render terms dealing with residents who are not citizens of the country in which they live. A couple of our reviewers expressed the concern that “aliens” may not be the best choice because of the baggage that term carries in the United States today.

In terms of overall style, nine reviews expressed the opinion that in places the EHV seems to be too wooden in translation, sticking too closely to the Hebrew, which they felt made it less readable and lacking a smooth flow. Other reviewers felt that the EHV employed translation options that connect well with the 21st century reader. Several made mention of the fact that they preferred the way in which the EHV stuck closely to the original Hebrew.

A number of reviews mentioned the footnotes included in the EHV. Here, too, the reviews were mixed. Nine reviews made mention of the fact that the footnotes were, in their opinion, very helpful and added to the value of the EHV. Conversely, one reviewer stated that he felt that there are simply too many footnotes. One commented that the “footnotes extensively refer to the Septuagint and the Dead Sea Scrolls, often using them to correct or supplement the Hebrew text,” which may “cause readers to doubt the reliability of the Scriptures.” Another reviewer noted that places where the footnotes described a verse as “difficult” may lead some to doubt our certainty about the Bible as a whole.

There were several mentions of the grammar choices in the EHV. Two men pointed out there seemed to be too many run-on sentences, too many clauses and commas. Others felt that the

EHV is in need of some more editing, pointing out that there was a lack of consistency in using quotation marks when the Lord is speaking in some sections. Two other reviewers lauded the EHV for using “shortened, concise sentences more than other translations.”

In general, the WELS reviewers found the EHV to be appropriate in English style and suitable for use in WELS publications.

Critique of EHV New Testament Translation Choices

New Testament reviewers were pleased overall with EHV. Submitted reviews noted only six doctrinal weaknesses, significantly fewer than past translation projects. Most of those were qualified with “this may be nit-picking” or “you could probably understand it correctly.” Suggestions for translation improvements were widespread and varied, even by reviewers of the same NT book. EHV’s copious footnotes met with mixed reaction. Some were very appreciative, mentioning that the footnotes helped clarify translation choices or textual variants. Others felt that the sheer number of footnotes got in the way of reading the text, or were unnecessary. Most admitted that, if nothing else, the footnotes made the EHV a valuable study resource. Overall, scores were positive.

Readability and English style factored heavily into overall impressions. With some notable exceptions, reviewers felt very comfortable with EHV’s readability. One reviewer expressed appreciation that the EHV read similarly to the very familiar NIV84, yet “the passages that I’ve been correcting from the NIV all my ministry are clearly set forth in the EHV style of clarity.” Some brothers, however, raised concerns over translation inconsistencies within the same book, archaic words and awkward phraseology, clumsy language and the superfluity of words. One reviewer flagged a redundancy in the book of Acts when he learned the English word “after” was chosen 102 times. Another thought that, in the pursuit of balance between literal and dynamic equivalence, EHV skewed too closely to word-for-word translation. One of the trickiest translation challenges is how to render gender language. On that front, the majority opinion was very approving, with a few reviewers commenting that the translation could be revisited for consistency. Many considered the EHV to be on par with or a tick better than the CSB. We shall comment in more detail on this issue at the end of our doctrinal analysis.

Evaluators were also asked to consider whether the EHV is appropriate for use in our publications. Unsurprisingly, majority sentiment considered EHV worthy for those applications. Those who paused at this notion cited occasional unevenness in translation, or a general desire for it to be read more widely and polished. One reviewer offered the following even-handed advice, “I believe that the EHV can be used with great benefit by called workers and lay people alike. However, if it is to be used in WELS publications, I would like to see it undergo a revision based on suggestions made by a group of reviewers, similar to the way in which suggestions were made for the HCSB/CSB revision.”

