

The ESV and Conjectural Emendation: A Dubious Inheritance from the RSV and Past Interpreters

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Abstract: The practice of conjectural emendation in Hebrew, where a critic suggests a possible different text based purely on conjecture, has a limited history back as far as the Middle Ages, but the practice expanded greatly in the 1800s and 1900s. The various editions of Biblia Hebraica from the Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft have recorded in the apparatus thousands of possible emendations to the Hebrew Masoretic Text. The RSV has 316 places in its footnotes where the editors marked “Cn.” to indicate that the translation in English was based on a conjectural emendation of the Hebrew text. The ESV retained 54 of these, but renamed them “probable reading.” In addition to these notes, the ESV and other English versions emend the text at times without any indication.

This paper asks the question: “Is conjectural textual emendation an evangelical value?” As scholars training the next generation of leaders, are we tacitly endorsing a practice that is actually undermining our belief in verbal plenary inspiration? Recognizing that the manuscript tradition is not perfect, what safeguards do we need so we will have a clear boundary between careful correction where absolutely necessary and high-handed rewriting when the Hebrew text is difficult to understand? Is conjectural emendation actually creating new variants, or even more seriously, simply rewriting the text to make it something easier to translate?

1. Introduction

This paper is intended to evaluate modern English Bible translations about one single factor, their use or non-use of conjectural emendations for translating the text of the Hebrew Bible. Conjectural emendation is the practice of many scholars and commentators to postulate a different Hebrew text in places where there is no manuscript or versional basis for such a text change. The primary focus of the paper will be the English Standard Version (ESV).

The battle to be “the” English Bible for the English-speaking world continues. Looking at English Bible translations and their popularity, as of 2025 the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (ECPA) listed the top Bible translations in this order:

- 1 New International Version
- 2 English Standard Version
- 3 King James Version
- 4 New Living Translation
- 5 New King James Version
- 6 Christian Standard Bible (ECPA 2025)

The ESV has been steadily rising in popularity over the last few years, and is now the second English Bible translation to surpass the KJV in popularity. It has been described as an evangelical revision of the RSV, and ironically it owes its greatness to the RSV, a version that was severely criticized by evangelicals when it first appeared. In spite of its popularity, there are certain weaknesses in the ESV which have not been addressed in the original revision or subsequent revisions. The main one is the matter of conjectural emendations inherited from the RSV and the very concept of conjectural emendation. This weakness is the subject of this paper.

2. The history of the RSV¹

In order to properly understand the ESV, we must begin with a little history, starting with the English Revised Version. The English Revised Version of 1885 (ERV) was primarily the work of scholars from the Church of England, having been authorized in 1870 by the Convocation of Canterbury (Weigle 1946, 10). The 1901 American Standard Version, while the product of American scholars, was not a new translation but rather the text of the ERV with modifications for American English usage and the preferences in some places of the American revision company. The actual differences between the ERV and the ASV are listed in the 1901 ASV in an appendix of 25 pages. In spite of the involvement of the American revision company, the ASV never gained wide acceptance in the United States, and in 1928 the copyright for the ASV was transferred to the International Council of Religious Education, a body that represented about 40 different Protestant denominations in the US and Canada (Weigle 1946, 10), and would eventually become part of the National Council of Churches in the United States. That body appointed a group of scholars to become the American Standard Bible Committee to oversee the text of the ASV and determine if revision was necessary (Weigle 1946, 10). In 1937 work was begun on what would become the first truly ecumenical English Bible translation (Weigle 1946, 11).

The RSV was even more inclusive and ecumenical in that one of the members of the committee, Harry Orlinsky, was Jewish. His chapter in the RSV Old Testament introduction was about the selection of the text for the OT translation (Orlinsky 1946, 24-32). Orlinsky elaborated in considerable detail about the “corrections” (conjectural emendations) to the Hebrew text as well as the use of the ancient versions, practices that are commonplace today but were very controversial in Bible translations at the time. His final comment was: “In general, considering their much greater use of the versions, the translators of the RSV have been circumspect in the matter of emending the Masoretic text of the Old Testament” (Orlinsky 1946, 32). While Orlinsky may have described their practice as “circumspect,” OT Allis in 1953 published a severe criticism of the RSV textual practices, examining the conjectural emendations and other treatments of the

¹ This history of the RSV is taken for the most part from my 2025 doctoral dissertation: “Polysystem Analysis and Bible Translation: A Wedding of Theory and Practice to Create a Holistic Model to Guide Bible Translation and Biblical Exegesis.”

