

Modern English Translations of the Bible

Introduction:

We have an abundance of very good options in English that is not the case in practically any other language. What a wonderful problem to have!

—An important point to make early on:
Discussions of translations require humility, willingness to consider different ideas, and working to not be prejudiced.

We all have strong opinions about translations!
It's hard not to be biased for or against certain translations, to not be too emotionally attached. In fact, as I've been preparing for this presentation, I've been surprised how emotionally attached I've been to my preferences in the ESV when I see differences in other translations. I wouldn't have thought I was a stuck-in-the-mud ESV guy, but I'm more that way than I realized. It's hard not to be, when you've been using the same translation for a long time.

We're often not as objective as we think we are. We likely have biases about English translations.

Case study: "Living Oracles" 1826 Edition vs KJV

For all of us who are tempted to think we are impartial about English Bible translations, consider the fact that 200 years ago, people like Alexander Campbell strongly disliked the KJV and felt that it taught sectarian theology, especially Calvinism. The "Living Oracles" translation, as it came to be known as, was an attempt to fix all the doctrinal problems that the KJV had been perpetuating the last 400 years. Most notably, "baptize/baptism" was replaced with "immerse/immersion" and "church" with "congregation."

"Jesus replying, said to him, Happy are you, Simon Barjona; for flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. I tell you, likewise, you are named Stone; and on this rock I will build my congregation, over which the gates of Hades shall not prevail."
(Matthew 16:18, LO)

"And now, why do you delay? Arise, and be immersed, and wash away your sins, invoking his name." (Acts 22:16, LO)

Interestingly enough, even 200 years ago, Alexander Campbell (the man behind the "Living Oracles" translation) saw that words changed meaning over time, and there needed to be an update to the wording of the KJV. The Living Oracles translation has been called the first modern translation, with its commitment to both updated vocabulary and updated textual-critical information.

https://webfiles.acu.edu/departments/Library/HR/restmov_nov11/www.mun.ca/rels/restmov/oracles4th/oracles4th.html

<https://stonedcampbelldisciple.com/2008/12/22/the-living-oracles/>

What is the point? Compare that with Foy E. Wallace Jr., another prominent voice among Restorationists, who 150 years after Campbell spoke of the KJV as if it were the neutral, best, and default translation. Even today, there are many people in churches of Christ who have a

scruple for using the KJV. So is the KJV the worst of the worst? or the best of the best? Depends on who you talk to.

In short, let's be humble, thoughtful, and willing to think through translation issues and questions, not merely in this two day Bible study, but through our lives of Bible study.

—Disagreements about our Bibles might make us feel like we are disagreeing about the Bible itself. But we're not disagreeing about the *Bible*. We're trying to find the best English translation of the Bible.

Example: At a presentation I gave at Jeff Smelser's ETDS, I said how the NIV had done a good job in 1 Cor 6:8-9, actually translating it in a non-Calvinistic way, against most translations. People afterward told me they were surprised and pleased that I had had the guts to say something positive about the NIV... which, when you think about it, is pretty silly. I'm thinking "Um... I'm just telling it like it is. If the NIV translates something well, then we need to acknowledge that." It's not our job to bash the NIV just because it's the NIV.

—The fact: Translations are tools. Some translations are great tools, some are more limited tools, and some are bad or unhelpful.

Example: From what I understand, Marty Pickup taught and Marty Broadwell still teaches OT poetry from the NIV. Why? Because a more literal translation loses much of the poetry — and thus, the much of what was meant to be communicated — that is a part of that Bible genre.

Example: I would never suggest the NLT for careful Bible study. But having said that, I benefited from the NLT back in my college days when I was trying to dive into Isaiah for the first time. The simplified language was really helpful for me at that point in my Bible study.

—There is not a perfect translation! Like it or not, there are going to be issues with every translation. Some of these issues could be more personal and subjective; others may be more objectively measurable by an objective biblical standard.

Biblical Principles for using Modern English Translations

1. The Bible is the word of God, and God uses words in a book to communicate to us. Therefore, words are important.

—What makes a good translation?

My Greek professor: "the best translations are the ones that make the fewest decisions for the reader."

—One way a translation helps Bible study is by having a high level of *concordance*.

Concordance is the fancy word that means you translate the same Greek word into the same English word consistently through a passage. High concordance helps us see connections we would otherwise miss.

Example: The Lost Son in Luke 15:13 "wasted" or "squandered" his father's inheritance. In the next parable, the Unrighteous Manager is fired because he was found "wasting" or "squandering" his master's money (Luke 16:1). It's the same Greek word in both verses. A

translation that uses the same English word in Luke 15:13 and 16:1 would really help the reader see the connection between these two stories.

Concordance is especially difficult in a book like Romans, where it's pretty much impossible to use one English word for Paul's central concept (*dikaio/dikaioisune*): "justify" or "make righteous"... or "free"... or "vindicate"....

Interestingly, the KJV translators did *not* aim for a high level of concordance in their translation. They thought that literary variety was helpful, so they would freely translate a word differently, even in the same passage.

— Because of the nature of the inspired pages of the Bible, there are a million interconnections between the pages of the varied authors of the scripture. Word-for-word translations, especially with a mind for concordance, helps us make these important inter-text connections.

The case for formal equivalence (word-for-word translations)

Formal equivalence is when the translators are interested in carrying over the forms of the original language into the translation. Usually the emphasis is in being word-for-word, with matching vocabulary from one language to the next (what we might call a "literal" translation), but other *forms* from the original could be relevant, like word order, sentence structure, and style.

— For careful Bible study, formal equivalence is going to be the most helpful in seeing what was originally said. First, formal equivalence naturally restricts interpretation by the translators. Second, the forms usually have meaning. Preserving the original form, when possible, is helpful.

Example: The Elder's qualification lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 are better understood when the original form is preserved — in this case, the sentence structure. The two lists are made of two sentences (1 Tim 3:2-6,7; Titus 1:6,7-9). Each sentence in each passage starts with the idea of being "above reproach" or "well thought of." This is very much highlighted in the Greek. Being "above reproach" is not simply one qualification among many; it is the introduction to the rest of items on the list. This sentence structure is important, but it's lost in most translations.

— The difficulty comes when formal equivalence gets in the way of readability, or style, or poetic elements, which are important forms to consider as well. What if the form of vocabulary gets in the way of the form of readability?

Example: John writes in very simple, elementary Greek, and the Hebrews writer writes in a much higher, academic Greek. Yet is there an English translation that successfully communicates this?

Example: In a more general way, the New Testament was written in the common Greek of the day (Koine). It would have been understandable and relatable. Yet is that the impression you would get of what Scripture "sounds like" when you read the KJV today? The KJV gives the opposite impression, of high and elevated style. Similarly, the "Thou/Thee/Thine" words were the *informal* 2nd person pronouns in the days of the KJV translators, yet now that all sounds incredibly formal, even honorific!

— However, there are going to be times when trying to be word-for-word might miss something bigger. Idiomatic phrases are notorious for this. It would not be helpful for Exodus 34:6 to be word-for-word translated "God is long in the nose"; most translations opt for "slow to anger".

Example: In Romans 6:2, the Greek (*me genoito*) could be more literally rendered in a variety of ways, including: “May it never be!” (NASB95; LSB); “Let it not be!” (LSV). And yet most translations work to recreate the very strong force of this Greek phrase by *departing* from a word-for-word translation for something that better communicates Paul’s message. Options include: “By no means!” (ESV, NIV); “God forbid” (KJV); “Absolutely not!” (HCSB, CSB, NET); “Certainly not!” (NKJV); “Far from it!” (NASB). I suppose that most of us would find that this second group of “less literal” translation options is more punchy, *which* — and this is important — *is a way of being accurate to Paul’s message*. But it’s not word-for-word, even in the above versions that promote themselves as word-for-word Bible translations. So we need to be a little nuanced here.

In conclusion, careful Bible study will be helped by word-for-word translation, since words are important, and a high level of concordance highly helps the Bible student. However, since there are other factors going on in language than just the individual words (and other forms going on besides the vocabulary), there is room even for careful translations to not be beholden to “word-for-word” translation every step of the way.

2. We should have a concern for sound doctrine.

Let’s be “wise as serpents” here. It is common for all people to twist or tweak things to support what they believe and want to believe (2 Peter 3:16). We ourselves are all subject to this temptation. So we should want translations that are good translations — accurate and fair to the original text, as unbiased as possible — and it is reasonable to do some checking into a translation to see if it has a bias or potential for bias.

—It is important to note: we don’t want a biased translation, even one that is biased towards what we believe in. We should want a fair and accurate translation. Our job is not to unfairly translate things to fit our doctrine or understanding. We don’t need to be like the Medieval copyists who thought they were “fixing” things when they came across something difficult. We want good translations, even if that gives us new and difficult things to think about.

Fair translations are needed for fair interpretation. If we want to keep understanding the Bible better and better, the springboard for that is a good translation.

3. The Bible should be understandable to it’s readers.

This is a clear principle we see through the scripture.

- In Ezra’s revival, they explained the text (Nehemiah 8:7).
- Jesus and the Apostles used different forms of the Greek Old Testament, and they were fine to use these translations.

Perhaps the greatest passage on the need for a message to be understandable is 1 Cor 14. Here Paul is very clear: *if people can’t understand what you’re saying, it’s not edifying.* (1 Cor 14:3-5,9,17, etc)

This is where we really get down to the brass tacks about the KJV: unless it can be proven that we must use the KJV (for some doctrinal or theological reason), then we shouldn’t, because it’s not as easily understood and easily misunderstood. (More on this below).