The challenge of objectivity raised by our committee in the introductory comments of this report was also noted in some comments from those who reviewed individual Bible sections. When WELS pastors review the work of other WELS pastors, should it be surprising that scores for readability and acceptability for WELS publications are high? Is it possible that when our brothers review the work of a known Reformed or Baptist leaning translation they work with a

different set of scruples than when we review ourselves? Would the scores or reviews have been different if it were done in a double-blind? Some conscience-bound brothers acknowledged this was on their minds as they did their work. As one brother gave glowing scores, he admitted, “I was taught in the same system as those translating, so my ears are accustomed to the way of bringing the Greek translation into English.” Despite the fact that the preface of the EHV clearly states its goal to be a balanced translation, suitable for all-purpose use in the church, another reviewer expressed concern over the perception that this is the WELS version of the Bible. Might that perception exist also outside our circles? Another lamented, “I do sense a bit of an effort to insert such (our) biblical principles into the texts unnecessarily.”

On the other hand, from the outset, this translation was not “particularly concerned about academic prestige or universal acceptance” (November 2013 Wartburg Project Invitation, <http://wartburgproject.org/mdocs-posts/wartburg-project-invitation-2013-11/>). It was intended to serve the people of the Lutheran church. Moreover, the concerns were far outweighed by a general eagerness to work with the EHV. Most considered it as readable as the NIV and CSB. That, together with a more temperate approach to gender language and an overall balance throughout gave the New Testament a considered endorsement from our reviewers.

Handling Key Doctrines

When our committee reviewed the CSB, knowing that it was produced by the publishing arm of the Southern Baptist Convention, we asked about a dozen men to look specifically at key doctrinal passages. While some of our reviewers noted passages they felt could have been translated in a way that would leave less room for doctrinal confusion, in general we felt the translation was doctrinally sound.

In our review of the EHV, we did not ask men to look specifically at doctrinal passages, given that the translators are pastors in our fellowship. Instead, we gleaned compliments and concerns in this area from the section-by-section reviews we received.

Reviewers were asked to rate the five best and five worst passages of their section, and to label each as relating to translation, textual criticism, exegesis, or doctrine. Excluding gender questions, which will be treated separately, thirty-five passages were singled out for their doctrinal impact—21 positively, and 14 negatively.

A few of the positive mentions were related to doctrinal concerns previously expressed about other translations. The most common commendation was given for prophetic passages that clearly showed messianic references via capitalization (e.g. Psalm 2:2, Psalm 132:10, and Isaiah 4:2) and/or footnotes (e.g. Psalm 8:4 and Isaiah 4:2). Two reviewers appreciated how the EHV translated Romans 9:22-23 and 1 Peter 2:8 in such a way that they would not seem to be speaking of predestination to damnation. Most of the rest of the positive points mentioned translations that left less room for misunderstanding than other versions (e.g. *torah* as “teaching” in a number of places), or footnotes the reviewers found to be helpful (such as the one explaining “atonement seat” in Exodus 25:17).

Among the fourteen doctrinal concerns, there were no real patterns, other than that nearly all of them were passages reviewers felt were left open to misunderstanding because of poor translation choices. For example, “Samuel had not yet experienced the Lord’s presence” (1 Samuel 3:7) sounded to one reviewer like something an evangelical might say about someone before they experience an immediate call or message from the Lord. To another pastor, Job’s statement (7:7), “My eyes will never again see good fortune,” sounded like someone who believes in luck or fate. Another reviewer thought that translating *sothete* in Acts 2:40 as “save yourselves” could be construed to give too much credit to humans for their salvation.

A couple of the passages flagged as doctrinal—and several more categorized as questions of translation—had to do with the controversial issue of gender. Once again, these reviews show that there is a wide variety of opinions on the subject in our circles. Of the four reviewers that mentioned EHV’s gender choices as positive, two commended them for places where they translated *adelphoi* as “brothers” and two for places where they translated masculine words in the original with gender-neutral English terms. Ten negative examples were given by reviewers. One thought EHV’s translation of *b’nai* as children (Proverbs 8:32) was “a little off.” On the other side, eight felt that EHV shied away from being appropriately gender-neutral when it was called for in the context, giving masculine translations where the reviewers felt a mixed audience was intended or even required. Some perceived this as an overreaction to the controversy over NIV’s decisions in this area, while others saw it as a matter of inconsistency (as in 2 Timothy 4:21, where the translators chose to put “brothers” in the text but included a footnote that says, “Here the Greek word for brothers seems to refer to all fellow believers, male and female”).