Hebrew text, and concluded with the following statement concerning the RSV: "...it treats the Old Testament with a freedom which is incompatible with that high regard for its trustworthiness and divine authority" (Allis 1953, 60).

What is of particular interest on this subject of conjectural emendations is in regard to Orlinsky in particular, who later in life was a major part of the New Jewish Version of 1985. He said the following concerning the New Jewish Version (NJV) and conjectural emendations: "It would seem that the best solution of this problem is the one reached in NJV, viz., translate the Hebrew text directly, and offer in a footnote the proposed emendation and its translation, with minimum pertinent data" (Orlinsky 1974, 413).

3. RSV conjectural readings

I did an extensive study of the RSV and these 316 places where the RSV margin indicates a "Cn." I then compared these readings to the *Biblia Hebraica* third edition (BH3) apparatus to see if there was a note that specified this emendation, and found that practically always BH3 had a note that detailed the emendation followed by the RSV. I then went on to compare the RSV as a "source text" to the NRSV and the ESV to see what they had done with the conjectural reading from the RSV (Kerr 2005). This comparison is too large to include in this paper, as it covers 10 pages of 11x17 paper in landscape orientation. Much of the data for this paper is based on that study. It demonstrates that the NRSV and ESV took more or less opposite approaches to the question of emendation, the NRSV retaining about 260 of the original 316, and the ESV retaining 54 and renaming them "probable reading." I might add that the term "probable reading" is more assertive than the old term "conjecture."

4. The history of the ESV

The ESV began as an idea in the mind of Lane Dennis, founder and CEO of Crossway Publishing, sometime in the 1990s, but it came more to a head in 1997 through a conversation between Dennis and John Piper (Crossway 2021). Dennis then sought to obtain the rights to the RSV text, formed the Translation Oversight Committee, and in 1998 the work began (Crossway 2021). According to the preface, over 100 people have made up the publishing team (Crossway Bible 2001, ix). The RSV text used was the 1971 edition (Carter 2016).

Despite an initial statement that the ESV text would remain unchanged, there have been several revisions and a retraction of that initial statement (Carter 2016). There have been text corrections in 2002, 2007, 2011, 2016, and 2025 (Wikipedia 2025). There has also been a UK version, a 2009 Oxford University Press edition with the Apocrypha, and Catholic editions in 2018 and 2019 (Wikipedia 2025).

I discussed this problem of "probable readings" with Peter Williams of Tyndale House in the UK, one of the people involved in oversight of the ESV, at length and sent him a list of the passages with my suggestions in November of 2011. So far, I have not seen that these have been taken seriously.

5. Examples of ESV conjectural readings

A few examples of the conjectural readings in the ESV and what I hope are better solutions are given here:

Deu 33:7 ESV - And this he said of Judah:

"Hear, O LORD, the voice of Judah,
and bring him in to his people.
With your hands contend¹ for him,
and be a help against his adversaries."

The point of interest here is the next-to-the-last line. The ESV has the following note: "Probable reading; Hebrew *With his hands he contended*." This is based on the BH3 Hebrew apparatus, which reads:

לֹא יָדֶיךָ רִיב לוֹ (your hands, contend for him)

The actual Hebrew text is:

לֹא יָדָיו רִיב לוֹ (his hands contended for him)

The real question here is to ask why this is necessary, when the text is easily translated as it stands. As a matter of fact, the verb forms fit naturally into the idea that this line is background information for the next line:

| He said | this for Judah:

LORD, listen to Judah's voice
And bring him to his people.
He has contended for them with his own hands,
So may you be his ally against his foes. (Kerr translation)

2 Samuel 13:16 (ESV) - But she said to him, "No, my brother, for this wrong in sending me away is greater than the other that you did to me."¹ But he would not listen to her.

The first line in Hebrew reads:

אֵל-אוֹדֶת הָרָעָה הַגְּדוֹלָה הַזֹּאת מֵאַחֶרֶת (no reason for this great evil than the other one)

The suggested emendation is this:

אֵל-אֲחִי כִּי גְדוֹלָה הָרָעָה הַזֹּאת מִהָאַחֶרֶת

(no my brother, because greater is this evil from the other...)