4. Our job is to help the little ones, to help the weak (Matthew 18; Acts 20:35)

When you need to, use a translation that people are comfortable with. There is no need to make the translation a barrier to people.

—Most translations people have are not so bad that they are unusable. Don't make an issue out of translations when we don't need to. Don't let that be a hinderance with someone willing to study the Bible. If you show up to study the Bible with someone in jail or prison, and they have a NlrV "Free on the Inside" Bible, use that Bible! Use the NWT with Jehovah's Witnesses to show them their errors!

—Many people have a strong belief in using the KJV. So use the KJV with these people! If I ask someone if they would study the Bible with me, and they ask me "Well, do you use the King James?" (asking in a way that implies a skepticism of anyone who would *not* use the KJV) then I say, "I do use the King James to study with people." (At some point, I may ask the person how they would feel about the *New King James*, which would be a big improvement, if they would allow that to happen).

As we discuss versions and translations with our congregation, we need to do that in a way that does not undermine people's faith in the usability of God's word. No translation discussion is worth undermining people's confidence in the Bible.

- Don't talk about italics in translations to imply that if their Bible doesn't have "supplied words" in italics, the translators are trying to pull a fast one on them. Building skepticism in people like that is not going to be helpful.
- If your congregation uses a particular translation for a particular reason, work with them in that!

Example: I really appreciate Marty Broadwell's attitude of humility in this kind of thing. Marty used the ASV for years, but when Embry Hills selected the NKJV to be their pew Bible in the 80's, he switched to preach from the NKJV. His working with his congregation in a desire to help new Christians (aligning the pew Bible with what is shared from the pulpit) is commendable.

We're going to look at the two different situations we find ourselves in where translation issues matter: personal study and teaching others.

Principles for Personal Bible Study

My personal criteria for my primary personal Bible

I believe it is invaluable to have one — just one — primary translation that you use most of the time. (Full disclosure: I use the ESV as my primary personal Bible.) And not just one translation to stick with: one *pagination layout* to get the full Bible "in your head" of where things are on the page. Most preachers fall into this, whether they meant to or not. (And make sure you have a couple extra copies around, in case your pagination goes out of print. This happened to me).

Here's the most important thing: you need a Bible that *you* trust, that *you* are comfortable with. If you can read the NASB with no qualms, then that is great. There is no point of someone trying to push somebody into using a Bible that they are reading with apprehension. You need

to be able to dig in and relax and study the word in front of you, without having lingering doubts while you're trying to grow in your knowledge of the scriptures.

With that being said, what might I say to my past self, if I could go back and counsel myself on how to pick my primary personal Bible? Here are my personal criteria for a primary personal Bible:

1. **Not too many footnotes and cross-references.** They have their place for study and class preparation, but if I'm just wanting to dig into the text, all the extra stuff is unhelpful to me. First, it's too many distractions for my ADD brain. Second, that's now how it was originally written. Paul's letters didn't come with a hundred little letters, numbers, and daggers clogging the text.
2. **Not using italics for supplied words.** I find the translation philosophy of *italicizing* every interpolated word to be very unhelpful, so I don't use translations that do this for my primary personal Bible. (More on this later.)
3. **Paragraph form.** Similarly, I want a paragraph form like it was originally written in. The way that some translations' layout makes a new line (or almost paragraph break) for every verse very much breaks up the text. For this reason, I do love the Reader's Bible editions available in some translations, but the lack of versification in a Reader's Bible keeps it from being my primary personal Bible.
4. **Room to write in the side margins.** For me, this is hugely helpful for personal study and for bringing my Bible to study with others. When I'm teaching, I like having only my Bible in front of me, so that means I'm going to want space to write my notes on the side.

I very much realize that some of the above criteria are a little subjective, but I don't believe they are *completely* subjective. In general, a translation and edition of the Bible that best replicates the original is going to be the best: and that's true not only for word usage, but also for readability and extra stuff that become distractions.

Some key principles for personal Bible study

1. In personal studying, your very best tool is learning *yourself* how Greek works and how languages work and how translations work.

Instead of outsourcing everything to translators, you'll do you and your congregation a huge favor by learning translation principles yourself.

Second-year Greek at FC was the most impactful class I ever took at Florida College. It was in second-year Greek that we went beyond learning the nuts and bolts of Greek to learning the nuts and bolts of how translation and language work.

No, "learning the Greek" is not everything, but it is something. As my Greek professor Tom Hamilton says, it's the difference between watching TV in color vs black and white. Can you watch a whole movie in black and white and understand it well? Of course. But you're also missing something.

2. Whether you learn and use the original Bible languages or not, use multiple English translations to provide good direction (even guardrails) in your Bible study.

Using multiple English translations can give you a different possibility of meaning, or a different flavor. It is far better to check on other translations from time to time than to be hidebound to looking at only one. That will only be to your detriment. I'm not sure a sermon or class goes by where I don't use biblehub.com to look at how another translation handles a verse.

Example: I was visiting a group one day and the preacher was teaching Colossians 1. I believe he was looking at his interlinear at Col 1:15 “Who is the image of God...” but when he saw the “Who” he assumed that then Col 1:15 and following was a question! So he taught the group that that passage is actually in the form of a question... even though no translation I know of renders it this way. I’d like to believe that the preacher would have been helped by looking at the verse in biblehub.com and seeing that he was venturing into unknown territory with his personal translation.

We’ve all had the experience of teaching out of your usual translation and you didn’t check what other translations said, and it shows in class.

3. Utilize free online resources.

There are tons of good resources in electronic form, some of them very expensive. I would probably benefit from having a good software Bible program, but the fact is, most of what I want to do on a daily basis I can do with the resources available free online.

The amount of free and very good resources you can access online is wonderful.

- Word searches in English
- Original language word search
- Interlinears that parse every word in the original language
- LXX word searches

(Note: it is much more important to be able to search the usage of a word in the original language than the usage of that word in your particular translation. It’s very helpful to see where and how that word is used in the Greek, and much less important how often the ESV uses a certain word in its translation.)

—Let’s talk about the Septuagint (LXX) for a minute...

By far the most *important* translation of the Old Testament is the LXX. It was done by Hebrew and Greek speakers before the time of Christ, and it gives us great insight into how words were being used in the time of the NT writers and by the NT writers themselves.

One of the most helpful free tools out there is the ability to do word searches in the LXX in blueletterbible.org. It will take you all of 10 minutes to figure out how to use this great free resource on this site.

There is a veritable treasure trove of Bible insights to be gained by having such great access the LXX. Here is a small sampling of Bible insights we can gain by using the LXX:

- Job says his friends are miserable “comforters” (Job 16:2). The word here in the LXX is Paraclete (1 John 2:1; John 14:16, etc).
- The word for “Church” (*ekklesia*) in the LXX is very important to understand the idea of the New Testament church. We gain insight into the OT background of the church, as well as NT passages like Matthew 16:18.
- Use of propitiation in OT as the “Mercy Seat” (Romans 3:25, Exodus 25:18-22, etc; see Hebrews 9:5)
- Romans 8 “vanity” in Ecclesiastes (Romans 8:20; Eccl 1:2,15, etc.)
- *Bapto* and *Baptizo* in the crossing the Jordan story and in Naaman’s washing foreshadows New Testament baptism. (Joshua 3:15; 2 Kings 5:14)

- Jesus was a carpenter (Mark 6:3), *teknon* in the Greek (like *technology*.) This is the word used to describe the “craftsmen” in Zechariah’s second vision (Zech 1:18-21) in a time when Zechariah is calling them to build the Temple.

I’m intentionally not fully explaining why I think these insights are helpful. Dig in, and see for yourself!

4. Don’t over-rely on one translation

If no translation is perfect, then overuse of one translation will be to our detriment.

—If a doctrine that someone is defending is only defensible with one particular translation (or worse: his own translation from the original language), he likely doesn’t have a very strong argument.

All the great Bible doctrines are greater in scope than just the nuances and debates of translations. You can prove just about all the great doctrines even with bad translations.

Example: Evangelicals desperately try to make *eis* a backward idea (“because of”) to escape the natural reading of Acts 2:38. They really don’t have good ground to stand on making “for the forgiveness of your sins” to mean “because of the forgiveness of your sins.” (You may have heard them use the illustration of “jump *for* joy” which really means “jump because you have joy.”) But the Bible presentation of baptism is far greater than just how you translate Acts 2:38. If they’re going to be dismissive of Acts 2:38, there are all kinds of places to take them to teach on baptism.

5. Consider options with helpful bells and whistles

There are amazing tools that go along with certain Bible translations these days.

- **Spacious side margins.** I love my ESV with large side margins for notes, and this feature is now available in many translations.
- **Reader’s Versions.** A “reader’s version” is the idea of removing all the extra things editors like to put into our Bibles, including removing or minimizing verse and chapter divisions. Reader’s Versions became a popular thing about 10 years ago, but that fire shouldn’t die. The NIV has “The Books of the Bible,” the first of this kind of Bible edition. The ESV has the Reader’s Bible, and the Gospels, with Matt, Mark, Luke, and John published by itself in the Reader’s version format. Bibliotheca was a big deal in 2014, and it really popularized the idea of a Reader’s Bible. (The Bible text of Bibliotheca is an updated version of the ASV.)
- **Bible Notebooks.** The ESV has gone another step with individual books of the Bible printed separately, with the right-hand page blank for notes.
- **Reference Bibles.** Today, a reference / chain reference Bible is old hat, but the ASV has a legendarily helpful center column reference that has made many Bible students want that edition. Apparently, the NASB has some editions with this particular reference.
- **Study Bibles.** Study Bibles have commentary along with the text, usually at the bottom of the page. Some people love them, but they should be used with caution, and never as one’s primary personal study Bible. Most people will be hindered, not helped, by having commentary shaping their personal study time on a daily basis. Most study Bibles will have an Evangelical slant to their commentary. The last thing we want is to be studying with someone with a study Bible that is constantly being referenced to refute what we’re trying to teach them.
- **Extensive footnotes.** The NET Bible has quite extensive footnotes on translation decisions, study notes (which is really just commentary) and textual-critical issues. They boast over

60,000 footnotes, but if you think that every translation decision was discussed in the footnotes, you'd be wrong. Essentially, the NET Bible's footnotes are just a variation on the Study Bible idea.