Appropriate English Style and Overall Acceptability: The Scores

As mentioned, each EHV reviewer was asked to score the translation on the basis of English style and overall acceptability for use in our publications. Comments both pro and con show a generally favorable view of the EHV. The numerical scores are also generally positive, though they reveal a somewhat wider difference of opinion between reviewers when compared to input from past translation reviews.

More than a third of our reviewers gave the EHV a score of 9 or 10 on their recording sheet, whether for style or acceptability—35% of the total. About 9% gave the translation a score from 2 to 4 (there were no ones or zeroes). Obviously, the high scores outnumber the low scores by a wide margin. For the sake of comparison, 44% of those who reviewed the CSB gave it a score of 9 or higher, and only 2% scored it 4 or less.

For English style, the scores for the EHV broke down like this:

	Total Points	Average Score
Entire Bible	530	7.6
Old Testament	338	7.5
New Testament	192	7.7

Although this review is not meant to be a comparative study, looking at the scores from past reviews helps to give these scores some context and meaning. Many of the men who provided reviews of the EHV also participated in the three translation review of the ESV, the HCSB, and the NIV(11) in 2012. Even more of them were part of the review of the CSB in 2017. Some of them were involved for the first time with this review of the EHV. And, as noted earlier, the total number of reviewers is almost a third less than in the past. Assigning scores is already a subjective process, and the difference in the numbers and identities of our reviewers may have some effect on the scores.

Nevertheless, the EHV’s score for English style surpasses the scores given to the ESV (4) and HCSB (6.9) in 2012. It still lags behind the NIV (8.3), as well as the more recent review of the CSB (8.01). That’s a relatively strong showing for a newcomer. Weaker books include Genesis, Daniel, some of the Minor Prophets, Mark, and the Pastoral Epistles. Very strong scores went to Exodus, Leviticus, the Psalms, Matthew, John, and Galatians through Colossians.

On the issue of acceptability for use in our publications, the score was slightly higher:

	Total Points	Average Score
Entire Bible	538.5	7.7
Old Testament	338.5	7.52
New Testament	200	8.0

This is not the highest score a WELS review has ever given to a translation. That belongs to the CSB, which scored nearly 8.3 for acceptability. But it is higher than all three of the translations reviewed in 2012.

Conclusion

Our synod constitutes a small percentage of those who profess Christianity. As both our clergy and laity interact with other Christians, reach out to the unchurched, and make use of materials produced by other church bodies, it is advantageous to be familiar with those English translations which enjoy the widest use and acceptance within Christendom. We believe the best of them continue to be useful for our teaching, preaching, evangelizing, and publishing. Though the choice of translation has become less unified in English-speaking Christianity as a whole, the well-rendered readings in the ESV, the NIV, and the CSB will continue to be the way most Christians know God’s message. It serves us and God’s kingdom at large to work with these ourselves.

The EHV presents us with another tool for communicating God’s word. As a new translation, it doesn’t always have the “spit and polish” one perceives in translations that have gone through several editions. There is room for improvement in its English style and overall consistency. In some places its translators have produced fresh renderings that surpass the clarity and fluency of other translations. As a work produced by WELS and ELS clergy, it is not surprising that we find its handling of passages sometimes at the heart of doctrinal debate comfortable and familiar. We can generally cite these renderings with confidence. On some issues, such as the best way to

handle language relating to gender in modern English, reactions among our own people will continue to reflect the diversity of opinion that exists.

Several of our reviewers expressed the hope that the EHV will continue to go through an editing process in anticipation of future editions. We the undersigned agree that this would benefit the translation. At the same time, we find the translation accurate and faithful, and can recommend it for use in our church.

Respectfully submitted,

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