The statement is broken syntax, but not garbled, and is likely the very thing Tamar said in her distress. The emendation is too long and detailed to be a real source for the present reading. The editor of BH3 simply was not happy with what Tamar said, and wanted to make her say something else. The ESV editors have a note that says this: "Compare Septuagint, Vulgate; the meaning of the Hebrew is uncertain." Yet the text is translatable as it stands, and evidently the translators of the LXX and Vulgate were struggling with the same problem we face.

"There's no reason for this terrible evil, which is worse than the other you did to me, to send me away |like this|!" she said to him. But he wasn't willing to listen to her. (Kerr translation)

Proverbs 26:23 (ESV) - Like the glaze¹ covering an earthen vessel are fervent lips with an evil heart.

The Hebrew text here reads:

כֶּסֶף סִיגִים מְצֻפָּה עַל־חֶרֶשׁ שְׁפָתַיִם דֹּלָקִים וְלֵב־רָע.

(silver drosses coated on pottery, fervent lips and bad heart)

The note reads: "By revocalization; Hebrew *silver of dross*."

The emendation, again right out of the BH3 apparatus, has to do with the first two words, which on the basis of a Ugaritic word meaning "glaze" are emended to the following: סַפְסִיג

The ים ending is explained as an "enclitic," in the NET Bible notes², in other words a meaningless addition for no real reason. However, the Hebrew text clearly reads "silver dross." Granted that silver dross might be thrown away, yet the possibility of a creative translation solution instead of a creative emendation has occurred to me: "impure silver."

Fervent lips with an evil heart are |like| impure silver covering a clay pot. (Kerr translation)

One more is interesting because it has been adopted in most translations:

Psalms 23:6 (ESV) - Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell³ in the house of the LORD forever.

Note 3 reads: Or **shall return to dwell**

The Hebrew text here reads:

וְשָׁבְתִי בְּבֵית־יְהוָה לְאָרְךָ יָמִים

(and I will return in the LORD's house for the length of days)

I know this is a surprise, but the text uses the verb שׁוּב (return), not יָשַׁב (dwell). David was a shepherd, and was minding flocks that gave him a nomadic life for the most part. A shepherd would not live at the Lord's house for the rest of his days, but he would return as often as possible, which is what the nation as a whole in fact did if they were faithful, three times a year at that.

Wow! Goodness and faithful love

Are chasing after me

All my life long.

I am going to come back

To the LORD's house

For the rest of my days. (Kerr translation)

² "Ugaritic turned up a word *spsg* which means "glaze," and this found a parallel in Hittite *zapzaga[y]a*.... The final ׀ (mem) is then classified as enclitic."

Many more examples can be demonstrated, but time and space do not permit.

6. The history of and rationale behind conjectural emendation

It is true that conjectural emendations can even be found in medieval rabbinic commentators, but they are very rare. The real heyday of conjectural emendation was the late 1800s and early 1900s, particularly in the International Critical Commentary series. This was a negative by-product of the explosion and expansion of Hebrew knowledge in the same period as a result of the discovery of ancient texts of other cognate languages. It was the product of a very degenerated view of the transmission of the Hebrew text which arose at the same time. Scholars were seeking to recover what they deemed to be lost readings of the text, which was viewed as a very human collection of writings with no providential supervision over it. The practice has spread into the lexicons, which often suggest emendations, giving the fledgling student of Hebrew the idea that this practice is normal and to be accepted. No matter what the motive for the practice of emendation, the result is the making of a new textual variant, a text that is easier to translate, and a text written by a non-native speaker of the language.

The practice has crept into English Bible translations as well as into other language translations. The following chart shows research by Daley based on a sampling method to make a comparison of English Bible translations and their degree of textual emendation use:

