

Bible Translation Sources and Theory

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1 Introduction

In preparation for this research project, I visited my local Barnes & Noble and perused their well-endowed Bible section. While gazing at the potpourri of marketing gimmicks enticing customers to buy this or that Bible, my eye fell upon a little pamphlet designed to guide purchasers. This shiny brochure self-identified as “A comprehensive guide to the most popular Bible translations & how to find the right Bible for your needs.”¹ In light of the many hours of research I have poured into understanding manuscript traditions, critical editions, translation philosophies, and hidden biases, I was rather impressed by the claims this little document boasted. It presented ten popular English versions, mentioning the translation philosophy for each, and citing 1 Corinthians 13.4-5 from each for comparison. Though three of the translations employed vastly inferior source texts, they stood shoulder to shoulder with the others. Others injected so much bias and interpretation, that they are of little use beyond providing readers a window into the publisher’s doctrinal commitments. Sadly, this guide reduced choosing a Bible to personal taste, as if picking ingredients for a burrito. We need the facts behind Bible translations so we can prioritize manuscript fidelity over wide margins, translation accuracy over a nifty cover design, and honest transparency over the endorsement of pastor-celebrities. It’s a travesty that well-intentioned Bible purchasers end up buying what’s well-marketed rather than what is truly best.

In what follows, I intend to briefly overview the most significant issues and decisions translators make when producing English versions of the Bible. We’ll begin with the original source documents for the Old and New Testaments to gain an appreciation for the starting place of translation work. We’ll encounter several corruptions absent from the oldest manuscripts and see how our English Bibles handle them. Then we’ll explore translation methodologies and decisions made at the outset. This will put us in a good place to examine two popular versions: the *King James Version* (KJV) and the *Message Bible* (MSG), each of which illustrates important aspects of translation. Lastly, we’ll consider a few examples where doctrinal bias shapes translation. My aim in this work is to equip readers with the

¹ Ominously, the bifold brochure specified neither author nor publisher.

knowledge to understand what’s going on behind the scenes of English Bible translation so that they can not only spot and avoid problematic versions, but also read quality translations with a trained eye.

In what follows I have endeavored to remain objective and factual, though like most Christians, I have strong views on many of these issues. Sometimes I will condemn or extol a particular methodology and point out how well a translation prioritizes accuracy over sales, emotional impact, or tradition. (For the record, I am not at the time of this writing employed in the translation of any of these versions.) Furthermore, my purpose here is not to recommend the one perfect Bible as if there is such a thing. As we will see, Bible translation is a complex and challenging task and all versions have drawbacks as well as advantages. My hope is that educated Christians would increasingly make their purchasing decisions based on facts and best practices rather than marketing gimmicks and emotional reasoning. If I can accomplish this for a few, then the many hours I’ve poured into this project will be worth it.

2 The Text of the Old Testament

I want to begin our overview of the Bible translation process by looking at the manuscripts that translators use as sources. “Manuscript” is a compound word from *manus* “hand” and *scriptio* “writing.” Thus, by definition, manuscripts are handwritten documents. Consequently, we have relatively few manuscripts after 1440 when Johannes Gutenberg’s printing press invention began replacing handwritten copies. Thus, the bulk of our extant (existing) manuscripts are at least six centuries old and some of them go back more than twenty-two centuries. Furthermore, many of the most significant manuscript discoveries for both the Old and New Testaments have occurred in the last century. This sometimes makes a huge difference to Bible translation, since the source from which translators work has changed and continues to change over time. Since scholars have been putting out English translations for centuries, it’s critical for our inquiry to get a grasp of how the fields of manuscript discovery and comparison have developed over the years. But before we get into that subject let’s familiarize ourselves with a basic knowledge of what kinds of manuscripts, we have for the two major parts of the Bible—the Old Testament (OT) and the New Testament (NT)—since they are quite different.

2.1 Hebrew Manuscripts

Israelites wrote the OT (what they call the Tanakh²) almost entirely in Hebrew with just over one percent of it in Aramaic, a sister language.³ The original scroll of the prophet Jeremiah or Ecclesiastes have not survived the ravages of time. Thankfully, diligent scribes copied these precious original texts, also called autographs, before they wore out, transmitting them to the next generation. Eventually, scribes began copying the entire Hebrew Bible so that each generation would have access to sacred scripture. However, most ancient manuscripts perished long ago, eventually wearing out due to age and usage. This should not surprise us very much, since even to this day, Jewish synagogues bury their scrolls when they show signs of deterioration. Nevertheless, we have two large ancient Hebrew manuscripts: *Codex Leningradensis* (the Leningrad Codex⁴) and כִּתוֹב אֲרָם צוֹבָא (Crown of Aleppo⁵ or the Aleppo Codex). The Leningrad Codex dates to the 11th century and contains the complete OT

² Tanakh is an acronym from the three divisions of the Hebrew Bible: Torah (Law), Nevi’im (Prophets), and Ketuvim (Writings). T + N + K results in TaNaKh.

³ Out of the Old Testament’s 23,208 verses, 269 of them are in Aramaic, totaling to 1.2%.

⁴ A codex is just an ancient book (as compared to a scroll).

⁵ The astute Hebrew student will know that this actually reads “Crown of Aram-Zova” not “Crown of Aleppo.” However, from the 11th century onward, rabbinic literature identifies Aram-Zova as the area of Aleppo in Syria.

whereas the Aleppo Codex is from the 10th century and is missing most of the Torah as well as parts of the final books.

In addition to these two, Bedouin shepherds and university archeologists competed to discover scrolls in eleven caves in Qumran near the Dead Sea between 1946 and 1956. These Dead Sea Scrolls (DSS) contain 981 documents out of which about 23% turned out to be copies of the OT, mostly in Hebrew. Paleographers have dated the DSS to between 50 and 225 BC, which pushed back the date of our extant OT manuscripts more than a millennium! Even so, the DSS are not the oldest evidence of the Hebrew Bible on the planet. In 1979 archeologists discovered two small silver amulets with scripture engraved on them at Ketef Hinnom (near Jerusalem). These contain the high-priestly blessing of Numbers 6 in paleo Hebrew, dating to the 6th or 7th century before Christ. Beyond these sources, archeologists have found quite a number of other ancient Hebrew scrolls and partial remains. Here is a list of the earliest sources of the Hebrew Bible in chronological order.

Name	Date	Scribe	Contents	Location	Available to the West ⁶
Ketef Hinnom Silver Scroll	6th c. BC	n/a	priestly benediction from Numbers 6	Jerusalem	1979
Dead Sea Scrolls	250 BC - AD 68	various	227 partial manuscripts (except Esther)	Jerusalem	1947
Nash Papyrus	100 BC	n/a	Ten Commandments & Shema	Cambridge	1902
Ein-Gedi Scroll	3rd c.	n/a	partial Leviticus	Jerusalem?	1970 (not readable until 2016) ⁷
Cairo Genizah Fragments⁸	6th-8th c.	various	thousands of Bible fragments	Cambridge, Manchester, Oxford, New York	19th c.
Codex Cairensis	9th c. or 11th c.	Moses ben Asher	Prophets	Jerusalem	1983

⁶ Rather than saying this or that manuscript was “discovered,” I chose to label this column “Available to the West” or “Available.” Some of these were never lost, nevertheless, western scholars (Europeans and Americans) did not have access to them until the year listed.

⁷ In 2016 Professor Brent Seales of the University of Kentucky led a team to scan the charred scroll and employ virtual unwrapping software to reconstruct 18 lines of text from Leviticus.

⁸ The genizah (scripture room for worn out texts) of the Ben Ezra Synagogue in Old Cairo, Egypt contained around 300,000 Jewish manuscripts of several languages. A portion of these turned out to be Hebrew Bible fragments.

Codex Babylonicus Petropolitanus	916	n/a	Major Prophets	St. Petersburg	1839
London Codex (Oriental 4445)	920-950	n/a	Partial Torah	London	1891
Aleppo Codex	930	Aaron ben Moses ben Asher	Partial Torah, Prophets, Partial Writings	Jerusalem	1958
University of Michigan Torah	950	Ben Naftali tradition	complete Torah except Gen 1	Ann Arbor	1922
Damascus Pentateuch	1000	n/a	nearly complete Torah	Jerusalem	1975
Leningrad Codex	1010	Samuel ben Jacob (copied from Aaron ben Moses ben Asher's text)	Complete OT	St. Petersburg	1863
Codex Zurbil ⁹	1100	various Samaritan scribes in paleo Hebrew	nearly complete Torah	Cambridge	1895
University of Bologna Torah Scroll	1155	n/a	complete Torah	Bologna	2013
Mikraot Gedolot ¹⁰	16th c.	Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah used ben Asher texts	complete OT	Venice	16th c.

In addition to these Hebrew sources for the OT, we have several important early translations in other languages, including the Greek Septuagint (3rd c. BC), the Syriac Peshitta (2nd c. AD), and the Latin Vulgate (AD 405). These ancient translations have value because the Hebrew texts they came from antedate the existing sources we have.