6. A working knowledge of Textual Criticism will be very helpful in dealing with English translation issues.

Preachers find out in time that they'll need to have at least *some* knowledge on textual criticism to answer people's questions. "Why are these verses in my Bible but not yours?" Or "What's this note here about the ending of Mark?"

There are a hundred books out there to introduce the main concepts behind modern textual criticism. The standard for many years has been Metzger's The Text of the New Testament.

In my opinion, the most important resource for answering your garden-variety textual questions is Metzger's A Textual Commentary on the Greek NT. It discusses in paragraph form why the United Bible Society made the decisions they did for their Greek critical text (which is identical to the Greek critical text of the Nesle-Aland). I use this all the time. It is super helpful to get a quick thumbnail sketch of why the UBS made the decisions they did in creating their Greek Text (which forms the basis of most modern English translations). I'll be reading in my ESV some footnote "some manuscripts have" and I can look in my Textual Commentary to hear explained what the evidence is on both sides.

7. Realize that translations are now changing on a regular basis.

Hand-in-hand with electronic versions on the internet for all to freely use and utilize, many translators are updating their translations without public fanfare. If it's a big update, they will probably tell the world about it. But you also may find that the print Bible in your hand is different than what you will find on biblegateway.com.

Example: I had been frustrated that my ESV translates Luke 24:47 to read "repentance *and* the forgiveness of sins should be proclaimed in his name to all nations" (emphasis added), since my Greek text showed "eis" (for) not "kai" (and). To me this seemed like another Evangelical way of weaseling out of "you have to repent to be forgiven." (Little did I know, there is a textual-critical manuscript question here.) So I was looking up the ESV online to make this point, and lo! The ESV online version read "repentance *for* the forgiveness of sins"! They had updated the ESV and hadn't even told me! (I do suspect that "for the forgiveness of sins" in Luke 24:47 is supposed to parallel the "for the forgiveness of sins" in Acts 2:38, which is identical in the Greek.)

Principles for Teaching Others

1. Assess what their biggest need is!

In one-on-one studies, likely, the biggest translation issue is just good old *readability*.

Some interesting statistics on Americans and Bible reading...

In 2022, here are the top selling Bibles in America:

1. NIV
2. ESV
3. NLT
4. KJV
5. CSB
6. NKJV
7. Reina Valera
8. Nlrv
9. NASB
10. The Message

(From <https://christianbookexpo.com/bestseller/translations.php?id=BO22>)

But before we get upset that a third of Americans are reaching for an NLT, here are the more relevant statistics...

In 2014, here's what Americans are reading at home:

1. KJV (55%)
2. NIV (19%)
3. NRSV (7%)
4. NAB (a Catholic translation, 6%)
5. The Living Bible (a paraphrase predecessor to the NLT, 5%)

(From <http://blogs.thearda.com/trend/featured/the-lord-is-their-shepherd-new-study-reveals-who-reads-the-bible-%E2%80%93-and-why/> and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bible_translations_into_English)

What this tells us is that most people who are reading their Bible at home and are using a KJV or NIV. The impression I get in Southern Indiana is that your average family a) used to go to church, b) maybe picks up their Bible occasionally, c) probably has the KJV lying around collecting lots of dust, and d) has in their brain somewhere this fear that any translation besides the KJV is probably bad.

As I've said, I believe that if these people want to use the KJV, that's just fine. They can be taught the gospel from the KJV. I suggest asking them if they would be okay with the NKJV, as that will help the Bible study quite a bit.

In jails, if the guy is proud of his Nlrv "Free on the inside" translation that he's been reading from, use that translation! Most likely, its readability will probably be helpful to him.

—Does your one-on-one study have more of a doctrinal focus?

- Get them to stay away from "study Bibles" that will likely have an Evangelical slant. We never want to hear, "Oh, it can't mean that! Look what my study Bible says about that!"
- There will be translations (NIV, NET) that have a more Calvinistic slant that would be better avoided. If you're studying with someone savvy enough to have a legitimate doctrinal discussion, they are probably savvy enough to be reasonable about translations. On the other hand, it may not be worth the battle to question your neighbor's NIV at the beginning, since that may make you sound too cultish. In that case, it would be better to teaching them sound doctrine *from their NIV* when possible.

2. Don't let the translation be a hurdle to anyone.

At my group, one member does *not* like when I reference the NIV as a comparison translation, so I don't. I don't even bring the NIV up. When they're in my class, the NIV is dead to me.

Obviously, don't be a guest preacher somewhere and show up using The Message. That's a completely unnecessary hurdle.

3. Be prepared for a variety of issues that may come up

Here is the potpourri category of translation issues when studying with others.

— Make the person read the Bible in the language they are best in. This is a Bible study, not an English class. If they are best in Spanish, make them read from a Spanish Bible.

Example: When I was studying with Mohammed in NYC, he was a recent migrant from French Africa. So when we studied, he would read the passage in French, then we would talk in English. Even though I don't know French, it worked just fine.

Example: Years later, I began studying with a lady from China. She was already a believer and knew her Bible some. But she hated studying the Bible in Chinese, which made sense when she talked about it. Can you imagine all the names of Kings in the Old Testament trying to use a pictographic language? She said it was easier for us to study in English, so we did.

— Large print Bibles are worth it! If you are studying with someone with poor eyesight (or maybe even poor reading skills), consider giving them a very large print Bible, available in some print formats. If they can use a phone or tablet, get them an app where they can increase the font to be huge.

— If they really don't care, don't let them stay with their KJV.

Example: When I lived in NYC, people would download Bible apps that only had KJV, and they could barely read and understand it. It would take them all of 2 minutes to get a different Bible app or to download another version, but they wouldn't. Help people find better apps that have more readable translations.

Key Translation Issues For Christians Today

1. Doctrinal Concerns

Probably the translation issue that we think about the most is the importing of false doctrine into a translation, and probably the doctrine we find ourselves combating the most in modern English translations is Calvinism. This only makes sense, since we're not regularly running into Roman Catholic or Eastern Orthodox or Pentecostal translations of the Bible.

— Growing up, the biggest concern I heard about the NIV was its Calvinism, especially in passages like Romans 7-8, where *flesh* was translated "sinful nature." As it turns out, the NIV has really backed off those more extreme translations, and most of those "sinful nature" passages have been changed in more recent updates to the NIV. The significant dialing back of that terminology probably shows that they themselves came to see that they had produced a biased translation. Is the NIV still Calvinistic? Yes, probably some. In my opinion, the NIV has

too much “non-literal” translation to be a good primary study Bible anyway, whether or not we can find Calvinism still there.

—People have had concerns that the LSB is either currently or in the process of becoming a Calvinist Bible. Certainly, the John MacArthur influence over the six men of the translation committee would generate a reasonable suspicion that the LSB would head that way. But I’m not sure it’s overly Calvinistic yet. I appreciate its using “chosen” for “elect” in passages like Romans 11:7 and 1 Peter 1:1. (“Elect” is such a loaded word with historical Calvinistic baggage that it’s certainly better to avoid it when possible.)

The issue with the LSB is that current translations tend to be updated regularly. This is made especially easy with online versions. Will the LSB be subtly changed over time?

2. Gender Inclusive Pronouns

When we hear about Gender Inclusive pronouns, we’re likely to recoil in horror. Could there be a more liberal, 21st Century kind of idea?!

(No surprise, some very liberal translators argue extreme things like taking out the masculine nature of God in masculine pronouns, which of course is thoroughly wrong. We’re not even going to discuss such extreme options).

Here is the fact of the matter: today, when people hear “man” or “men” (when it’s meaning “person” or “people”) they may think “males”, as in, *specifying* males. They may think *males* when people fifty years ago would not have heard the word that way. They certainly didn’t in hear it that way the first century. Fifty years ago, or 2,000 years ago, people would not have heard “man” and thought of that as specifying “males,” in the way that “girls” (to ancient and modern ears both) specifies “females.”

Here is how different translations have adapted their gendered language:

—The ESV has taken small steps, like “let your light shine before others” (Matt 5:16), and copious footnotes attached to “brothers” with inane and unhelpful explanations like: “Or *brothers and sisters*. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word *adelphoi* (translated “brothers”) may refer either to *brothers* or to *brothers and sisters*”

—The NASB20 has really increased gender inclusive words. Matt 5:16 reads “Your light must shine before people...” You can read more about the NASB20’s gendered language choices below in the NASB section.

—The CSB took visible steps toward gender inclusive language. “In the same way, let your light shine before others” (Matt 5:16) and “Consider it a great joy, my brothers and sisters...” (James 1:2)

—The NIV, unsurprisingly, utilizes even more gender inclusive words than the CSB. Matt 5:16 here reads “let your light shine before others” and James 1:2 has “Consider it pure joy, my brothers and sisters...”. The NIV translates “sons” as “children” in passages like Hebrews 12:7, “God is treating you as his children.”