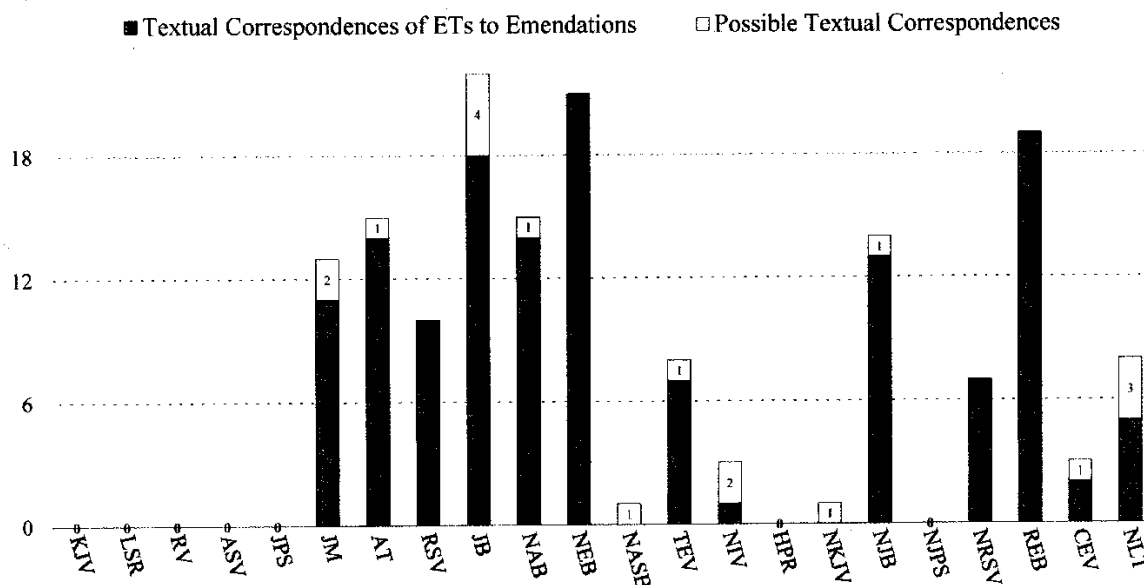


FIGURE 1 Conjectural emendations of the sample reflected in the ETs

(Daley 2019, 228)

The chart is basically chronological, and shows the up and down tendencies of textual emendation over the last century and a half in particular. The ESV was unfortunately not included in Daley's chart, but I can roughly estimate it to be somewhere between the NIV and the TEV as far as emendations go. Of modern

translations, the NKJV, the NASB, and the NJPS are the three most conservative as far as the Hebrew text. As far as usefulness to lay Christians, I would place the NKJV first and the NASB next.

7. Conjectural readings in ESV or NET

A complication of this practice is the fact that many emendations are not even noted in the margin or the accompanying notes. To locate all the places that editors and translators have emended the Hebrew text is a monumental task, but in looking for a solution I went to the notes for the NET Bible, and found by a word search 756 places where the word “emend*” was used, thus finding all the places where any word beginning with “emend” occurred. The notes are diligent to mention the places where scholars are inclined to make emendations, though the NET Bible translation does not always follow them. Here is the breakdown of the 756 places by book or range of books:

1-133 – Genesis to Esther	601-630 – Ezekiel
134-205 – Job (71)	631-633 – Daniel
206-367 – Psalms (161)	634-648 – Hosea
368-416 – Proverbs (48)	649-666 – Joel to Jonah
417-426 – Ecclesiastes to Song of Solomon	667-696 – Micah (29)
427-553 – Isaiah (126)	697-724 – Nahum (27)
554-598 – Jeremiah (44)	725-742 – Habakkuk to Malachi
599-600 – Lamentations	743-756 – NT

Please note that the greatest preponderance of suggested or carried out emendations is in the poetic books. This is a telltale sign of the tendency of scholars who do not seem to recognize the wide variations in and difficulties of Hebrew poetry, a characteristic of poetry in almost any language. This can also be seen in the significant failure of the KJV translators to properly render Hebrew poetic passages, with only minor improvement in modern English translations.

As a sampling of the question for this paper, I limited my scope of investigation to the Psalms, with 161 instances where the NET Bible notes either described or actually recommended an emendation. The results of this investigation are the following: the ESV has 18 places where the editors either emended or retained an emendation without noting it in the margin, as opposed to 5 places where they noted an emendation. In contrast, the NET Bible translators actually noted and emended the Hebrew text 95 times. Since all the translators for the NET Bible were known evangelicals (New English Bible 2025), this fact brings up the question as to whether the evangelical world of scholars is truly respecting the Hebrew text. This is especially true since in my own work in translating the Psalms I have translated every instance with no need to emend the text. Admittedly the passages cited for possible emendation are difficult, and require some thoughtful and at times creative work for a faithful translator. But which is better, a creative translation or a creative emendation?