2.2 Hebrew Critical Text

With so many manuscripts both in Hebrew and other ancient languages, we are bound to find differences between them. Now the scribes that faithfully copied these texts did their best to prevent mistakes from creeping in, but over so many centuries, variations were inevitable. After collecting the different readings for each verse of the Hebrew Bible, specialists compare them to arrive at what they

⁹ Although the Samaritans claim their treasured Abisha scroll goes all the way back to Abishua, Aaron's great-grandson, experts who examined it said "it had a distinctly medieval appearance" probably dating to the thirteenth century. Sir Frederic Kenyon, *Our Bible and the Ancient Manuscripts* (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, 1939), p. 52. However, *Codex Zurbil* dates to 1100 to 1149, making it the earliest representative of the Samaritan Pentateuch.

¹⁰ This is the text that underlies the King James Version.

believe to be the original text. The scholars who do this work are called textual critics not because they criticize the Bible, but because they carefully analyze the differences between manuscripts to figure out the initial version. The result of textual criticism is the production of a critical text with an extensive apparatus at the bottom of the page, indicating important variant readings. This, in turn, is what translators all around the world will use to produce Bibles in modern languages.

In 1901 Rudolf Kittel began developing a critical edition of the Hebrew Bible using as a base text the *Mikraot Gedolot* of Jacob ben Hayyim ibn Adonijah (1470-1538), a well-known rabbinic Bible, originally printed by Daniel Bomberg in 1525. Kittel added a critical apparatus to the bottom of the page so he could print textual variants from other manuscripts such as the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the Vulgate, and Syriac Peshitta. He published his first edition of *Biblia Hebraica* in 1906 and his second edition in 1913, which corrected some mistakes in the first. In 1921 the German Bible Society of Württemberg bought the rights to *Biblia Hebraica* and changed out the base text to the more accurate Leningrad Codex. After revamping and expanding the apparatus under the leadership of Paul Kahle, they released the complete *Biblia Hebraica* in one volume in 1937. Then in the 1960s, the German Bible Society began work on the fourth edition, completely revising the textual notes in the apparatus. After nearly ten years, they published the single volume *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS) in 1977. This critical edition (the BHS) underlies most translations completed between 1977 and the early 2000s.

A team of Jewish, Catholic, and Protestant scholars in thirteen countries have been working on a new version since 2004. Since this will be the fifth edition, it is called the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ). This is a massive project with a projected output of twenty volumes with a slightly corrected main text (Leningrad) and an apparatus based on more recent discoveries as well as extensive commentary about the variants. Approximately 75% of the fascicles¹¹ are already available with the rest projected for completion in the near future. Since the main text merely reproduced the Leningrad Codex, translators must make their own decisions by consulting the apparatus and textual commentary. “To this day,” Philip Comfort explains, “almost all Bible scholars and translators still use the Masoretic Text of the Hebrew Bible as the authoritative, standard text. At the same time, they make use of the findings of the Dead Sea Scrolls, as well as two other important sources: the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch.”¹² Although anyone can purchase volumes of the BHQ, they are expensive and unavailable in Bible software except for Accordance.¹³ Once BHQ is complete, they will likely release a single volume Hebrew OT, which will then become the standard for Bible translators going forward. Additionally, the Society of Biblical Literature has begun developing a proper critical Hebrew text so translators won’t need to do the work of textual criticism, though they have only produced one volume so far.¹⁴

2.3 Redactions

The dominant Hebrew manuscripts (ben Asher texts) contain the vowels that the Masoretes inserted in the middle ages. However, since these vowels were not in the original scrolls, scholars sometimes suggest vowel changes (revocalizations) that alter the meaning of the word. This ambiguity is inherent in consonantal Hebrew texts from the Dead Sea Scrolls to today’s *Jerusalem Post* newspaper.

¹¹ A fascicle is a single volume of a multi-volume work.

¹² Philip Comfort, *Essential Guide to Bible Versions* (Wheaton, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2000), p. 43.

¹³ At present Bible Works and Logos still use the old BHS instead of the BHQ.

¹⁴ For more information about *The Hebrew Bible Critical Edition* (HBCE), see https://www.sbl-site.org/HBCE/HBCE_Method.html.

Furthermore, since the Hebrew manuscripts often don't insert blank spaces between words, readers can disagree on how to break them up. Lastly, Hebrew experts rarely suggest changes (emendations) in the consonants due to scribal errors.¹⁵ OT translators have to decide how reliable the Leningrad text is when other Hebrew versions and early translations differ. To illustrate this, we will consider an interesting text from Proverbs 30.1 that involves both alternate word separation and revocalization. Here are the two possibilities:

לְאִיתִי אֵל לְאִיתִי אֵל וְאֶכֶל	Text without the vowels or spaces
לְאִיתִי אֵל לְאִיתִי אֵל וְאֶכֶל	Text as the Masoretes pointed it
לְאִיתִי אֵל לְאִיתִי אֵל וְאֶכֶל	Alternate spacing and revocalization

Even without a knowledge of Hebrew the careful reader can see the overwhelming similarities between these three lines. In fact, all the consonants (the large characters) are identical, but the second and third lines differ on where to add spaces between words. Additionally, the vowels (the little markings below the consonants) differ between the second and third lines. Thus, someone reading the first line, could read it either as the second or third lines. And although these two look similar, their translation is completely different.

to Ithiel, to Ithiel and Ucal:	NASB, NET, CSB, JPS, RA
I am weary, O God; I am weary, O God, and worn out.	ESV, NAB, NRSV, NIV, NLT

In the first case, the translator interprets the Hebrew (in accordance with the Masoretic vowel pointing) as names whereas the second way of looking at it translates what the words mean.¹⁶ The question for us is how a translation generally deals with redactions. Does it freely correct the text based on other versions and intrinsic difficulties or does it slavishly follow the Masoretic Text, no matter the consequence? Fortunately for us, translations these days tend to add footnotes when significant textual variants are possible for a given verse. Although this is an important aspect of translation, it happens rarely so I don't want to dwell on it longer than we need to.

Now, I realize this was a lot of detailed information, but it is important to understand where scholarship is at for the text of the OT. I would have thought that scholars had established the text of the OT centuries ago and that there was little new to discuss. However, what I've discovered is that not only is the Hebrew text in the process of a massive revision, but many translations do not take into account the amazing manuscript discoveries that occurred in the twentieth century (see table above). This means that we have good news and bad news. The bad news is that some of our most beloved and traditional

¹⁵ For a helpful list of scribal errors with specific examples, see Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1999), p. 180.

¹⁶ Here's one explanation: "These names, and the repetition, are enigmatic. Many scholars revocalize them and change the word division of the consonantal text to yield three verbs...Although it is possible that this was the original reading in the Hebrew, there is no warrant for it in the ancient versions, and it remains conjectural." Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 3, The Writings* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 445.

Bibles do not reflect the earliest and best Hebrew texts. Nevertheless, the good news is that we are moving closer and closer to the original year by year. I realize how counterintuitive this seems. One would think Bomberg’s printed Hebrew Bible from 500 years ago would be more accurate than the 1977 BHS. However, in the twenty-first century we have better access to both many more and much older manuscripts, especially due to the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls. This means that newer Bibles are getting progressively more accurate in reflecting the older Hebrew texts (assuming the translation is accurate).

Even if this all seems rather startling, the situation is not nearly as alarming as it could be. Since Hebrew scribes, especially the Masorettes, had toiled assiduously to pass on the scriptures as accurately as possible, the differences between these texts tend to be quite minor. To my knowledge, no biblical doctrine is at risk of getting overturned due to manuscript variations. Now that we’ve briefly considered the manuscript situation for the OT, let’s turn our attention to the NT.

3 The Text of the New Testament

Christianity has been missionary minded from the beginning. Jesus was an itinerant preacher who travelled about spreading the gospel of the kingdom and calling his countrymen to repentance. It should not surprise us that his early followers committed much to writing for the purpose of spreading the good news far and wide. Of course, this necessitated a prodigious amount of copying to get the message out to as many as possible. Over the years, Christianity made its way across the Roman empire to Asia, Africa, and eventually the Americas and Australia. As we would expect, most of the manuscripts Christian scribes made have long ago fallen to pieces. However, more than five thousand have survived to our own day. Sadly, most of them do not contain the entire NT.

3.1 Greek Manuscripts

The oldest NT manuscripts come to us on papyrus, an ancient form of paper made from a reed plant that grew along the banks of the Nile River in Egypt. After laying them out crosswise and pressing them together, ancient scribes wrote on them. Although this material could not survive very long in wet climates, papyri can remain in good condition for millennia in the right conditions. So far archeologists and textual critics have catalogued around 130 NT papyri. “These manuscripts,” Philip Comfort notes, “provide the earliest direct witness to the New Testament autographs.”¹⁷ Here are a few of them.

Papyrus #	Date	Contents	Location	Available
ⲑ ⁴⁵	3rd c.	Gospels, Acts	Chester Beatty Library, Dublin	1933
ⲑ ⁴⁶	2nd/3rd c.	Romans, Hebrews, 1 Corinthians - 1 Thessalonians	Chester Beatty Library, Dublin	1930
ⲑ ⁵²	2nd c.	John 18.31-33, 37-38	University Library, Manchester	1934

¹⁷ Philip Comfort and David Barrett, *The Text of the Earliest New Testament Greek Manuscripts*, vol. 1, 3rd ed. (Grand Rapids: Kregel Academic, 2019), p. 10.