Is it really that big a deal to translate “all men” as “everybody” or “men” as “others”? I personally think not. So for the most part, what Bible translations are doing today doesn’t bother me too much. The whole “brothers and sisters” thing drives me a little crazy, but I also

like the reminder of the Christians sisters being there. Is there some dark “slippery slope” this trend could fall down? I’m not convinced of that.

Honestly, I think this trend is being fair with how our language is working today. When “brothers” was meant to be generic (not specifying males), and “brothers” sounds gender specific to the modern ear, it’s actually a reasonable translation question on how to best communicate what was meant by this word 2,000 years ago.

3. Translations that use italics

Many Modern English Translations (NASB, KJV, NKJV, LSB, BLB) will use *italics* to demarcate the specific words that the translators felt were necessary, though that word was not in the Greek or Hebrew of the original. These are what some will call *interpolated* words.

The translation philosophy is something like this: when you are trying to translate carefully and faithfully and conservatively, and there is not just one word in English for the one word in Hebrew or Greek — or there needs to be added English words for the translation to make sense — you’ll put interpolated words into your English translation, and it’s good to show that those are interpolated words by putting them in *italics*.

In general, I disagree with this translation philosophy, even though I know I’m likely to get pushback on this.

—First, let’s hear other people describe this translation philosophy:

The following is a typical description of the use and value of the italics:

“In line 3 of the above Scripture, you also see the word, “being,” is presented in italics. This indicates that the same word is not found in the original Hebrew but was an educated guess (based on the context) by Biblical scholars to render the implied meaning as accurately as possible in modern English. This comes with the territory in any endeavour to translate one language into another.” <https://neilenglish.net/a-brief-look-at-the-new-american-standard-bible-nasb/>

Or how about...

“The Legacy Standard Bible, like its forbear, the NASB 1995, consistently italicizes words in the translation that the grammar of the original languages implies or is not in the original languages at all. The scholars working on this translation sought to eliminate as many additional words as possible while still maintaining readability in English. By eliminating unnecessary additional words, the scholars ensured that the inspired Word of God stands out and maintained the trustworthiness of the translation.” <https://www.olivetree.com/blog/look-inside-legacy-standard-bible/>

I mean, what’s there to disagree about? That seems pretty cut and dry a good idea, right? To be fair, I really am all about “eliminating unnecessary additional words” as they put it. I think that’s very good. But it’s just not that simple.

The Problem with the Italics Method for Interpolated Words

—If a word really does need to be supplied, then there's little value in putting it in italics. If it don't really need to be there, then maybe it shouldn't be there at all, italics or no.

Translators aren't usually making "guesses" like the above quote implies. And when translators supply needed words, those aren't guesses either.

—The underlying idea seems to be one of desiring transparency with the reader. In other words: "We're not trying to pull anything here! We're going to show you everything we translators are doing!"

But, as any person familiar with the original languages will tell you, there are still tons of decisions being made that they're not telling you about. In any given passage, the translators are making all kinds of translation decisions for the reader that the English reader will never be aware of. Change of sentence structure (like shortening Paul's long sentences), turning particles into finite verbs, deciding which definition of a word to use, finding the equivalent for a preposition, adding English punctuation that wasn't there...

The point is this: I'm afraid that the italics approach gives the reader the impression that it is a transparent translation, when it is really only shedding light on one particular issue.

—You know the old adage: "A little learning is a dangerous thing." People get in their head that all these italicized words "really shouldn't be there" and are just "guesses," so they start making big points in their lessons based on what the sentence looks like when they take out all those "extra italicized words." But that's silly. Proper interpolated words really *should* be there. If you want a translation with no regard to how English works, that's an interlinear, not a translation.

—It is very difficult to be consistent with this approach. How very italics-y are we going to be? Consider the following verse (chosen at random, though it worked well for my purposes) in various italics-bearing translations:

James 3:13

KJV — "Who *is* a wise man and endued with knowledge among you? let him shew out of a good conversation his works with meekness of wisdom."

NKJV — "Who *is* wise and understanding among you? Let him show by good conduct *that* his works *are done* in the meekness of wisdom."

NASB20 — "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom."

NASB95 — "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good behavior his deeds in the gentleness of wisdom."

LSB — "Who among you is wise and understanding? Let him show by his good conduct his works in the gentleness of wisdom."

BLB (Berean Literal Bible) — "Who *is* wise and understanding among you; let him show his works out of the good conduct, in *the* humility of wisdom."

The point is more than just the obvious fact that the above translations are not consistent in their use of italics. For example, the KJV, NKJV, and BLB show that the verse does not literally have "is," the copulative verb; the NASBs and LSB do not. The BLB is the only version to show that the article is not present in the prepositional phrase "in *the* humility of wisdom" (which is common and insignificant in Greek prepositional phrases.)

The bigger point is this: what did we gain by having any of those words italicized? Did that really give us insight into the translator's thinking? Does it matter that the "to be" verb can be absent in the Greek? Of course not. And what about the "the"? The use of the article in Greek is very different than that in English. Do we gain anything by showing the reader when the Greek has the article? No. I would suggest we only confuse the reader by making them think there's something going on when there really isn't.

—It is reasonable for translators to have the ability to offer suggestions that are less literal and to also *show* us that this suggested wording is less literal. I like how the ESV will offer footnotes for alternate translations, even highlighting what the literal Greek expression was in the first place.

"For I would have you know, brothers, that the gospel that was preached by me is not man's gospel.[c]" (Galatians 1:11, ESV)

[c] Greek *not according to man*

I also like how the HCSB does this with little brackets:

"And Enoch, in the seventh [generation] from Adam, prophesied about them" (Jude 1:14, HCSB)

The question is not whether there is a place in Bible translations for supplied words. The problem is that with the italics system for every interpolated word, you can't tell if it's something is noteworthy or not.

Example: Check out Ephesians 1 in the NASB95 and the italicized words we find there.

- The interpolated (and italicized) words in v1,3,14,15 are completely necessary for it to make sense in English, so I would suggest that italicizing them is unneeded.
- Italicizing *places* (after heavenly) in v3 and 20 gives a weird impression, like Paul forgot to put a noun after the adjective, when the truth is, it's an unusual construction that would be literally rendered "heavenlies."
- The "*that is*" of v10 is more an interpretive insertion, worthy of italics. Same with "of you" in v16.
- The "*I pray that*" in v18 is an interpretive insertion for sure, but unfortunately at the expense of chopping up Paul's sentence and prayer list. Same thing with "*These are*" in v19. Here's the problem: the NASB is letting you know about the supplied words here while not informing the reader that the supplied words are only needed because the NASB is chopping up Paul's sentence and turning the participles into finite verbs.
- A quick look at the BLB shows us that the NASB here missed italicizing "are" in v18, "is" in v19, "Him" in v20, "one to" in v21.

The conclusion of this sample text: Six of the italicized words / phrases really don't need to be highlighted, two *should* be highlighted (italicized) as interpretations, and two more are needed in italics because of other decisions the translators are making (but they don't tell you about). Four times (maybe more) in this chapter they missed italicizing words that another translation demonstrated were interpolated.

Here's the real point: unnecessary italicized words dilute when the reader really should know about "interpretations of the translators" I would be fine with footnotes, brackets, or italics showing supplied words that should be flagged to the reader as supplied. But when nothing is

gained by a high percentage of the flagged words (and it would be an even higher percentage if the NASB was as persnickety as the BLB), it dilutes the power of the tool.

—I’m not sure the italicizing really does increase confidence in the translators. From what I’ve seen, it more opens up people to be constantly looking to see if they’re being tricked. We’ve all heard the comment in Bible class, “Yes, I know it says that, but those words are in italics, so they really shouldn’t be there.” That’s not trust in the translators.

—Believe it or not, many people use italicizing translations and think that the italicized words are there for *emphasis* (like we all learned about back in 7th Grade English class). Oh yes, it’s true. I’ve read multiple accounts online from people who were misunderstanding what the italics were all about. Sure, that was explained in the preface to the NASB, but who reads that kind of stuff.

Here’s the heart of the matter: the italics are being used for two different kinds of “supplied words”: explanatory words and needed words. I believe it’s a good idea to use italics for more explanatory insertions, but it is not a good idea to then *also* use italics for words that really need to be there. To use the Ephesians chapter 1 example above, the words that really need to be there (vs1,3,14,15) should not be italicized, so that when you come to the explanatory insertions (vs10,16,18,19) you can see the real nature of those insertions.

In conclusion: Many people whom I respect believe that italics in English translations are needed and helpful. I understand where this comes from. First, it comes from a place of desiring transparency. We want to see where people made decisions in translations, and even how they made those decisions. We want an accurate translation with no jumps in assumptions, especially when jumps may be theologically driven.

My fear is that the italics give the *appearance* of being helpful when it’s not really. It gives the appearance of transparency when it is really only being partially transparent about one particular feature of Greek-to-English translation. It gives the promise of an inside peek into translation decisions, when it more-often-than-not just flags things not worth noticing. It allows for many a Bible student to think they are making a good point if they observe “this word isn’t in the original” when they may be doing violence to the Greek they think they are preserving.

Instead of a system of italics which highlight words needing to be supplied (but where a hundred other Greek to English decisions must be made that you would never know about), what I believe is much more helpful is this: a good word-for-word translation that is making as few decisions for the reader as possible and that footnotes or italicizes *noteworthy* issues that the reader should be aware of. Why highlight every supplied word when only 1 in 3 is even worth knowing about?