8. Stages of dealing with the Masoretic text

Do these findings represent a respect for the Masoretic Hebrew text, or are the KJV-only people right when they say that conservative, evangelical, and fundamentalist scholars are nothing more than “correctors” of the text? What do you think such people would do with such information as I have set forth in this paper about the ESV if they actually knew of its existence?

I am not pretending that there are not very difficult verses and questions about the Hebrew text that do not always have easy solutions. But I am proposing that we need to have a guide as to what is acceptable and what is not for resolving such problems. I suggest the following steps in order as pertaining acceptable and not acceptable:

- a. Semantic rather than grammatical translation
- b. Other Hebrew MSS (Psa. 49:7)
- c. Ancient versions (Isa. 51:19)
- d. Vowel pointing changes (Psa. 57:10 (9))
- e. Different divisions of consonants
- f. Minor conjectural emendation
- g. Major conjectural emendation

Step a. is a rather basic translation principle that I have followed and taught for the last thirty years, and is fairly obvious: when the grammar and the semantics of a passage seem to contradict, or when the grammar is hard to figure out, go with the semantics. This involves a fundamental fact of translation, which is that we the scholars and translators are not native speakers of ancient Hebrew, and never will be. What the Hebrew Bible says was written down and transmitted by people who were native speakers, and we cannot sit in judgment as to whether they were right or not in what they wrote. We can tentatively come to some conclusions, but ultimately we have to have the same attitude that the beginning Bible student has, which is that the Scriptures search us, and not the other way around. The best and first step is always the same: what does the text say?

Step b. is important because it is completely in line with Step a. What do other native speakers have? The quality of other medieval MSS of the Hebrew Bible can be shown by a comparison of the Second Bomberg Hebrew Bible with the Leningrad Codex. When Jacob ben Chayyim made a recension to produce the Second Bomberg edition of the rabbinic Bible in 1525, he used medieval MSS from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. When the Aleppo and Leningrad codices were discovered and compared to the ben Chayyim text, the differences were minuscule. Paul Kahle in his *Biblia Hebraica* edition of 1937 noted 268 differences between them in the footnotes. Of those 268, only 29 are material textual differences (Kerr 2005). Despite their basic uniformity, there are places where looking at other Hebrew MSS can be of help. An example of this is Psalm 49:7:

The Hebrew Masoretic text reads:

אֶחָד לֹא-פִדְיָהּ יִפְדֶּה אִישׁ (brother can never redeem a man)

A few medieval MSS have:

אֵךְ לֹא-פֹדֶה יִפְדֶּה אִישׁ (he can certainly never redeem a man)

Both texts make sense, but ultimately there is no real reason to reject the Masoretic text.

Step c. must be used with great caution. The favorite “go-to” is the Septuagint, but the LXX is a very uneven collection of texts that vary a great deal in methodology. Often it is clear the LXX translator was facing the same problem we are facing, and there really is no textual *Vorlage* to go back to, even if we could be sure of such. The same applies to the Vulgate for the most part. The Aramaic targums can be helpful, but are often too paraphrastic and explanatory. The Syriac Peshitta can be of better help at times. The Samaritan Pentateuch is just that, so not much help in the poetic passages of the Hebrew Bible. The greatest value of the versions is not for alternate readings, but for ancient interpretations of the text. An example of this is Isaiah 51:19:

הַשָּׂדֶה וְהַשֶּׁבֶר וְהָרָעָב וְהַחֲרָב מִי אֲנַחֲמֶךָ:

(the distress and the destruction and the famine and the sword, who will I comfort you?)

The ESV here has “devastation and destruction, famine and sword; who will comfort you?” Note #1 reads: Dead Sea Scroll, Septuagint, Syriac, Vulgate; Masoretic Text *how shall I comfort you*.

This is smoother, but may not even be necessary, since “how shall I comfort you?” also works in the context. But the fact that so many ancient versions agree against the Masoretic text may swing the balance, or at least cause one to provide a footnote.