ⲡ ⁶⁴	2nd/3rd c.	Matthew (partial)	Magdalen College, Oxford	1901
ⲡ ⁷⁵	3rd c.	Gospels	Vatican Library, Rome	1950s
ⲡ ⁹⁸	2nd c.	Revelation 1.13-20	French Institute for Oriental Archeology, Cairo	1971
ⲡ ¹⁰⁴	2nd c.	Matthew 21.34-37, 43, 45	Sackler Library, Oxford	1997

These papyri, designated by the gothic ⲡ, occupy the first place of importance for NT manuscripts, since they are so close to the time of the writing of the NT. However, since they only contain fragments of the NT, we depend on later manuscripts as well. In the second category, we have 323 uncials, which are manuscripts written on parchment or vellum (animal skins) in majuscule (capital) letters. These survived better than the papyri, even in wet climates. Scholars reference them with a numbering system, always starting with a 0. Additionally, the more famous codices have a letter associated with them. Here are a few noteworthy examples.

Manuscript	Name	Date	Contents	Location	Available	Family
Codex Sinaiticus	01 (Ⲱ)	4th c.	Old Testament, New Testament, Epistle of Barnabas, Shepherd of Hermas	British Library, London	1844	Alexandrian
Codex Alexandrinus	02 (A)	5th c.	Old Testament, New Testament, Epistles of Clement	British Library, London	1621	Byzantine & Alexandrian
Codex Vaticanus	03 (B)	4th c.	Matthew - 2 Thessalonians, Hebrews 1-9, James - Jude	Vatican Library, Rome	15th c.	Alexandrian
Codex Ephraemi Rescriptus	04 (C)	5th c.	Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles, Revelation	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris	1453	mixed
Codex Bezae	05 (D)	5th c.	Gospels, Acts	University Library, Cambridge	9th c.	Western

In addition to these majuscules, we have another nearly 3,000 minuscule (lowercase) manuscripts, each designated by a regular number. This writing style came into use from the 9th and 10th centuries onward. Here are a few examples:

#	Date	Contents	Location	Available
1	12th c.	New Testament except Revelation	Basel University Library, Basel	15th
2	11th/12th c.	Gospels	Basel University Library, Basel	n/a
3	12th c.	Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles, General Epistles	Austrian National Library, Vienna	14th
33	9th c.	Gospels, Acts, Paul's Epistles, General Epistles	Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris	19th
2017	15th c.	Revelation	Saxon State Library, Dresden	n/a

Lastly, approximately 2,500 lectionaries have survived, designated by a cursive ℓ followed by a number. These are liturgies—scriptures arranged in the order that lectors would read them out publicly as part of worship (1 Timothy 4.13). They include both majuscule and minuscule text types. Here are some examples of the lectionaries.

#	Origin	Contents	Location	Available
ℓ59	12th c.	Acts	State Historical Museum, Moscow	1655
ℓ60	11th c.	Gospels, Acts	Bibliothèque nationale de France	19th
ℓ253	11th c.	Gospels	Russian National Library, Saint Petersburg	19th
ℓ259	13th c.	Acts, Paul's Epistles	Bodleian Library, Oxford	1883
ℓ890	15th c.	Gospels	Saint Catherine's Monastery, Sinai	n/a
ℓ1977	12th c.	Gospels, Acts	National Library, Ohrid, Macedonia	n/a

Adding the papyri, majuscules, minuscules, and lectionaries together, we have around 5,900 Greek manuscripts of the NT today. Although these manuscripts are locked away in museums all around the world, the dawn of the digital has provided new opportunities to access them online. However, it's important to keep in mind that this is a moving number. Some manuscripts perish in war and through natural disaster while new ones come to light. Of particular interest is the excellent work that the Center for the Study of New Testament Manuscripts (CSNTM) has accomplished under Daniel Wallace's leadership. Since 2002, they have travelled the world taking thousands of high-quality digital pictures of ancient manuscripts to post online for free access.¹⁸ Needless to say, NT textual scholars have a wealth of material to access and analyze. For the sake of brevity, I have not included physical remains like the thirty amulets with varying portions of scripture engraved on them, dating from the third to fourteenth

¹⁸ Access their online database at csntm.org.

centuries. We will also not cover the thousands of early translations from Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, Georgian, and Ethiopic.¹⁹

3.2 Greek Critical Text

The work of comparing Greek manuscripts to arrive at a complete text began in 1502 when a team of Roman Catholic specialists led by Cardinal Francisco Jiménez de Cisneros gained access to several medieval manuscripts.²⁰ After more than a decade, they produced the Complutensian Polyglot Bible and it included both Old and New Testaments in six volumes with multiple languages in parallel columns.²¹ Although Cisneros had completed and printed the NT in 1514, he delayed until 1517 when the whole Bible was finished to distribute it. However, in the meanwhile, a wily priest-scholar named Desiderius Erasmus, rushed his own Greek New Testament (GNT) to print in 1516 after successfully securing the pope's approval for exclusive publishing rights for a four-year period. This delayed the Complutensian Polyglot's publication until 1520, though it was not widely available until 1522. This deft maneuver insured Erasmus' place in history as the first one to publish and distribute a Greek New Testament on the printing press. However, because he rushed the work, his version contained many typos, transcription mistakes, and other errors that he corrected in subsequent editions in 1519, 1522, 1527, and 1535. Sadly, Erasmus' versions derived from just a few late manuscripts from the twelfth century (including minuscules 1 and 2)²² as Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman explain:

Since Erasmus could not find a manuscript that contained the entire Greek Testament, he utilized several for various parts of the New Testament. For most of the text he relied on two rather inferior manuscripts from a monastic library at Basle, one of the Gospels and one of the Acts and Epistles, both dating from about the twelfth century. Erasmus compared them with two or three others of the same books and entered occasional corrections for the printer in the margins or between the lines of the Greek script. For the Book of Revelation, he had but one manuscript, dating from the twelfth century, which he had borrowed from his friend Reuchlin. Unfortunately, this manuscript lacked the final leaf, which contained the last six verses of the book. Instead of delaying publication of his edition while trying to locate another copy of Revelation in Greek, Erasmus (perhaps at the urging of his printer) depended on the Latin Vulgate and translated the missing verses into Greek.²³

This wasn't an isolated incident as Hannibal Hamlin and Norman Jones point out: "Erasmus translated passages back from the Latin into Greek...in many other instances whenever he mistrusted the Greek

¹⁹ For a list of the prominent manuscripts taken into consideration by the United Bible Societies committee of textual criticism, see the introduction in Bruce Metzger's *A Textual Commentary of the Greek New Testament*, second edition (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002).

²⁰ "What Greek manuscripts lie behind the text of the Complutensian New Testament has never been satisfactorily ascertained." Bruce Metzger and Bart Ehrman, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption, and Restoration*, 4th ed., (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 200), p. 140. (Also see footnote 9 for more information.)

²¹ For the OT, the polyglot had Hebrew, Latin, and Greek in parallel except in the Torah where it also included the Aramaic from Targum Onkelos as well as a Latin translation. The NT had Greek and Latin columns.

²² Comfort, *Essential Guide*, p. 102.

²³ Metzger and Ehrman, p. 99.

sources.”²⁴ Even though Erasmus’ GNT had these flaws, it provided eager translators like Martin Luther an accessible GNT to make his German translation of 1522 and William Tyndale to put out his English version in 1526.

Next, Robert Estienne (aka Roberto Stephanus), a printer and classical scholar, began putting out editions of the GNT in 1528 and 1546. These were noteworthy for their quality and beautiful typeface, designed by Claude Garamond. His 1550 edition was the most significant and became known as the *Editio Regia* (Royal Edition) and the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text).²⁵ Estienne combined both the Complutensian Polyglot and Erasmus’ version along with fourteen other manuscript sources. Furthermore, his version was the first to include a critical apparatus (i.e. footnotes), wherein he placed variant readings, as well as verse numbers.²⁶ His masterpiece quickly became the dominant critical text used by translators in Europe, holding sway until 1880. Most of his sources were late minuscules, though he also used Codex Bezae (5th c.) and Codex Regius (8th c.). Even though Estienne’s text was a huge leap forward, it did not take into account the papyri or any of the majuscules (apart from Bezae and Regius), since they were either undiscovered or inaccessible to the Europeans doing this work. Unfortunately, this *Textus Receptus* version of the GNT grew in popularity to such a degree that subsequent attempts to improve it based on earlier manuscripts sometimes fell on deaf ears.

For the next two centuries after the 1550 *Textus Receptus* came out, scholars “ransacked libraries and museums, in Europe as well as the Near East, for witnesses to the text of the New Testament.”²⁷ Then in the late 18th century, Johann Griesbach boldly parted from the *Textus Receptus* and arrived at a better Greek critical text by applying a list of objective criteria to the manuscripts available to him.²⁸ Next, in the mid-19th century, Lobegott Friedrich Constantin von Tischendorf dedicated his life to locating and publishing early NT manuscripts. He worked on a number of texts in the *Bibliothèque Nationale* (National Library) at Paris, including Codex Ephraemi. Then, in 1844 he visited St. Catherine’s monastery next to Mount Sinai and noticed some manuscripts in a wastebasket that the monks were using to start fires. Tischendorf immediately recognized the antiquity and good condition of the Greek OT manuscripts and convinced them to allow him to take 43 leaves with him. On subsequent visits, he discovered Codex Sinaiticus, arguably the oldest complete GNT on the planet, and negotiated for them to allow him to present it as a gift to the Russian Czar so that scholars could access it. Later, in 1933, the

²⁴ Hannibal Hamlin and Norman Jones, *The King James Bible after Four Hundred Years*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), p. 111.