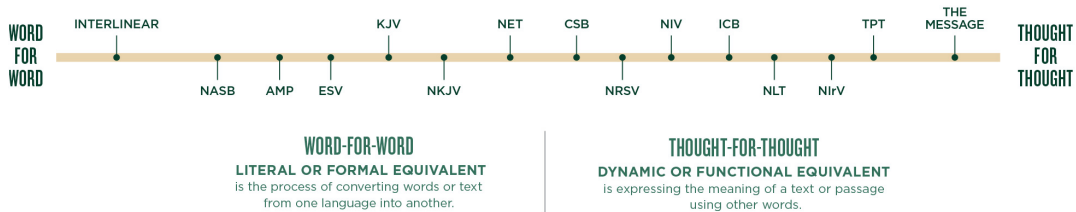
An introduction to some translations we are likely to use and encounter:

Using the principles we’ve been looking at, let’s take a closer look at the modern English translations that we are likely to hear about, use, and encounter with other people.

We’ve all seen charts like the following, which boast of the ability to show in pictorial form just where every translation lands on the “formal equivalent / dynamic equivalent” spectrum.

BIBLE TRANSLATION CONTINUUM

Bible translations shown in the top half of the chart are original translations directly from ancient languages to English. Versions shown below the line began with the English text of another Bible translation.

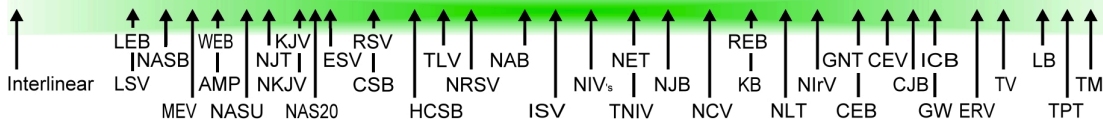


All versions of the Bible use a mix of both philosophies in an effort to produce a Bible that is both accurate and clear to the reader.

<https://www.mardel.com/bibletranslationguide>

English Bible Translation Comparison

Word for Word ←————→ Thought for Thought ←————→ Paraphrase



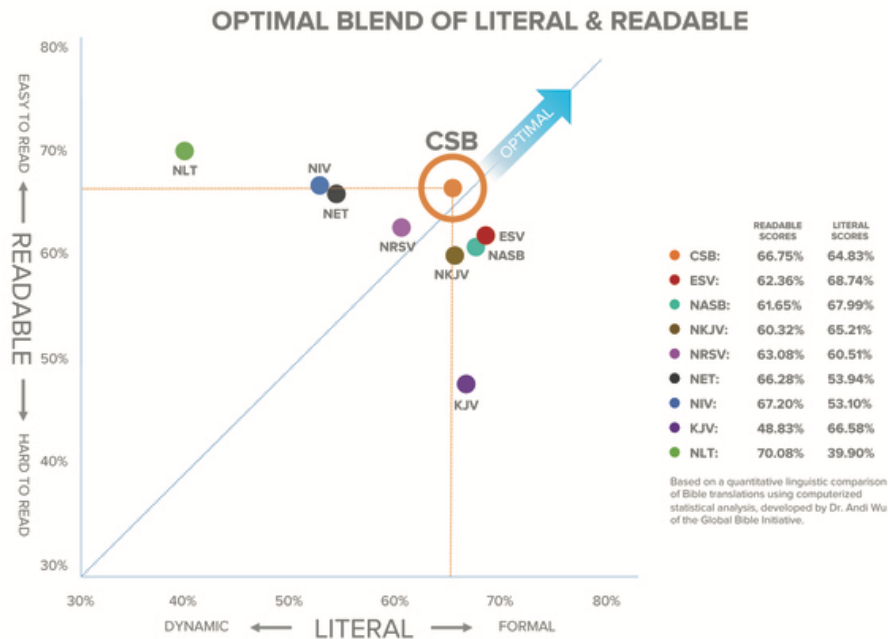
- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> AMP - Amplified Bible (12) CEB[^] - Common English Bible (7) CEV[^] - Contemporary English (5) CJB - Complete Jewish Bible (9) CSB[^] - Christian Standard Bible (7) ERV[^] - Easy to Read Version (3.5) ESV[^] - English Standard Version (9.5) GNT (GNB/TEV)[*] - Good News Translation (6) GW[^] - God's Word (4.5) HCSB - Holman Christian Standard (8) ICB[^] - International Children's Bible (3.5) ISV[^] - International Standard Version (8.5) KB[~] - Knox Bible (12.5) KJV^{**} - King James Version (13) LB - Living Bible (8.5) LEB - Lexham English Bible (11) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> LSV[*] - Literal Standard Version (12) MEV[*] - Modern English Version (13) NAB[*] - New American Bible (7) NASB - New American Standard 1977 (11) NASU - New American Standard 1995 (11) NAS20[^] - New American Standard 2020 (11) NET[^] - NET Bible (7) NCV[^] - New Century Version (5) NIrV - New International Reader's (3.5) NIV - New International Version (8) NIV11[^] - NIV 2011 Revision (8) NIVI[^] - NIV [UK only, 1996 edition] (8) NJB[*] - New Jerusalem Bible (7.5) NJT[±] - New Jewish Translation (12) NKJV[*] - New King James Version (9) NLT[^] - New Living Translation (6.5) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> NRSV[^] - New Revised Standard (10.5) REB (NEB)[^] - Revised English Bible (7) RSV[*] - Revised Standard Version (11) TLV - Tree of Life Version (10) TNIV[^] - Today's NIV (7.5) TM - The Message (4.5) TV - The Voice (7) TPT[±] - The Passion Translation (9.5) WEB[*] - World English Bible (8) |
|---|---|---|

[^] No gender neutral language for God, careful/moderate inclusive language regarding mankind.
^{*} Gender neutral language ^{*} Apocrypha available or included (#) Approximate overall reading grade level
[~] Text based entirely or primarily on the Textus Receptus and the Jacob ben Hayyim edition of the Masoretic Text.
[±] Text based entirely or primarily on the 1592 Sixto-Clementina Latin Vulgate prepared by Pope Clement VIII. ± Complete Bible Unavailable

<https://www.chapter3min.org/bible-translations-comparison-charts/>

The fact of the matter is this: the more charts you look at like this (and they're not hard to find: just google "Bible translation chart"), the more you see that the charts all differ with one another. Even in the two charts I included above, the CSB and NET are swapped pretty dramatically.

Here's a nice chart that shows just how perfect the CSB translation is:



<https://csbible.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/horizontal-gbi-chart.jpg>

Sure, charts like this have the potential to be pretty useful, but don't take them as overly precise, overly scientific, or even unbiased.

ESV — The English Standard Version

I use the ESV far more than any other translation. I started using it in my college days, and it became my daily study Bible, personal evangelism Bible, and preaching Bible. Then, for better or worse, it became the pagination and page layout that my brain uses to remember where everything in the Bible is. (You know what I'm talking about).

I think the ESV is a very good translation for several reasons:

- It is a good blend of formal equivalence (“word-for-word”) while still being readable and not sounding archaic.
- I love the bells and whistles that Crossway Publishers have put with the ESV: the side marginal notes Bible, the little paperback notebook Bibles of a single Bible book, the Reader's Bible... all are great.
- It does not strike me as being Calvinistic influenced.
- The ESV regularly footnotes a slightly more literal expression (1 Cor 11:30 gives the footnote “Greek *have fallen asleep*”;) or explaining the Greek usage (Hebrews 9:15, “The Greek word means both *covenant* and *will*; also verses 16, 17”) or noting manuscript differences / textual issues (Psalm 22:16, “Some Hebrew manuscripts, Septuagint, Vulgate, Syriac; most Hebrew manuscripts *like a lion* [they are at] *my hands and feet*”)

Having said that, here are things are just bad about the ESV:

- 1 Cor 11:2-16 is terrible. Yes, the Greek word for “woman” can also be translated “wife,” but the ESV here joins the small minority of modern translations to make this passage about “wives.” It is the only translation on biblehub.com to treat v13 like this: “Judge for yourselves: is it proper for a wife to pray to God with her head uncovered?” And the fact that the ESV in this passage goes back and forth between “woman” and “wife” makes it all the worse.
- The ad nauseam footnotes about “brothers and sisters” makes me want to pull out my hair. In a NT book, the first time “brother” show up in that book, you get a footnote like: “Or brothers and sisters. In New Testament usage, depending on the context, the plural Greek word adelphoi (translated “brothers”) may refer either to brothers or to brothers and sisters”... and the footnotes repeat endlessly from there.
- Second place in the annoying-repeated-footnote category goes to *servant* and *slave* constantly footnoted to “bondservant”
- They could have made little choices to improve readability, but they didn’t. Colossians 3:12 — “Put on then, as God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience...” There are eight words between the verb “put on” and it direct object “compassionate hearts.” If they were trying to make it more readable, simply English-ifying it one step more would be very helpful: “Then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, put on compassionate hearts...”
- The “sinner’s prayer / faith only” appendix from the publishers is something I’ve had to tear out of countless ESV Bibles before handing them out in outreach evangelism to strangers.

KJV — The King James Version

The KJV was a wonderful translation for the time — it really was. Since words change meaning over time, it is not nearly as helpful a translation as it used to be. Even two hundred years ago Alexander Campbell talked about words in the KJV that had already changed meaning so much as to make the text unintelligible. Some of Campbell’s examples: “I prevented the dawning of the morning, and cried” (Psalms 119:147) and “Moreover, brethren, we do you to wit of the grace of God bestowed on the churches of Macedonia” (2 Cor 8:1)

Here is the biblical basis for criticizing the KJV: the principle of intelligibility from 1 Corinthians 14. If our words can’t be understood, they’re not edifying and spiritually helpful. Why demand (or even use) the KJV, when the Bible teaches that we need to be able to understand the words in teaching and worship?