Step d. is where I go with even greater caution. One example stands out to me, in Psalm 57:10 (9). The Hebrew Masoretic text reads:

אֹדֶךָ בְּעַמִּים | אֲדַנִּי אֲזַמְרֶךָ בְּלִאֲמִים:

The second stich reads: “I will make music to you without peoples.” Here the presence of the *metheg* seems very out of place, and seems to cry out for correction. This is really a case where the text as it stands does not make sense, and an ever-so-slight change can resolve it:

אֹדֶךָ בְּעַמִּים | אֲדַנִּי אֲזַמְרֶךָ בְּלִאֲמִים (I will make music to you among the peoples.)

Step e. has been popular in the past especially at the hands of Mitchell Dahood. Yet the simple fact is that Hebrew MSS, unlike uncial Greek MSS, all have spaces. So I stop at Step d. So far it has worked well.

9. Conclusion

I have a quote from Harry Orlinsky that I think reflects his own personal journey concerning conjectural emendations:

There was good reason for the decision to adhere to the so-called masoretic text. All official translations are meant for the community at large, Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish, as the case may be; they are not meant primarily for scholars, who can control the pertinent data at the source and

who comprehend the canons of textual criticism. The general community has the right to expect the most accurate and intelligible translation possible of the best text handed down through the ages. Not only that; once a committee of translators begins to resort to emendation, it is difficult to draw the line. Every Bible scholar has his own collection of favorite emendations, some of which originate with him, with or without versional support; and it is only natural that in a committee translation hundreds of emendations would be proposed, many of them purely conjectural, many of them based on allegedly pertinent roots and meanings in the cognate languages. It is not easy, mere mortals—even biblical scholars—being what they are, to vote against another's proposed emendation and expect his support in return; nor is it always easy, personal relationships aside, to decide when an ancient primary version has been comprehended correctly or when a purely conjectural emendation is sufficiently probable to deserve a place in the text of an official translation. Take, e. g., RSV's thirteen emendations of the traditional text of Isaiah which were based, largely or only, on the major Isaiah scroll. Of these, M. Burrows has now written (*The Dead Sea Scrolls*, p. 305). "... A brief review will show that even in these thirteen places the superiority of the manuscript's reading is not always 'certain.' For myself I must confess that in some cases where I probably voted for the emendation I am now convinced that our decision was a mistake, and the Masoretic reading should have been retained. ..."

It would seem that the best solution of this problem is the one reached in NJV, viz., translate the Hebrew text directly, and offer in a footnote the proposed emendation and its translation, with minimum pertinent data. (Orlinsky, H 1974, 413)

I agree completely with Orlinsky's conclusion and commend him for championing it in the NJV Tanakh translation. It has made that translation one of the most useful for its clarity in regard to the actual Masoretic text. The real unanswered question in all of this is: what can we do to get the scholars to stop playing with the Hebrew text? I talked to one man at a conference about this and his answer was that we would correct mistakes in a document we were working on, so why not in the Hebrew text? That is a drastic oversimplification of the problem, and bears no real comparison. It also fails to recognize that the great bulk of such corrections have already been done by the Ketiv/Qere readings, and done by native speakers at that.

Orlinsky supplies a clue as to why the practice of conjectural emendation is deeply entrenched in the scholarly world. This quote tells it all: "Every Bible scholar has his own collection of favorite emendations." The practice is based on the desire of the scholars to show off their skill in reconstructing their "favorite" emendations. In their minds, the construction of an emendation is an expression of the scholar's skill and cleverness. There are no rules for it, or scholarly consensus as to when it should be done or when not. But there are several serious problems with conjectural emendation for the evangelical scholar. First, since the extended practice arose among those who held a very low view of the Hebrew text,

emendation does not have a sound historical or theological basis. Second, the emendation is simply creating a new textual variant that has never existed before, in the same way many times that variants have arisen in other places in the past, often in a place in the text where there is no other evidence that the passage has any variants anyway. Third, in reality, consciously or not, the scholar is simply rewriting the text to make it easier to translate. Fourth, since most of the emendations appear in poetic passages, rather than showing the skill of the scholar, it is actually showing the scholar's ineptitude in understanding and translating Hebrew poetry. Fifth, since a skilled Hebraist can show that virtually all the passages can be successfully translated, the emendations are totally unnecessary.

It will take a great deal of work and writing to eliminate the scourge of conjectural emendation. But with a willingness on the part of the ESV editors, this problem could be eliminated at least as far as the ESV is concerned. The alternative is to switch to one of the Bible translations that shows more distinct care for the Hebrew text.

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