²⁵ The translators of the 1557 Geneva Bible used either Stephanus’ 1550 edition or Jean Crispin’s slight revision.

²⁶ “The modern verses are meant to be sense clauses, but they often mar the sense far more than they mark it. They were made by Robert Stephanus [Estienne] in 1551 on a journey from Paris to Lyons as he went *inter equitandum*. I have often felt that the horse sometimes bumped his pen into the wrong place.” A. T. Robertson, *An Introduction to the Text Criticism of the New Testament*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2014, originally published by Doubleday in 1928), p. 100.

²⁷ Metzger and Ehrman, p. 153.

²⁸ From Griesbach’s first canon: “The short reading (unless it lacks entirely the authority of the ancient and weighty witnesses) is to be preferred to the more verbose, for scribes were much more prone to add than to omit. They scarcely ever deliberately omitted anything, but they added many things; certainly they omitted some things by accident, but likewise not a few things have been added to the text by scribes through errors of the eye, ear, memory, imagination, and judgement.” quoted in Metzger & Ehrman, p. 166.

Soviet Government sold it to the British Museum where it now resides, though these days one can readily access the digital version online.²⁹

Then in 1881, Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort, working from the many discoveries found since Estienne's *Textus Receptus*, built upon the work of Griesbach to produce a "truly epoch making" critical text that was "doubtless the oldest and purest text that could be attained on the basis of information available."³⁰ They produced two volumes: the first their reconstruction of the GNT and the second an explanation of the principles they followed to make decisions between alternate readings. Their methodology came to dominate the field for the next century. Next came Eberhard Nestle who continued the efforts of Westcott and Hort to produce a widely used pocket GNT for the Württemberg Bible Institute in Stuttgart, Germany in 1898. This GNT went through many important subsequent editions. Nestle's son, Erwin, took over the revisions with the thirteenth edition in 1927, continuing his father's work. In 1963 Kurt Aland came on board and expanded the work to include many additional manuscripts in the critical apparatus for the 25th edition. Since new manuscripts kept coming to light, this work has persisted to our own day, culminating in the 28th edition, published by the *Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft* (Germany Bible Society) in 2012.³¹ This Greek critical text of the NT (The Nestle-Aland 28th edition) is what most translators use as a source for our English NTs, though work is underway to produce several new Greek critical texts.³²

As with the OT, so with the NT, the pursuit of manuscripts along with the development of textual criticism over the last couple of centuries has worked wonders in improving our access to earlier and less corrupt forms of the GNT. Thus, someone studying a recent critical GNT today encounters a text more accurate than someone reading from a manuscript a millennium ago. Now, I cannot deny that this seems paradoxical, since someone living so long ago was so much closer to the time when the NT came into existence. However, our critical texts go back to manuscripts from the fourth, third, and even the second centuries, making them older and better. This makes sense when we consider that corruptions tend to increase with time as generations of Christian copyists produce new handwritten GNTs. Even so, thanks to the work of textual scholars over the last century and a half, we are confident about the great majority of textual variants with only a small percentage that are up for debate. To be specific, the NA28 GNT has 7,941 verses in it and the committee of textual scholars only had difficulty determining 378 variants.³³ This means that the text of the GNT is 95.2% certain with only 4.8% up for discussion. Even so, many of the readings in the 4.8% do not significantly alter exegesis, much less doctrinal considerations. This doesn't mean the differences aren't important, but it does mean that we don't

²⁹ See codexsinaiticus.org.

³⁰ Metzger and Ehrman, p. 183.

³¹ The United Bible Societies' versions began in 1966 and have gone through similar edits such that the UBS5 (2014) is nearly identical though the NA28 differs in about 30 places in the General Epistles (James - Jude).

³² See Juan Hernández Jr., "Modern Critical Editions and Apparatuses of the Greek New Testament," in *The Text of the New Testament in Contemporary Research: Second Edition* ed. Bart D. Ehrman and Michael W. Holmes (Leiden: Brill, 2013), pp.689-710).

³³ The *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (2nd edition) includes 509 {A} ratings, 539 {B} ratings, 369 {C} ratings, and only 9 {D} ratings. {A} and {B} include variants where the text is certain and almost certain, respectively. {C} is for those where the committee had difficulty deciding which variant to prefer. {D} ratings are those for which the committee had great difficulty determining which was best. Combining the {C} and {D} together, we end up with 378 total variants with a significant degree of uncertainty.

need to doubt the NT teaching on salvation matters like the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus. We will return to listing out a handful of the most significant differences shortly, but first, let’s turn our focus to the subject of translation.

4 Translation Approaches

Translators aim to accurately convey a source document into a receptor language. However, since no two languages precisely line up with each other, translation involves more than merely substituting a word in biblical languages for one in the translation language. Translators need to add and remove words as well as rearrange them. Rather than describing this process, let’s consider an example from 1 Timothy 2.5 as an illustration of the process.

NA28	Εἷς γὰρ θεός, εἷς καὶ μεσίτης θεοῦ καὶ ἀνθρώπων, ἄνθρωπος Χριστὸς Ἰησοῦς
Exact	one for God, one and mediator of God and men, man Christ Jesus
Finished	For (there is) one God, and (there is) one mediator of God and mankind, (the) man Christ Jesus

In this example, the first line is Greek from the Nestle-Aland 28th edition (NA28), the second, an exact English equivalence, and the third, a proper English translation. Notice how the word “for” (γὰρ) is second in the Greek but comes first in English. This is because γὰρ (*gar*) is a postpositive—a Greek word that always appears after the word it acts upon. Also, I added in quite a few extra words to make good English, including inserting “there is” twice. This is because the Greek language does not always supply the verb “to be” when it is implied (nor does Hebrew). Then I added in the word “the” (the definite article) before “man Christ Jesus.” I had to do this, because Greek diverges from English convention by not including the definite article, ὁ (*ho*), when it’s clear the phrase is already definite. Lastly, I changed “men” to “mankind” since both sexes are in view, not just men. This is just one simple sentence in Greek, and we’ve already encountered four differences that English translators would account for in order to functionally render the source language into the target language. With this in mind, we are in a good place to consider the two major translation philosophies: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence.

4.1 Formal Equivalence (*Word for Word*)

Formal equivalence translations do their best to stick to the form and exact meaning of the original text, using a literal “word for word” approach as much as possible. Now, since the Hebrew and Greek languages have different conventions for word order than English, a more literal translation can sound awkward or obscure in English. Nevertheless, formal equivalence translators would rather sacrifice readability for accuracy. They want to give the reader a translation that is as transparent as possible to the words, phrases, and style of the original. Gordon Fee explains: “If the Greek or Hebrew text uses an infinitive, the English translation will use an infinitive. When the Greek or Hebrew has a prepositional phrase, so will the English...The goal of this translational theory is formal correspondence as much as possible.”³⁴ Some formal equivalence translations even make a point to signal the reader with italics

³⁴ Gordon Fee and Mark Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), p. 26.

whenever they add in English words to smooth out the reading. The end result empowers readers to interpret scripture for themselves. Ron Rhodes writes:

Formal equivalence translations can also be trusted not to mix too much commentary in with the text derived from the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. To clarify, while *all* translation entails *some* interpretation, formal equivalence translations keep to a minimum in intermingling interpretive additives into the text. As one scholar put it, “An essentially literal translation operates on the premise that a translator is a steward of what someone else has written, not an editor and exegete who needs to explain or correct what someone else has written.”³⁵

Over and over the formal equivalence approach transfers the decision to the reader to figure out what the text means. Thus, if the original contains ambiguities, the translator seeks to preserve them so that the reader has the same interpretive options as the original audience. Several English translations that follow this tradition have the word “standard” in their name, including the New American Standard Bible (NASB), English Standard Version (ESV), and the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), among others. Now that we’ve considered the word-for-word approach, we’ll turn our attention to the thought-for-thought translation philosophy.

4.2 Dynamic Equivalence (*Thought for Thought*)

The twentieth century saw the beginning of a shift towards readability in English Bible translations. Early attempts of this included the *Moffat New Translation* (1922), the *Philips New Testament* (1958), and the *New International Version* (1978). The goal of these versions was to prioritize the sense and flow in English over replicating the style and form of the original languages. As time has passed, this way of thinking has found widespread acceptance in several bestselling translations, including the *Good News Translation* (1976),³⁶ the *New Living Translation* (1996), the *Message Bible* (2002), and the yet incomplete *Passion Translation* (2017, NT only). Eugene Nida who coined the term “dynamic equivalence” explains the goal as follows:

Dynamic equivalence is therefore to be defined in terms of the degree to which the receptors of the message in the receptor language respond to it in substantially the same manner as the receptors in the source language. This response can never be identical, for the cultural and historical settings are too different, but there should be a high degree of equivalence of response or the translation will have failed to accomplish its purpose...[A] translation of the Bible must not only provide information which people can understand but must present the message in such a way that people can feel its relevance (the expressive element in communication) and can then respond to it in action (the imperative function).³⁷

³⁵ Ron Rhodes, *The Complete Guide to Bible Translations* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House Publishers, 2009), p. 30. Quotation from Leland Ryken, *Choosing a Bible* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2005), p. 27.