Interestingly, even the KJV brother at my church feels the need to clarify and define words as he reads from the KJV. He’s not apologizing for the wording, but he does feel a sense that things need to be explained.

Some data supporting the idea that the KJV’s use of English is outdated.

Dead words. The KJV contains at least 779 dead words (and that number comes from the KJV folks.) “Ouches” (clasps or settings, like in the tabernacle) or “beves” (cows) or “besom” (broom) or “chambering” (sexual immorality)...

“False friends.” Much worse — much more unhelpful — than dead words are a category of words called “false friends” (which are similar to “false cognates”). These are words that you *think* you know what the KJV means, but you don’t. It’s a familiar word, or so you think, but it

means something other than the common, modern meaning, and you may not ever realize it, because it's not jumping out to you as wrong.

Mark Ward (author and YouTuber) has identified at least 70 "false friend" words in the KJV.

The compounded problem of "false friends":

1. You aren't likely to look up these words, because you think you know them.
2. When you look them up, a modern English dictionary is going to give you a modern English definition. Unless you're intentionally looking for the "archaic" and "obsolete" usages, even the dictionary is going to misdirect you.

Two case studies in "false friends":

Case study 1:

"Even as Sara obeyed Abraham, calling him lord: whose daughters ye are, as long as ye do well, and are not afraid with any amazement." (1 Peter 3:6, KJV)

You come across "amazement" (1 Peter 3:6) in the KJV, and you wouldn't even think to look it up in a dictionary, because everyone knows what "amazement" means.

But worse, if you were to google "amazement definition" the only definition that comes up is "a feeling of great surprise or wonder." But that's not what Peter means in 1 Peter 3:6, and no modern translation renders it that way. (NKJV "terror", NASB "fear")

I believe that your average modern reader would take the KJV of 1 Peter 3:6 to mean "Don't be afraid of your difficult husband, or be *surprised* when those hard, scary things happen." But surprise is not the idea, and you'd never know that you were misunderstanding 1 Peter 3:6 if you were only studying from the KJV.

Case study 2:

"But when ye shall hear of wars and commotions, be not terrified: for these things must first come to pass; but the end is not by and by." (Luke 21:9, KJV)

Imagine that you're studying with someone you hope will obey the gospel. They are new to Bible study. You read about something happening "by and by" (let's say Luke 21:9; also in Matt 13:21; Mark 6:25; Luke 17:7;) and they will naturally assume that means "eventually." But then you have to explain, "No, actually, 'by and by' used to mean *immediately*, but now it means *eventually*. Jesus is saying the end is not coming *immediately*." I don't think this is going to build their trust either in you or in the KJV text they are reading, and I think it quickly becomes very confusing.

Here are three examples of "false friends" that I believe have negatively impacted our Bible study:

"Bruise"

"And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise thy head, and thou shalt bruise his heel." (Genesis 3:15, KJV)

The problem is not that *bruise* was a bad translation. In 1611 *bruise* could have the meaning of "crush," and potentially it still can mean that today. But for the most part, today *bruise* sounds pretty tame. Even "bruise thy head" doesn't sound all that violent. But "break" or "crush" or

“strike” is better to communicate this idea to our modern ears. Satan may have crushed Jesus’s heel in the crucifixion, but in doing that, Jesus crushed the Serpent’s head!

“Want”

“The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want.” (Psalm 23:1, KJV)

I surely was not the only kid out there who didn’t think Psalm 23:1 made any sense.

“I shouldn’t want the Lord as my shepherd? That’s gotta be wrong!”

“Study”

“Study to shew thyself approved unto God, a workman that needeth not to be ashamed, rightly dividing the word of truth.” (2 Tim 2:15, KJV)

How could this verse have negatively impacted our Bible concepts? The Greek here for *study* here means “do your best” or “be diligent” or “make every effort.” Obviously, the verse is still about teaching God’s word properly. But could it be that a verse like this has pushed preachers too much into their church offices to “study”... as if the primary job of an *evangelist* was to study and not to evangelize?

Here is a partial list of KJV “False Friend” words that impact the meaning of the text in a significant way:

- “Unicorn” — (Numbers 23:22; 24:8; Deut 33:17; Job 39:9,10; **Ps 22:21**; 29:6; 92:10; Isa 34:7) This one is pretty self-explanatory. Most modern translations will say something like “wild ox.” I wondered once if the KJV brother at my group intentionally avoided reading “unicorn” in Psalm 22:21 when he was giving a short talk.
- “Convenient” — (Proverbs 30:8; Romans 1:28) “Convenient” used to have a meaning of “fitting, appropriate,” but now people mostly used it to mean “easy, requiring little effort.” Romans 1:28 has a different meaning now: “And even as they did not like to retain God in their knowledge, God gave them over to a reprobate mind, to do those things which are not convenient...”
- “Careful” — (2 Kings 4:13; Jer 17:18) “Careful” used to mean “full of care,” but now it means “cautious” or “thoughtful.” The meaning of Daniel 3:16 has now changed: “O Nebuchadnezzar, we are not careful to answer thee in this matter.”
- “Conversation” — (**Phil 3:20**; 2 Cor 1:12; Gal 1:13; Eph 2:3; **Eph 4:22**; Phil 1:27; 1 Tim 4:12; Heb 13:5, 7; Jas 3:13; 1 Pet 1:8; 2:12; 3:1, 2, 16; 2 Pet 2:7; 3:11) “Conversation” today means what you talk about, but it used to mean “conduct” or “way of life.”
- “Imagination” — (Deut 29:19; Jer 7:24; 9:14; 11:8; 13:10; 16:12; 18:12) “Imagination” meant “stubbornness”, but now means “creativity.”
- “Meat offering” — (Exodus 29:41; throughout Leviticus 2 and 6, etc). The phrase “meat offering” shows up 113 times in the KJV. But “meat” doesn’t mean “meat” any more. This is the “grain offering” of unleavened flour the Israelites offered at the Tabernacle, not at all an animal sacrifice. It’s really too bad this one is so confusing.
- “Prevent” — (Psalm 119:147,148; Matthew 17:25; 1 Thess 4:15) “Prevent” used to mean “to go before” or “anticipate” but now it means “to hinder”.

How big a deal are “false friends”? The above list gives some idea of their problematic nature. No, nothing in there is catastrophically bad for understanding the Bible, especially if you’re kind of used to not making much sense when you read the KJV. But to quantify the problem, there are over 1,400 occurrences of false friends in the KJV, which is about one per page. That’s a lot.

“Bad” words. There are many words in the KJV that we wouldn’t want our kids to say or hear on TV but are in the OT and NT.

Unfortunate wording to modern ears. These are passages that just sound weird or funny in our modern ears: “Wherefore lay apart all filthiness and superfluity of naughtiness” (James 1:21)... “Then was fulfilled that which was spoken by Jeremy the prophet, saying...” (Matthew 27:9)

Lack of concordance. The KJV translators did not aim for consistency with the same words being translated the same way in a passage. (To use the modern term, they were not aiming for concordance.) Instead, they thought it was nice to mix it up a little bit for literary variety. But most of us today would frown on this translation choice.

Thou / Thee / Thy confusion. Just as with “by and by” (originally meaning *immediately* but now means *eventually*), so Thou / Thee / Thy communicates something the opposite of what it meant 400 years ago.

In the days of the King James translators, T/T/T for the second person singular pronoun communicated intimacy and closeness. “You” was actually more formal, indicating a formal social distancing, where “Thou” was something you would say to a friend. So what the KJV translators were communicating, especially in places like the Psalms with prayers to God, was a more intimate communication to God, whereas now we use T/T/T to communicate reverence and *intentional* formality. The KJV translators would want us to use “You” when speaking to God, since in our current language that is the more familiar second person pronoun.

To conclude: At the very least, using the KJV can often be distracting. As church goes, we’re very used to it, but it’s likely to be a barrier to people who *aren’t* used to it. At the worst, the KJV violates the biblical criteria for edification set up in 1 Corinthians 14. You have to be able to understand it for it to be spiritually beneficial. Can you still benefit from the KJV? Of course. Can someone still use it to obey the gospel? Of course. But unless we have a legitimate theological reason for doing so, there is no reason for us to use the KJV today.

Addressing KJV-only people

1. There are lots of different flavors of KJV only people, so we can’t assume where someone is at.

Some (the fringe of the KJV-only group, often called Ruckmanism) would believe in *double-inspiration*, that God inspired first the Bible, then the KJV. But not all KJV-only people believe this.

2. Even if a KJV-only person says they don’t believe in double-inspiration, it’s still easy to not be consistent.

Example: Mark Ward talks about a conversation he had with a KJV-only professor who said he did *not* believe in double-inspiration. Mark said, “Okay, then are there any words in the KJV that you would change? Like, *Bishop* in Titus 1? Most Evangelical churches don’t use the title of Bishop.” And the man said, “No! You can’t change God’s word!” Um... you can’t say the KJV is not inspired but then say you can’t change it.

The lesson is that it's easy to be inconsistent. It's easy for *all* of us to be inconsistent. You can't say that the KJV isn't inspired, but then also say it can't be changed or improved for modern readers.

3. The fundamental error that KJV people make is equating the KJV with the Bible.

The KJV translation is not the Bible. It is a translation of the Bible. The KJV is not *directly* God's word. It is a translation of God's word. To offer a different or better translation of the KJV is not to change God's word. It is to improve an English translation of God's word.

