

Rewriting the Biblical 'Curse' on Womankind

A change to a popular translation of the Bible could affect readers' views on marriage and gender roles.

[Chenxin Jiang](#)

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In the biblical book of Genesis, God expels the first two human beings from the Garden of Eden after Eve entices Adam to eat the forbidden fruit. God “curses” Eve for her misdeed, using ominous words that seem to doom her to live subordinately to Adam. In the phrasing of the historic King James Version familiar to many Protestant readers, God says, “Thy desire shall be to thy husband, and he shall rule over thee.”

This phrase was recently altered in the English Standard Version translation of the Bible—which is produced by a committee of prominent theologians and typically used by evangelicals—so that the intent of the “curse” seems different. Whereas the first half of that sentence formerly read “Your desire shall be for your husband,” it now reads, “Your desire shall be contrary to your husband.” It appears to suggest that women naturally oppose their husbands' desires, and thus are responsible for marital conflict. While many major Bible translations are regularly updated, this alteration isn't as inconsequential as it may seem: Translations like this have the potential to invisibly shape evangelicals' thinking about women's role in marriage.

The text as other major translations have it—and as the ESV originally did—acknowledges female desire, a relatively progressive move given the ancient context. But the new translation erases the allusion to Eve's natural want for physical and emotional intimacy and replaces it with anticipation of marital strife. This matters because for most evangelical readers, the Bible translation they use represents divinely inspired scripture. Because the “curse” supposedly applies to all women, the new translation may lead readers to believe the Bible says God cursed women with the desire to resist their husbands' wishes.

This change, which has been controversial in some evangelical circles, is especially troubling because it could influence the faithful without their knowledge. Bible translation is inevitably shaped by theology: For instance, some conservative Christians resist gender-neutral translations, preferring, for example, that their Bible text refer to “man” instead of “humanity.” But whereas a Bible translation's use of gendered language is clearly visible to the reader, other changes that reflect translators' theology, like this one, are rendered more subtly.

The translation hinges on a single Hebrew preposition: *'el*. Virtually no other major translation takes this word to mean “contrary to,” as the ESV now does. Joel Baden of Yale University, who teaches the Hebrew Bible, called the new translation “a stumper” in an email. Oxford University's Jan Joosten, also a Hebrew Bible scholar, concurred: “The Hebrew preposition *'el* means ‘toward’ and not ‘contrary to’—everyone agrees on that,” he told me. Not only do many scholars agree that the ESV translation committee has made a startling choice, but the evangelical blogosphere has also been buzzing with discussion of the revision. Many of those weighing in are pastors or seminary professors. Scott McKnight, a New Testament scholar at the evangelical Baptist Northern Seminary, wrote a blog post calling the translation “not only mistaken but potentially dangerously wrong.” The blogger Amy Gannett wondered “if some in Christian circles believe that my sin nature as a woman is hard-wired to be contrary to men.”

Some evangelicals have also questioned the timing of the new translation, including McKnight, who called it “profoundly unwise.” There are hundreds of contemporary translations of the Bible. Many widely read translations, such as the New International Version and New American Bible, are periodically re-issued in updated editions that reflect the latest scholarship. Likewise, the ESV was quietly updated in 2007 and 2011 after having first been published in 2001. But at the same time it announced its new translation of the curse, the ESV publisher Crossway revealed that after 17 years of occasional updates, its latest edition would no longer see revisions, leaving the rewrite as the permanent text.

Some evangelicals felt that Crossway was too quick to finalize a translation they saw as polemical, precluding the possibility of a public discussion. Under pressure, Crossway eventually chose to reverse its decision: It now promises to leave the ESV open to further alterations. But the contentious interpretation of women's "curse" still stands. The new wording of the "curse" isn't the only change Crossway made; it was one of 29 alterations announced last month. But the others were relatively minor and generated no controversy. Unlike popular "paraphrase translations" that render the Bible in contemporary, idiomatic language, an "essentially literal" translation like the ESV is generally expected by its readers to stick with cautious, straightforward translation choices. That's why a rewrite with serious theological implications can be so closely scrutinized.

Some evangelical readers—including those who have different theological views from the ESV's publisher—have questioned the change in part because it seems to reflect the translators' well-known views on gender roles. Like many modern Bibles, the ESV is produced by a committee, whose members include ordained pastors and seminary professors. The ESV translators are known to mostly affirm complementarianism, the view that men and women should have different roles in the family and church. They include Christian leaders such as the prolific theologian and writer J.I. Packer; the publisher Lane Dennis; and the theologian Wayne Grudem, who caught some flak this summer for arguing that voting for now-President-elect Donald Trump was a "morally good choice." (Grudem walked back his all-but-endorsement, though ahead of the election he [still planned](#) to vote for Trump.) They belong to the Boomer generation of conservative evangelicals, many of whom have been outspoken on the subject of gender roles. Grudem argues that wives stand under their husbands' authority and owe them "joyful, intelligent submission." The Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, which he founded, counts Dennis and Packer among its founding board and council members. In light of the translators' views, Gannett asked on her blog, "Should our theology inform our Biblical translation, or should our Biblical translation inform our theology?" Joosten also wondered in his email, "Does one try to render what the source text says, or what one knows it must mean?"

Baden pointed out that there's nothing intrinsically misogynistic about the "curse," though it might seem that way to modern readers. "What's being described here is the transition from the primeval state of gender equality to the social reality that the authors knew," he said, describing a time when men held the upper hand because women were responsible for raising children. "There's something very nice about the fact that the biblical author here recognizes the inherent unfairness of this situation." In other words: The author seems to see the "curse" against Eve as something that shouldn't be.

While Crossway has decided to continue updating the ESV, it has made no move toward reconsidering its controversial translation choice. It said the now-defunct "permanent" edition was created so that readers would be able to have "full confidence in the ESV." But as they've discovered, at least some of their readers are less inclined to trust an immutable text than one that remains open to theological debate. In this case, the stakes of the debate are high: how to read a key biblical passage on what it means to be a woman.

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