³⁶ The Good News Translation is also known as The Good News Bible (GNB) and Today’s English Version (TEV).

³⁷ Eugene Nida, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 2003, originally published by United Bible Societies, 1969), p. 24.

Thus, the goal is not to gain access to the words and syntax of the original, but to experience the same effect that the initial receptors would have had, keeping in mind that the original audience would not have struggled with language concerns, since they were already fluent in the source language. Once again, Rhodes helpfully summarizes the result of this process:

Dynamic equivalence translations generally use shorter words, shorter sentences, and shorter paragraphs. They use easy vocabulary and use simple substitutes for theological and cultural terminology. They often convert culturally dependent figures of speech into easy, direct statements. They seek to avoid ambiguity as well as biblical jargon in favor of a natural English style. Translators concentrate on transferring *meaning* rather than mere *words* from one language to another.³⁸

The result is an easier more natural reading experience with few ambiguities. However, this is only possible because we've ceded to the translator(s) the hard work of figuring out what the text means. Still, champions of dynamic equivalence think this tradeoff is worth it since formal equivalence versions may require too much of readers. For example, if the Bible is difficult to understand because it is too foreign or obscure, the result is more likely to be diminished rather than improved biblical literacy. After all, what use is a Bible to someone if he or she gives up on reading it out of frustration or boredom? The issue of readability is even more poignant when we consider audiences like children, the unchurched, and those reading English as a second language. In the end, the question comes down to readability or autonomy. Should the Bible be easy to understand, even by non-specialists or should it transfer the work of interpretation to the reader?

4.3 Formal and Dynamic Equivalence Styles Illustrated

In order to illustrate and contrast these two philosophies, let's consider this classic text from Genesis 9.6 about murder. (Readers may want to consult the extensive list of abbreviations in Appendix 1 for any unfamiliar translations.)

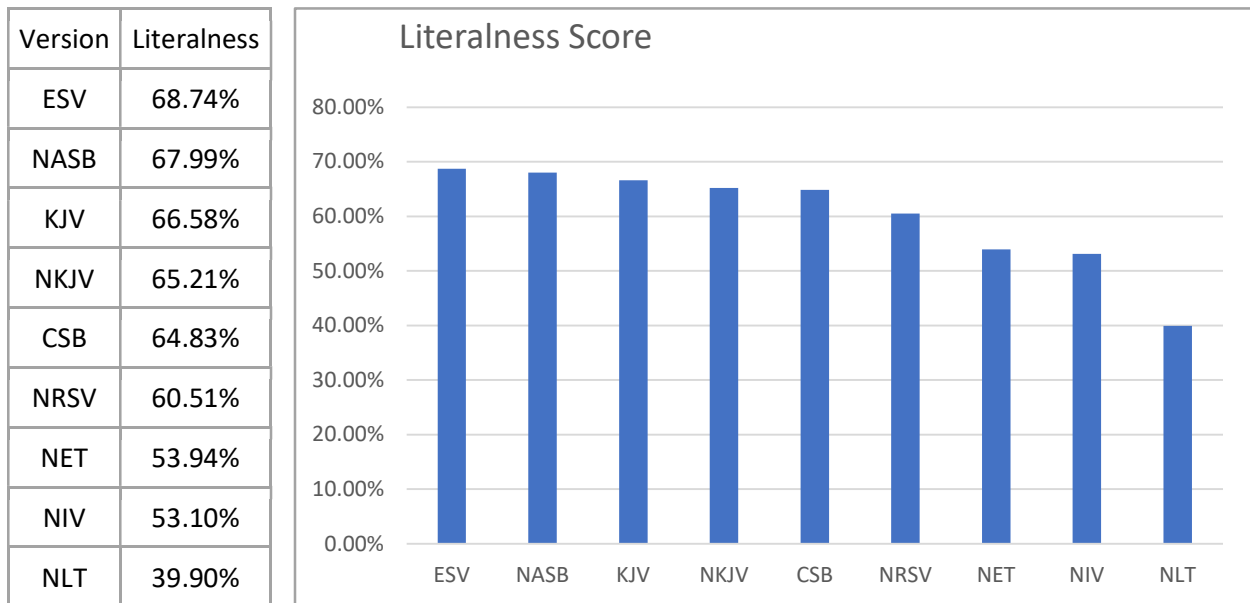
BHS	שִׁפֹּךְ דַם הָאָדָם בְּאָדָם דָּמוֹ יִשְׁפָּךְ כִּי בְצִלְמֵ אֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה אֶת־הָאָדָם׃
Literal	Pouring out the blood of the man, by man his blood will pour out because in the image of God he made the man.
NASB	Whoever sheds man's blood, By man his blood shall be shed, For in the image of God He made man.
NLT	If anyone takes a human life, that person's life will also be taken by human hands. For God made human beings in his own image.

My literal translation preserves the word order of the original Hebrew, but it fails to communicate the pun between the word “blood” דָּם (dam) and “man” אָדָם (adam). Sadly, this sort of flavor routinely gets filtered out in translation. Looking at the NASB, we see its sensitivity to form in recognizing the poetic

³⁸ Rhodes, pp. 32-33.

nature of this verse and rendering it as a series of lines. Furthermore, we observe that it's English closely follows the Hebrew even though the word order is a bit awkward. For example, "By man his blood shall be shed" would work better as "His blood shall be shed by man" or, even better: "A man shall shed his blood." Instead the NASB prioritized transparency over readability to give the reader the same form as the original. By contrast, the NLT reworks the word order and makes two additional changes: it substitutes "life" for "blood" and "human" for "man." The NLT distances the reader from the literal Hebrew while working to communicate the overall sense. This text nicely illustrates the priorities of both translation styles.

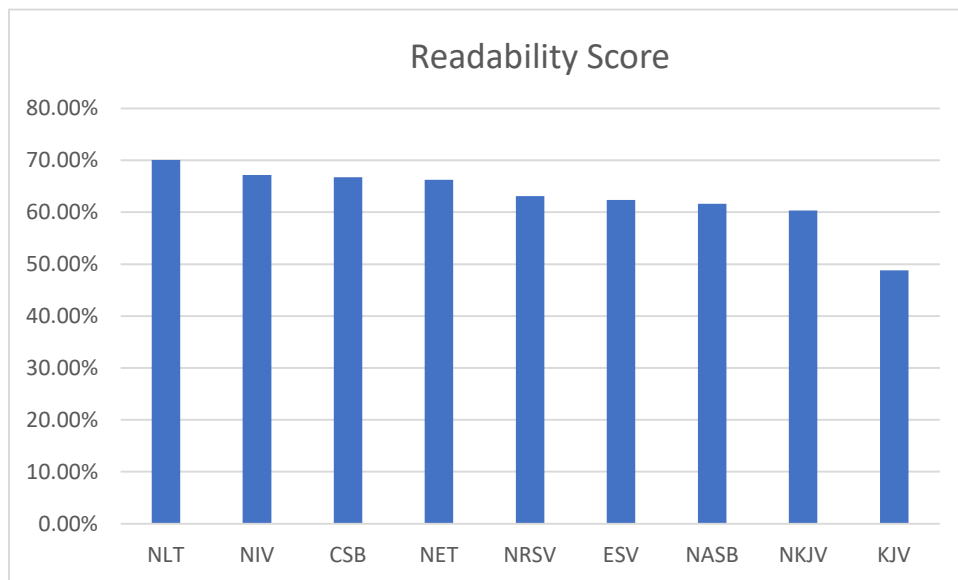
In order to see how these principles play out across translations, Bible sellers have generated graphics that show a spectrum of translations, ranked by how formal or dynamic they are. Although I've come across several of these, none of them indicates the criteria they use to place translations, leaving us to suspect that marketing and sales were the driving forces instead of data. What's more, no two of these charts agree with each other in the ordering of translations. The only source I could find that even claimed to use objective criteria to rank translations was Andi Wu's "A Quantitative Evaluation of the Christian Standard Bible." Naturally, the main problem with this report is that it appears that Holman Bible Publishers who produce the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) sponsored the study.³⁹ Nevertheless, recognizing the potential for bias, we can consider the findings of Wu in the tables and graphs below.⁴⁰



³⁹ Holman Bible Publishers is also known as Lifeway Christian Resources. It is the publishing division of the Southern Baptist Convention.

⁴⁰ Data taken from Andi Wu, "A Quantitative Evaluation of the Christian Standard Bible," published January 2017, accessed on March 7, 2020, <https://csBible.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Quantitative-Translation-Evaluation-by-GBI.pdf>.

Version	Readability
NLT	70.08%
NIV	67.20%
CSB	66.75%
NET	66.28%
NRSV	63.08%
ESV	62.36%
NASB	61.65%
NKJV	60.32%
KJV	48.83%



This data shows how nine of the most popular Christian translations stack up on both literalness and readability. As we would expect, the most literal translations follow formal equivalence and the most readable employ dynamic equivalence. It's not surprising to observe the inverse relationship between literalness and readability. This also explains a recent trend in some translations to move more toward the center. As it turns out, both translation philosophies include a wide range of styles. For example, the strictest word-for-word translation is probably *Young's Literal Translation* (YLT) of 1898 where the English text so closely follows the original languages that it occasionally breaks from natural syntax, making it both highly accurate and excessively wooden.⁴¹ On the opposite end of the formal equivalence spectrum is the CSB, which calls itself an "optimal equivalence" version since it seeks a balance between literal translation and readability. Then on the other end of thought-for-thought versions we find the *Message Bible* (MSG) and the *Passion Translation* (PT), which liberally reword whole phrases and sentences in order to prioritize the experience of the reader above all else. We will return to this issue in later sections, but for now, we need to examine several other key areas where translators make decisions.