Example: When Richard Lattimore (1951) translated the Illiad, he did not *change* Alexander Pope's translation (1720). He offered a new translation. Lattimore did not change the Illiad. He translated the Illiad. Similarly, the NIV did not change the KJV. The NIV was a fresh translation from the original Bible languages. It simply offered a different translation.

4. The KJV translators were not KJV only.

Here are some helpful quotes from scholars:

"The KJV translators were not KJV-Only. It is actually those who wish to see the venerable King James revised who are most honoring the KJV tradition. The KJV itself wasn't a fresh translation; it was a revision of the Bishop's Bible, first released in 1568. The edition of the KJV that is now in the most common use was produced in 1769 (not 1611)."

Mark Ward, <https://textandcanon.org/borrowing-from-the-kjv-bank-and-trust/>

"Miles Smith's preface to the KJB was clear on this point too: 'Truly, good Christian reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one ... but to make a good one better.' ..."

"The KJB is thus best understood as a thorough revision of the 1602 edition of the Bishops' Bible, carefully rendering the original languages and mining prior Bibles for verbal ore."

Timothy Berg, <https://textandcanon.org/misconceptions-about-the-king-james-bible/>

5. Even the KJV has changed over time.

Another nice quote from someone who knows more about this than I do:

"It's not uncommon for King James readers to assume their KJB is textually identical to the 1611, except for spelling. This isn't true. Frederick Scrivener, a major scholar of the KJB, concluded from his study that "numberless and not inconsiderable departures" from the 1611 abound in modern editions, mostly "deliberate changes, introduced silently and without authority" by unnamed men. He listed over fifty pages of variations from the 1611 edition that had been adopted by later editions and that he retained. He also gives more than twenty pages of variations from the 1611 that he rejected in his own edition of the KJB. David Norton's more recent study of the textual history of the KJB scrupulously lists over 150 pages of variant readings supporting his updated edition.

Most changes to the original text were made in 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769 editions, others in hundreds of humbler editions. These alterations are extremely minor compared to differences between distinct translations (say, KJB vs. NKJV) and so, they shouldn't be exaggerated."

Timothy Berg, <https://textandcanon.org/misconceptions-about-the-king-james-bible/>

6. It's easy to assume the primacy of the KJV without even realizing that that is your concept.

We all grow up with baggage (even good baggage). If we grew up hearing that the KJV was the "Authorized Bible" or the Standard Bible or the Common version, or that it was the Bible "that has saved more souls than any other translation" or "was good enough then, so it's good enough now"... we might struggle to realize that we have assumed, with out realizing it, the primacy of the KJV. But there's no reason to stay thinking like that. God did not come down and put His stamp of approval on the KJV, so we must not treat it as if He did.

NKJV – New King James Version

The NKJV is the Bible I grew up with. It is a very good translation on the "word-for-word" side of the spectrum. For most people it feels like a safe and readable option.

My personal objections to the NKJV are what you might suspect I would say from my earlier points.

- I don't agree with the Majority Text approach, and so the NKJV would have verses that I would generally say should not be in the text.
- I don't generally like the *italicized* method for interpolated words.

With these objections, it's no surprise that I don't use the NKJV as my primary study Bible. But I appreciate the NKJV's careful formal equivalence, and the NKJV often shows up on my powerpoint slides as a comparative translation.

NASB – New American Standard Bible

In many people's minds, the NASB is the gold standard of accurate Bible translation. No doubt about it, the NASB is a very good translation. But let's not be like those who equate criticizing the NASB with throwing careful Bible study out the window.

You can read my thoughts on the NASB's use of italicized words in the section above "Key Translation Issues For Christians Today."

Perhaps the most confusing thing nowadays is *which* NASB we're talking about. The NASB was first published in 1977 and underwent major revision in 1995. The NASB95 was much needed: it updated the language, especially taking out the "Thou/Thee/Thy" pronouns.

Then the NASB underwent a fairly major revision in 2020. They estimate 6% changes in the text from the 1995 to the 2020. From the looks of it, in my personal opinion, they made some great modifications, though I think they also made some bad choices.

Here are some of the updates from 1995 to 2020, in their own words:

"Archaic (antiquated) language has been updated. For example in the book of Ephesians the word "aliens" has been changed to "foreigners," "lose heart" changed to "become discouraged," "implore" changed to "urge," "tender-hearted" changed to "compassionate," "girded your loins" changed to "belted your waist," "coarse jesting" changed to "vulgar joking."

Psalm 23:1

The LORD is my shepherd, I will not be in need. (NASB 2020)

[The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.] (NASB 1995)

Ephesians 5:3

But sexual immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be mentioned among you, as is proper among saints; (NASB 2020)

[But immorality or any impurity or greed must not even be named among you, as is proper among saints:] (NASB1995)

*The third component to this update is the use of “**Gender Accurate**” language. The stated goal here is not “inclusivity” per se, but rather accuracy and faithfulness to the intentions of the Biblical authors. An example is found in Matthew 4:19, “Follow Me, and I will make you fishers of **people**.” (bold added) “People” translates the Greek word *anthropoi* – which means “human beings.” “Men” works in this verse only if it is assumed by the audience that “Men” refers to both men and women.*

*Romans 5:12 – “Therefore, just as through one man sin entered into the world, and death through sin, and so death spread to all **mankind**, because all sinned.” (bold added). In this case the NASB 2020 uses “mankind” for *anthropoi* (human beings). Mankind denotes “human beings” in a similar way “people” is used in other passages. Notice the word “man” in Romans 5:12 remains unchanged because it is clearly referring to a male subject.”
(From <https://evangelicalbible.com/nasb2020>)*

If you don't like what you see in the 2020 update, don't worry: they are still planning to print the 1995 NASB alongside the 2020 NASB.

Note: When you see the NASB on biblehub.com and biblegateway.com, that means the NASB 2020 edition, but those sites still have the NASB95 for use. On the other hand, blueletterbible.com calls them “NASB20” and “NASB95”.

Legacy Standard Bible – LSB

The Legacy Standard Bible is the new kid on the block, published in 2021. The LSB is an update on the NASB95, so it has different changes than the NASB20, and, in fact, some consider it an alternate update to the NASB95. It updates much of the wording of the NASB 95, and I think it's probably an improvement on the readability of the NASB 95.

Here's what you'll pretty easily see on the LSB website that they are promoting as the big changes in the LSB:

- Consistency in their translation, using the same English word in a passage translating the same Greek word. (The technical name for this is “concordance”). This is great.
- Advancing the “legacy” of the NASB, by improving the NASB 95 edition.
- Restoring the divine name *Yahweh* (instead of LORD) and the word *slave* (instead of servant) for *doulos*.

In my opinion, putting the name *Yahweh* in the OT is a complex issue and not just a “no brainer” like some might suggest. Could it be powerful and helpful in personal study? Yes. Would the cost / benefit of preaching from it to your congregation be worth it? I suggest probably not. I think it would be too confusing for most people to be hearing *Yahweh* coming

from the preacher or teacher. The LSB is, at this point, such a new and young translation, I doubt that it is worth it to pry this into your sermons and classes.

Some things to consider with the LSB:

- There were only six translators on this project (updating the NASB 95), all of whom are connected with the Master's University under John MacArthur. This is a very small team of translators, all from the same school, *literally*, but more importantly, of the same school of thought when it comes to Calvinist theology. From my looking at the LSB website, they are not at all transparent about this fact.
They say that the LSB translation was reviewed by lots of people, and I believe them. But this is not the diverse translation committee that the NASB was founded on. It's really a MacArthur update to the NASB95, and potentially a Calvinist update on the NASB95. As one YouTuber noted, the LSB may not be a Calvinist translation yet, but it very very easily could become that in future updates.
- It follows a good trend of helpful gender inclusive language. In their words:
"Gender Language: The Legacy Standard Bible is committed to precisely representing what was written in the original languages. Accordingly, while the translation recognizes that the Hebrew and Greek terms for "man" can legitimately mean "mankind" or "humanity" and renders such when appropriate, it does not add in phrases like "and sister" because they are not in the original text (cf. Jas 2:15 where the Greek word for "sister" is actually used). This abides with the LSB's commitment to being a word-for-word translation and honoring what was originally written in its exact formulation. Since there are highly interpretative matters involved in "gender-neutral" language, the Legacy Standard Bible allows the pastor and teacher to explain the text. Overall, the Legacy Standard Bible's commitment to focus upon authorial intent directs the translation concerning this issue. Doing so aligns the translation with its predecessors, an important goal as a legacy translation." <https://lsbible.org/foreword/>
This seems to be to be a reasonable update on gender language, seeing how words are heard by a modern audience.

If you have loved the NASB95, wish it was a little more readable, long for greater concordance, and are thrilled at the idea of having Yahweh's name throughout the OT, then the Legacy Standard Bible is probably going to be your new favorite translation. But is it the best translation to preach and teach from? I am doubtful of that.

HCSB and CSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible and Christian Standard Bible

The Holman Christian Standard came out in 2003 as a "from scratch" translation. In 2017, Holman released a greatly revised new edition, taking "Holman" off the title. (Apparently, people were confused by the "Holman" part, and Holman didn't want their translation being labeled the Southern Baptist translation.)

I have liked the HCSB for many years, though it had too many oddities for it to become my primary study Bible. I remember thinking once about 10 years ago that it was my favorite translation of Romans, although I'm not sure why I felt that at the time, and I'm not sure I would even agree with that now.

The big idea with the HCSB/CSB is that they are trying to be conservative, accurate but readable translations. The introduction to the CSB says its translation philosophy is neither formal equivalence or dynamic equivalence but *optimal* equivalence, taking the best of both worlds. "Optimal equivalence appreciates the goals of formal equivalence but also recognizes

its limitations.” (See the chart above which shows in graphic form just how better this optimal equivalence is.)