5 Translation Decisions

My aim for this next section is to make visible many of the hidden assumptions determined at the outset when going about the work of translation. Although, most publishers can't be bothered to inform their readers about these finer details, we can get a decent idea of their policies from the text itself. While we won't go into detail on any of these, each issue is important to know about and can help in deciding which translation to use.

5.1 Units of Measurement

As I mentioned before the purpose of translation is to render a source document into the target language. However, does this include translating units of measurement? Translators differ on this, with some preserving the biblical units and others converting them into modern quantities. For example, the

⁴¹ Sadly, the YLT only had access to inferior manuscripts by today's standards. Perhaps the LEB is the closest equivalent today that combines nearly interlinear strictness with the fruits of modern textual criticism.

ESV translates the measurement in Numbers 28.12 as “three tenths of an ephah” whereas the Christian Standard Bible (CSB) converts the units, rendering it “six quarts.” The ephah was a standard volume measurement in Israel equivalent to roughly six gallons or twenty-three liters. Should the translation put the reader in touch with the actual units used in the Bible or should it put everything in familiar terms? Other biblical measurements include baths, cubits, minas, shekels, and talents among others.

5.2 Idioms

Every language has its own unique idioms and Hebrew is no different. For example, the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) of Amos 4.6 says, “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities” whereas the NIV has, “I gave you empty stomachs in every city.” Having cleanness of teeth sounds pretty good in our modern culture, but as Robert Alter points out, it “does not have anything to do with dental hygiene but evokes a mouth in which there is no food.”⁴² Still, translations are not always consistent in what idioms they translate out and which ones they pass on to the reader. For example, the NIV, which went for meaning over literalness in Amos 4.6, translates part of Psalm 60.8 as “on Edom I toss my sandal” whereas the New English Translation (NET) has “I will make Edom serve me.” Should we expect readers to do the research to understand these strange ways of talking or should they get the point while remaining blissfully ignorant of the difficulty?

5.3 Gender Inclusiveness

When the NRSV came out in 1989, it did its best to avoid “linguistic sexism” and the “inherent bias of the English language towards the masculine gender.”⁴³ The committee of translators increased the gender inclusiveness of many passages “by simple rephrasing or by introducing plural forms when this does not distort the meaning of the passage.”⁴⁴ For example, instead of the CSB’s “Let us make man in our image,” the NRSV translates it, “Let us make humankind in our image” for Genesis 1.26. A second example is the NAB on 1 Corinthians 1.26, which reads, “Consider your own calling, brothers” while the NIV has “Brothers and sisters, think of what you were when you were called.” Should translators explicitly clarify that references to “man” or “brothers” generally include “women” and “sisters” or should that be the burden of readers? A third example is Paul’s term “inner man” (NASB) vs. “inner being” (ESV) or “inner self” (NAB) in Ephesians 3.16. If a woman is reading the Bible in the twenty-first century, will she feel excluded from this text because of male-dominated terminology? A second but related issue is whether to use masculine pronouns for God. In Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, the Bible always utilizes masculine pronouns for God, however some theologians have argued that because God does not have a sexual gender, either neuter or even feminine pronouns are possible. Although God obviously transcends human gender categories, virtually all translations follow the lead of the original languages in acquiescence to God’s self-revelation as our father and preserve masculine pronouns.

5.4 Editorial Helps

Biblical manuscripts in Hebrew and Greek do not contain capitalization, chapters, verses, paragraph headings, or cross references. They have very little punctuation and sparse marginal notes. Most translations of the Bible add in chapters and verses at the traditional places and follow standard English conventions for punctuation and capitalization. Some versions capitalize pronouns that refer to God while others do not. Also, publishers, these days, tend to add in other information to aid readers. For

⁴² Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 2, Prophets* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 1264.

⁴³ Bruce Metzger, “To the Reader,” New Revised Standard Version, quoted from *The Jewish Annotated New Testament*, ed. Amy-Jill Levine and Marc Zvi Brettler, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. xvii.

⁴⁴ *ibidem*

example, much of the OT consists of poetic structures, not only in Psalms and Proverbs, but also in the prophets. Some translations will add a line and capitalize the initial word on each line to make clear to the reader what the Hebrew is doing beneath the surface. Another editorial alteration is to mark out OT quotations in the NT. Most translations do this, but how they do it differs. One translation, the NASB, capitalized the words in the NT that quoted the OT, which probably hearkened back to the typewriter era when capital letters were the only way to emphasize a text. Nowadays, however, capitalizing words and whole sentences is how we express anger through textually shouting. Some Bibles like the KJV, NKJV, NASB, and REV use italics to indicate whenever they've added in words for readability that were not in the source documents. (Ironically, today italic type implies emphasis, which is precisely the opposite attitude the translators want us to have about these added words.) Many add in paragraph headings that are often helpful, but sometimes steer the reader to the publisher's theological bias. Most translations now include footnotes or marginal notes that clue the reader in to significant manuscript variants, alternate translation possibilities, cross-references, and other helpful information. Study Bibles include a running commentary on the bottom of the page with a mix of textual, doctrinal, and historical information. The NET, in particular, deserves mentioning, since it includes over 60,000 notes that clue readers in on translation issues and the reasons the committee went with the rendering they chose.⁴⁵

5.5 Lexicography

Although it might surprise many, Robert Alter points out, "[T]he Hebrew corpus abounds in opaque words and phrases" that translators still struggle to understand.⁴⁶ "In the past century," writes Paul Wegner, "scholars have learned a great deal about the biblical languages in the areas of grammar, syntax (the way words are related to each other), and lexicography (study of word meanings)." ⁴⁷ This means that our ability to translate is improving over time, but only if translators avail themselves of the latest scholarship and lexical tools. For example, Greek Lexicons have slowly evolved from Henry Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Jones (LSJ) lexicon of 1843, which enjoyed several revisions, culminating in the ninth edition of 1940.⁴⁸ The next huge step forward was when Walter Bauer's Greek-German lexicon came into English with the help of Felix Gingrich and William Arndt (BAG) in 1957. Frederick Danker got involved after Arndt's death and subsequently published the second edition in 1979 (BAGD). The third edition came out in 2000 in which Danker took a much larger role, now known as the BDAG. However, in 2015, Brill published the Brill Dictionary of Ancient Greek (also called BDAG, or Brill-DAG), which brought into English the 3rd edition of Franco Montanari's *Vocabolario della Lingua Greca*, the dominant Greek-Italian lexicon (an update of the LSJ). Thus, a NT translation completed in the year 1900 could not benefit from the BDAG and a translation in the year 2000 did not have access to the Brill-DAG. Over time, archeological, grammatical, and cognate studies benefit our lexical knowledge, providing newer translations increased accuracy in their understanding of the original languages. Sadly, most translations do not specify what lexical sources they used, so it can be hard to know how much they benefit from more recent scholarship.

⁴⁵ The NET is accessible online for free at netbible.org.

⁴⁶ Robert Alter, *The Art of Bible Translation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019), p. 14.

⁴⁷ Wegner, p. 401.

⁴⁸ A similar story happened with Hebrew lexicons with the Brown, Driver, and Briggs, and the later *Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (HALOT).

5.6 English Vocabulary

We've already discussed the dilemma between formal and dynamic equivalence with the former's preference for technical English words and latter's preference for longer but simpler explanatory phrases. Although deciding what the meaning is and spelling it out clearly results in a more accessible translation, it simultaneously distances the reader from the actual Bible. Alter laments this when he writes:

The Bible itself does not generally exhibit the clarity to which its modern translators aspire: the Hebrew writers reveled in the proliferation of meanings, the cultivation of ambiguities, the playing of one sense of a term against another, and this richness is erased in the deceptive antiseptic clarity of the modern versions.⁴⁹

We can observe an interesting example of this in Matthew 5.22 where the NLT has Jesus saying, "If you call someone an idiot, you are in danger of being brought before the court." while the NAB has, "[W]hoever says to his brother, 'Raqa,' will be answerable to the Sanhedrin." The two main differences here are "idiot" for "Raqa" and "court" for "Sanhedrin." In both cases the NAB gives what the Greek says while the NLT, recognizing that people generally don't toss around the insult "Raqa" in English, and have no idea what a Sanhedrin is, gave sanitized equivalents that are at once easier to understand and decidedly less Jewish. Other examples of cultural words include synagogue, a Sabbath day's journey, messiah, gospel, betroth, parable, slept with his fathers, Pentecost, Passover, as well as many more. Then there are words that might mean something different in our culture than theirs, like the word δοῦλος "slave." Because American ante-bellum slavery strongly colors how many English speakers interpret this word, some translations have opted to substitute the word "servant" for "slave." However, servants typically have much more autonomy than either Israelite or Roman slaves. Lastly, it has become customary for translators to avoid translating certain controversial words like sheol and hades as well as some uncertain words like selah, miktam, shiggaion, abaddon, and leviathan. Each translation has to decide how to render each of these vocabulary words.