Key features of the HCSB:

- It uses Yahweh in the OT, but only sometimes; it shows up 500x in the OT out of over 6,800 possible times. Apparently they didn’t want God’s personal name to be overwhelming to the unaccustomed reader, but I think many people thought this approach was just inconsistent and distracting.
- It uses “Messiah” 133x in the NT, and “Christ” 431 times. Again, I like the idea of having the word “Messiah” in the NT, but its inconsistency is puzzling.
- The HCSB went with “slave” not “servant” (as the LSB has done).
- You can still find the HCSB to purchase, but I suppose it is more likely to go out of print after its successful predecessor.

Key features of the CSB:

- The CSB aims to be more gender neutral. It has “brothers and sisters” 146x in the NT. I find this distracting but tolerable.
- People have suggested the CSB is more literal than the HCSB.

I have heard from people I respect that they really like the CSB. I suppose that if I had to choose another translation to use (since I don’t like the Majority Text approach or the italics approach), I would probably switch to the CSB.

NIV and NIV

The NIV of today is not your mama’s NIV... literally! Like many translations, the NIV has been updated over time, and thankfully much has been in a better direction. A lot of the passages where the NIV has received strong criticism for its Calvinistic slant have been improved in subsequent editions, including the NIV used on Bible websites today.

For example:

When the NIV first came out, it had “sinful nature” for flesh 9x in Romans 8 alone.

“Therefore, there is now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus, because through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free from the law of sin and death. For what the law was powerless to do in that it was weakened by the sinful nature, God did by sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful man to be a sin offering. And so he condemned sin in sinful man, in order that the righteous requirements of the law might be fully met in us, who do not live according to the sinful nature but according to the Spirit. Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God’s law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God. You, however, are controlled not by the sinful nature but by the Spirit, if the Spirit of God lives in you. And if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Christ.”
(Original NIV, 1978)

Now the phrase “sinful nature” only shows up 2x in the whole NIV — Rom 7:18,25 (and honestly, in my opinion, it’s not terrible in those passages. I’m not saying it’s good; it’s still an unnecessary paraphrase.)

The NIV in Col 2:11 does not good with “flesh”, but at least it has “flesh” now.

“In him you were also circumcised with a circumcision not performed by human hands. Your whole self ruled by the flesh was put off when you were circumcised by Christ” (Col 2:11, NIV)

My opinion: I still get the impression that the NIV does not stick close enough with the original wording to be a good primary study Bible.

Romans 1:3

NIV — “regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David”

ESV — “concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh”

NKJV — “concerning His Son Jesus Christ our Lord, who was born of the seed of David according to the flesh”

The NIV’s “as to his earthly life” is unnecessarily paraphrased. The ESV does a step better, but it misses the “seed” word that the NKJV retains. Since the “seed” idea is such a huge Bible concept, the word “seed” gives the full import of Paul’s idea.

What is the NIV?

“The original NIV was designed to be especially readable, and so was designed for a seventh-grade reading level. But even that audience could be narrowed. That’s why it was revised in a special edition published in 1996 called the New International Reader’s Version or NIV. It was aimed at a third-grade reading level with the hope of reaching children and readers whose first language isn’t English. This was accomplished by using smaller words and shorter sentences whenever possible.

Psalms 23:2 was changed from the NIV’s “He makes me lie down in green pastures” to “He lets me lie down in fields of green grass.” The Lord’s prayer became “Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored. May your kingdom come. May what you want to happen be done on earth as it is done in heaven” (Matt. 6:9–10)”

Peter J. Gurry, <https://textandcanon.org/five-decisions-every-bible-translator-must-make/>

The NIV is even less “word-for-word” than the NIV, so in general, it should be avoided for careful Bible study.

NET — The New English Translation

The NET Bible was available in 2001 as a free online Bible. Since that time, of course, all major translations are available online, so the NET Bible lives on with a different legacy. It is now well known and widely used for its copious footnotes, which are much lengthier than the English Bible text itself. The niche it has found is basically that of a study Bible, used as a reference tool. I bought a paper copy of the NET in preparation for this presentation, thinking this was my only access to the famed 60,000 footnotes, until I realized that all those footnotes are available when you access the NET on biblegateway.com.

Pros: It is a fresh translation, like the NIV and HCSB, which itself has merit.

Cons: It is majorly influenced by the Dallas Theological Seminary, and worse, an Evangelical slant is apparent in many passages. It is too “thought-for-thought” and not “word-for-word” to be a primary study Bible, in my opinion. If you are reading a NET Bible edition with all the footnotes (and why wouldn’t you?), then you’re running into all the problems of Bible study with a “study Bible.”

Consider the following review:

“The modern Bible that goes the furthest to explain itself is certainly the New English Translation or NET Bible. It was novel at the time, not only because it was provided freely online, but because the translators received mountains of online feedback from its first readers. Today, the NET Bible has over 60,000 translators’ notes, explaining virtually every decision made. The result is a Bible that “explains itself,” pulling the curtain back so to speak. Because of this, it has become something of a favorite among an unexpected audience: other Bible translators.”

Peter J. Gurry, <https://textandcanon.org/five-decisions-every-bible-translator-must-make/>

The fact of the matter: the NET does *not* explain virtually every decision. It was not hard to find many decisions they made that are not a part of the 60,000 footnotes.

It seems to me that the NET is pretty obviously trying to translate passages on baptism to minimize its importance.

“And now what are you waiting for? Get up, be baptized, and have your sins washed away, calling on his name.” (Acts 22:16)

Here’s the footnote connected to “have your sins washed away”:

[The expression have your sins washed away means “have your sins purified” (the washing is figurative).]

It is notable that this footnote minimizes the connection between baptism and the washing of sins, but it doesn’t even mention that it turns the “washing” into a passive action. (It is in the middle voice in the Greek, not passive).

“In him you also were circumcised—not, however, with a circumcision performed by human hands, but by the removal of the fleshly body, that is, through the circumcision done by Christ. 12 Having been buried with him in baptism, you also have been raised with him through your faith in the power of God who raised him from the dead.” (Colossians 2:11-12)

By starting a new sentence in v12, it disconnects the burial of baptism from the circumcision of Christ. But Paul’s point is that baptism *is* the circumcision of Christ, and this is clear in the Greek. I prefer a more succinct rendering of the participle “buried” to make this clear, something like: “in whom you were also circumcised with the circumcision made without hands, by the removal of the body of the flesh in the circumcision of Christ, *buried* with Him in baptism, in which you were also raised with Him through faith...”

And here is the very, very lengthy footnote to *eis* in Acts 2:28 —

“Peter said to them, “Repent, and each one of you be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ for [cd] the forgiveness of your sins, and you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.” (Acts 2:38)

[cd] tn There is debate over the meaning of εἰς in the prepositional phrase εἰς ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν ὑμῶν (eis aphesin tōn hamartiōn humōn, “for/because of/with reference to the forgiveness of your sins”). Although a causal sense has been argued, it is difficult to maintain here. ExSyn 369-71 discusses at least four other ways of dealing with the passage: (1) The baptism referred to here is physical only, and εἰς has the meaning of “for” or “unto.” Such a view suggests that salvation is based on works—an idea that runs counter to the theology of Acts, namely: (a) repentance often precedes baptism (cf. Acts 3:19; 26:20), and (b) salvation is entirely a gift of God, not procured via water baptism (Acts 10:43 [cf. v. 47]; 13:38-39, 48; 15:11; 16:30-31; 20:21; 26:18); (2) The baptism referred to here is spiritual only. Although such a view fits well with the theology of Acts, it does not fit well with the obvious meaning of “baptism” in Acts—especially in this text (cf. 2:41); (3) The text should be repunctuated in light of the shift from second person plural to third person singular back to second person plural again. The idea then would be, “Repent for/with reference to your sins, and let each one of you be baptized...” Such a view is an acceptable way of handling εἰς, but its subtlety and awkwardness count against it; (4) Finally, it is possible that to a first-century Jewish audience (as well as to Peter), the idea of baptism might incorporate both the spiritual reality and the physical symbol. That Peter connects both closely in his thinking is clear from other passages such as Acts 10:47 and 11:15-16. If this interpretation is correct, then Acts 2:38 is saying very little about the specific theological relationship between the symbol and the reality, only that historically they were viewed together. One must look in other places for a theological analysis. For further discussion see R. N. Longenecker, “Acts,” EBC 9:283-85; B. Witherington, Acts, 154-55; F. F. Bruce, The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary, 129-30; BDAG 290 s.v. εἰς 4.f.

Robert Alter's The Hebrew Bible

Robert Alter's one-man translation of the OT has made a big splash in the religious and literature world. Alter is Jewish (not believing that Jesus is the Messiah), and this shows very clearly in his translation and translation notes.

Alter's goal was to communicate the literary features of the OT, like bringing out the poetry of the Hebrew, or utilizing a high level of concordance to bring out a key word in a passage, or highlighting in the footnotes a literary motif through a book. But Alter's translation goal is not “theological” *per se*, and it shows. Certainly, Alter holds a more liberal view of God and of inspiration, which are explicitly communicated in his introduction to Bible books and footnotes.

People have been exuberant about this translation, but nothing I have seen so far is just mind-blowing. I think the strengths of the translation — poetic devices, dramatic effect, etc — could make this a worthwhile tool to have on your bookshelf for personal study. But it is not going to replace our more typical English translations for careful Bible study.

Jady Copeland
Columbus, IN
jadycopeland@gmail.com