5.7 God's Name

Most English translations follow the tradition of the Septuagint and change the nearly seven thousand instances of God's name in the OT to "the LORD." This obfuscation violates both translation philosophies since it neither offers the right word nor the right thought for "Yahweh"—God's personal name. Now a few translations have bucked this trend, by translating a few usages of Yahweh (or Jehovah), including the KJV (four times), NEB (two times), and NLT (seven times).⁵⁰ Only a handful of lesser known versions consistently render יהוה as "Yahweh," such as the NJB, LEB, and REV. One major translation, the CSB had made a name for itself by using Yahweh some 643 times in its 2009 edition, but then reversed their policy in the 2017 version, eliminating all of them in favor of "the LORD." In their helpful Q&A document, the CSB committee lays out their reasoning for the change, including that "full consistency in rendering YHWH as 'Yahweh' would overwhelm the reader," and that "feedback from readers showed that the unfamiliarity of 'Yahweh' was an obstacle to reading" since "they felt 'Yahweh' was an innovation."⁵¹ Even so, shouldn't a Bible committed to accuracy, accurately translate names

⁴⁹ Alter, *The Art*, p. 10.

⁵⁰ KJV: Exodus 6.3; Psalm 83.18; Isaiah 12.2; 26.4. NEB: Exodus 3:15, 6:3 (also four place names: Genesis 22.14; Exodus 17.15; Judges 6.24; Ezekiel 48.35). NLT: Exodus 3.15; 6.2, 3; 15.3; 33.19; 34.5, 6.

⁵¹ "Q&A: Translation Decisions for the Christian Standard Bible," published January 2017, accessed March 9, 2020, <https://csBible.com/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/Translation-Decisions-QA.pdf>.

rather than hiding them from the reader, regardless of how this practice challenges tradition or people’s sensibilities? Of course, readers will adjust to the foreignness of God’s name as they encounter it repeatedly. Hopefully, as times goes on, courageous translation teams will increasingly favor honesty over tradition and render God’s Hebrew name into English rather than substituting “LORD”.⁵²

Before looking at two specific translations—the KJV and the Message—I want to address two major additions that textual scholars know were not in the early manuscripts but find their way into virtually every version today. These are the story where Jesus rescues the adulteress woman from execution and more than half of the last chapter of Mark’s Gospel.

6 Two Enduring Corruptions

The great church historian, Jaroslav Pelikan, once wrote, “Tradition is the living faith of the dead, traditionalism is the dead faith of the living.”⁵³ I fear with respect to this particular issue, the latter sentiment lives on in virtually all of our English translations in two major sections of scripture where nearly all modern translations retain well-known forgeries: Mark 16.9-20 and John 7.53-8.11. Although scholars disagree whether these two passages reflect actual historical events, that neither belongs in their respective Gospels is a consensus.

6.1 *The Ending of Mark (Mark 16.9-20)*

We will begin with the ending of the Gospel of Mark. As it turns out, we have not two or even three different endings, but four! According to Bruce Metzger’s *Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament* (TCGNT), here they are:

#	Content (Quoted from ESV, Except Version 3 from TCGNT)	Mss	Year
1	8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid.	κ, B	4th c.
2	8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. 9 But they reported briefly to Peter and those with him all that they had been told. And after this, Jesus himself sent out by means of them, from east to west, the sacred and imperishable proclamation of eternal salvation.	L, Ψ, 083, 099, 0112, 579	7th c.
3	8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. 9 Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. 11 But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. 12 After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. 13 And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. 14 Afterward he	W	5th c.

⁵² Sometimes translators excuse themselves by saying no one knows for sure what vowels properly belong in YHWH. However, Robert Alter writes, “The strong consensus of biblical scholarship is that the original pronunciation of the name YHWH...was ‘Yahweh’” (Robert Alter, *The Hebrew Bible: Volume 1, The Five Books of Moses* (NY: W. W. Norton & Company, 2019), p. 222).

⁵³ Jaroslav Pelikan, *The Vindication of Tradition* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1984), p. 65.

	<p>appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. 15 And they excused themselves, saying, "This age of lawlessness and unbelief is under Satan, who does not allow the truth and power of God to prevail over the unclean things of the spirits. 16 Therefore, reveal your righteousness now" --thus they spoke to Christ. 17 And Christ replied to them, "The term of years of Satan's power has been fulfilled, but other terrible things draw near. 18 And for those who have sinned I was handed over to death, that they may return to the truth and sin no more, 19 in order that they may inherit the spiritual and incorruptible glory of righteousness that is in heaven.</p>		
4	<p>8 And they went out and fled from the tomb, for trembling and astonishment had seized them, and they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid. 9 Now when he rose early on the first day of the week, he appeared first to Mary Magdalene, from whom he had cast out seven demons. 10 She went and told those who had been with him, as they mourned and wept. 11 But when they heard that he was alive and had been seen by her, they would not believe it. 12 After these things he appeared in another form to two of them, as they were walking into the country. 13 And they went back and told the rest, but they did not believe them. 14 Afterward he appeared to the eleven themselves as they were reclining at table, and he rebuked them for their unbelief and hardness of heart, because they had not believed those who saw him after he had risen. 15 And he said to them, "Go into all the world and proclaim the gospel to the whole creation. 16 Whoever believes and is baptized will be saved, but whoever does not believe will be condemned. 17 And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will cast out demons; they will speak in new tongues; 18 they will pick up serpents with their hands; and if they drink any deadly poison, it will not hurt them; they will lay their hands on the sick, and they will recover." 19 So then the Lord Jesus, after he had spoken to them, was taken up into heaven and sat down at the right hand of God. 20 And they went out and preached everywhere, while the Lord worked with them and confirmed the message by accompanying signs.</p>	A, C, D, K, W, X, Δ, Θ, Π, Ψ, 099, 0112, f13, 28, 33	5th c.

Each of these four versions includes Mark 16.8, but the first one ends there, whereas the others all add extra endings. The first version enjoys support from the earliest manuscripts as well as a great deal of attestation among ancient translations of Latin, Syriac, Armenian, and Georgian. The second version is very unlikely, not only because it only appears in later manuscripts, but also, because it contains "a high percentage of non-Markan words," and "its rhetorical tone differs totally from the simple style of Mark's Gospel," according to Metzger.⁵⁴ The third version is only found in Codex Washingtonianus and as a partial quote in Jerome, which means its textual basis is too weak to be original. Furthermore, like the second version, it "contains several non-Markan words and expressions" resulting in "an unmistakable apocryphal flavor."⁵⁵ The fourth version appears in the largest number of surviving manuscripts and this is no doubt, why we find it printed in nearly all of our Bibles. Even though this long version is not likely to be original to Mark, it could go back to as early as the second century (50 to 100 years after the original Mark). Once again, the vocabulary in this version diverges from Mark's typical usage.

⁵⁴ Bruce M. Metzger, *A Textual Commentary on the Greek New Testament: Second Edition* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 2002), p. 105. Henceforth cited as TCGNT.

⁵⁵ TCGNT, p. 104.

Furthermore, verses 9-20 appear foreign to verses 1-8. For example, verse 9 suddenly changes the subject from the women in verse 8 to Jesus in verse 9. Also, verses 9-20 seem to retell the same story by introducing Mary Magdalene as if she hadn't already come into view from verse 1. Beyond these internal considerations, only the shortest version can explain the existence of these other three. Metzger explains:

No one who had available as the conclusion of the Second Gospel the twelve verses 9-20, so rich in interesting material, would have deliberately replaced them with a few lines of a colorless and generalized summary...Thus, on the basis of good external evidence and strong internal considerations it appears that the earliest ascertainable form of the Gospel of Mark ended with 16.8. At the same time, however, out of deference to the evident antiquity of the longer ending and its importance in the textual tradition of the Gospel, the Committee decided to include verses 9-20 as part of the text, but to enclose them within double square brackets in order to indicate that they are the work of an author other than the evangelist.⁵⁶

So, if Mark 16 originally ended in verse 8, we should ask why Mark would end his gospel with the anticlimactic words, "they said nothing to anyone, for they were afraid." The NET Bible footnote helpfully lays out the options:

There are three possible explanations for Mark ending at 16:8: (1) The author intentionally ended the Gospel here in an open-ended fashion; (2) the Gospel was never finished; or (3) the last leaf of the ms [manuscript] was lost prior to copying. This first explanation is the most likely due to several factors, including (a) the probability that the Gospel was originally written on a scroll rather than a codex (only on a codex would the last leaf get lost prior to copying); (b) the unlikelihood of the ms not being completed; and (c) the literary power of ending the Gospel so abruptly that the readers are now drawn into the story itself...The readers must now ask themselves, "What will I do with Jesus? If I do not accept him in his suffering, I will not see him in his glory."⁵⁷

If textual critics and translators believe that Mark 16 originally ended in verse 8, why do nearly all Bibles add in the forged verses 9-20? The NET, which fully acknowledges that verses 9-20 were "most likely...not part of the original text of the Gospel of Mark," still included them even if they employed a smaller font-size and enclosed the section in double brackets. We will return to this question after we consider our second major forgery that most Bibles keep printing: John 7.53-8.11.

6.2 The Adulteress Woman (John 7.53-8.11)

Here is the text in full:

John 7.52-8.13 (Quoted from NIV)

52 They replied, "Are you from Galilee, too? Look into it, and you will find that a prophet does not come out of Galilee." [53 Then they all went home, 1 but Jesus went to the Mount of Olives. 2 At dawn he appeared again in the temple courts, where all the people gathered around him, and he sat down to teach them. 3 The teachers of the law and the Pharisees brought in a woman caught in adultery. They made her stand before the group 4 and said to Jesus, "Teacher, this woman was caught in the act of adultery. 5 In the Law Moses commanded us to stone such

⁵⁶ TCGNT, pp. 105-106.

⁵⁷ *NET Bible: First Edition*, textual comment on Mark 16.9, (Richardson, TX: Biblical Studies Press, 2005), p. 1911.

women. Now what do you say?" 6 They were using this question as a trap, in order to have a basis for accusing him. But Jesus bent down and started to write on the ground with his finger. 7 When they kept on questioning him, he straightened up and said to them, "Let any one of you who is without sin be the first to throw a stone at her." 8 Again he stooped down and wrote on the ground. 9 At this, those who heard began to go away one at a time, the older ones first, until only Jesus was left, with the woman still standing there. 10 Jesus straightened up and asked her, "Woman, where are they? Has no one condemned you?" 11 "No one, sir," she said. "Then neither do I condemn you," Jesus declared. "Go now and leave your life of sin."] 12 When Jesus spoke again to the people, he said, "I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life."

Although this incident is beloved by readers, preachers, and moviemakers alike, it is missing from a staggering number of early manuscripts, including \mathfrak{P}^{66} , \mathfrak{P}^{75} , \aleph , B, L, N, T, W, X, Y, Δ , Θ , Ψ , 0141, 0211, 22, 33, 124, 157, etc. Early translations including the oldest Syriac, Sahidic, Bohairic, and some Georgian, Armenian, and Gothic manuscripts do not include it. Not a single Christian author comments upon this text before Euthymius Zigabenus in the twelfth century.⁵⁸ Furthermore, when this passage occurs in the manuscripts, it floats around. In most, it appears after John 7.52 (E, F, G, H, K, M, U, Γ , Π , 28, 700, 892, etc.), however in manuscript 225, it is after 7.36. In several Georgian translations, it's after 7.44; in yet other manuscripts it's after 21.25 (1, 565, 1076, 1570, 1582); and in one manuscript we find it in Luke 21.38 (f^{13}).⁵⁹ The fact that this passage floats around in different parts of John and Luke is evidence that scribes didn't quite know where to put it.

Internal evidence also supports omission. Not only is the text replete with vocabulary uncharacteristic of John, but it interrupts the flow of the text. For all of these reasons, Metzger writes, "the case against its being of Johannine authorship appears to be conclusive...It is obviously a piece of oral tradition which circulated in certain parts of the Western church and which was subsequently incorporated into various manuscripts at various places."⁶⁰ But, if scholars agree John 7.53-8.11 is not part of John, then why does virtually every Bible continue to include it? Daniel Wallace explains the situation nicely:

[E]ven though most translators would probably deny John 7.53–8.11 a place in the canon, virtually every translation of the Bible has this text in its traditional location. There is, of course, a marginal note in modern translations that says something like, "Most ancient authorities lack these verses." But such a weak and ambiguous statement is generally ignored by readers of Holy Writ. (It's ambiguous because many readers might assume that in spite of the 'ancient authorities' that lack the passage, the translators felt it must be authentic.)

How, then, has this passage made it into modern translations? In a word, there has been a longstanding *tradition of timidity* among translators. One twentieth-century Bible relegated the passage to the footnotes, but when the sales were rather lackluster, it again found its place in John's Gospel. Even the NET Bible...for which I am the senior New Testament editor, has put the text in its traditional place. But the NET Bible also has a lengthy footnote, explaining the textual complications and doubts about its authenticity. And the font size is smaller than normal so that

⁵⁸ TCGNT, p. 188.

⁵⁹ f^{13} stands for family 13, which includes minuscules 13, 69, 124, 174, 230, 346, 543, 788, 826, 828, 983, 1689, 1709, etc.

⁶⁰ TCGNT, p. 188.

it will be harder to read from the pulpit! But we nevertheless made the same concession that other translators have about this text by leaving it *in situ*.⁶¹

So, this text is a forgery. It's not part of the Gospel of John. More or less, everyone knows this, and still the committees that make the final decisions in translations insist on keeping it. Wallace hints at the reason: money. We do well to remember that there's an inescapable financial component to publishing Bible translations. In the wake of so many "King James Only" advocates, it's hard enough to sell Bibles in certain parts of America without removing this beloved story about a forgiven adulteress woman. What I find so amazing about Wallace's admission above is not that he blames sales or that he nails translators for "a longstanding tradition of timidity," but that despite all of his certainty and clout as the senior New Testament editor, he still couldn't excise this addition from his own translation. This is bad news, not only for the NET, but for all Bible translations that meekly submit to traditionalism over against the historical facts of the matter.

Furthermore, these two texts—Mark 16:9-20 and John 7:53-8:11—are ripe for exposure by a hostile atheist. In fact, I knew one young man who lost faith in scripture once a secular professor assaulted its credibility on the grounds that it contained these two forgeries. When outspoken critic, Bart Ehrman, published his *Misquoting Jesus*, many more became aware of this silent sin. After this book came out in 2009 and sales skyrocketed to *The New York Times* best seller list, Wallace said:

I wrote a critique of Ehrman's book that was published in the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*. There I said, "keeping [John 7:53–8:11 and Mark 16:9–20] in our Bibles rather than relegating them to the footnotes seems to have been a bomb just waiting to explode. All Ehrman did was to light the fuse. One lesson we must learn from *Misquoting Jesus* is that those in ministry need to close the gap between the church and the academy. We have to educate believers. Instead of trying to isolate laypeople from critical scholarship, we need to insulate them. They need to be ready for the barrage because it is coming. The intentional dumbing down of the church for the sake of filling more pews will ultimately lead to defection from Christ. Ehrman is to be thanked for giving us a wake-up call."⁶²

Even so, nearly all translations today stubbornly continue to include both texts. Maybe they assuage their consciences by telling themselves, "At least we told the truth in the footnote" or, "At least we put it in brackets," or, "At least we put it in a smaller font." This simply will not do anymore. It's time to tell the truth. It's time to relegate these two leftovers from the *Textus Receptus* to the footnotes and let the chips fall where they may.

7 The King James Version

Now, I want to turn our attention to two specific translations: the King James Version and the Message in order to address some unique issues related to each. These two versions occupy the fringes of the spectrum in Bible translation. The King James Version is excessively literal, even to the point of inverting sentences to mimic Hebrew and Greek grammar. The Message is so flowing that it often reworks verses so much that they are unrecognizable to avid Bible students. First, we will begin with the KJV and then we'll move on to analyze the Message.

⁶¹ Daniel Wallace, "My Favorite Passage that's Not in the Bible," June 24, 2008, accessed February 23, 2020, <https://Bible.org/article/my-favorite-passage-thats-not-Bible>, emphasis in original.

⁶² *ibid*.

Notwithstanding earlier attempts to bring the Bible into English by Bede (8th c.), John Wycliffe (14th c.), and others, the story of the KJV really begins with William Tyndale's Bible. He completed the NT in 1526, using Erasmus' printed Greek text.⁶³ After this, he began work on the OT, but only finished about half of it when the English king's cronies burned him at the stake in 1536. To say Tyndale was a brilliant linguist would be an understatement. He could operate in English, German, French, Spanish, Italian, Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. His translating skills have deeply impacted English language and literature to this day. For example, he coined words and phrases that we still use today like "atonement," "my brother's keeper," "the powers that be," "Passover," and "scapegoat." Tyndale dedicated his life to putting the Bible into the language of ordinary people so that even a ploughboy could read it. Although he was unable to finish the task, his dying words were, "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."⁶⁴ The answer to that prayer came in the person of Miles Coverdale who took up Tyndale's cause and published the first complete English Bible in 1535. According to F. F. Bruce, Coverdale's Bible was "basically Tyndale's version revised in the light of the German versions, and not noticeably improved thereby."⁶⁵ This led to a quick succession of revisions, including the Matthew Bible (1537), the Great Bible (1539), the Geneva Bible (1560), and the Bishops' Bible (1568).

In 1605 King James authorized a revision of the Great Bible and the Bishop's Bible to compete with the popular Geneva Bible. Unlike the Geneva Bible, which James called "very partiall, untrue, seditious, and savouring too much of dangerous and traytorous conceits [sic],"⁶⁶ this new "Authorized Version" would not have any marginal notes, least of all those undermining his kingly authority. The king appointed fifty-four translators who, Paul Wegner notes, "were the leading classical and Oriental scholars in England at the time, both traditional Anglican and Puritan."⁶⁷ Even so, for much of the NT, the KJV simply revised Tyndale's 1534 edition. "The makers of the Authorised [sic] Version," writes David Daniell, "who did some curious things elsewhere, had the wisdom to pass on Tyndale's New Testament as they had received it. Phrase after phrase after phrase is his."⁶⁸ Even though subsequent analysis of the KJV has overwhelmingly praised it as a magnificent accomplishment, like all new translations, it faced harsh criticism in its own time. Luther Weigle explains:

For eighty years after its publication in 1611, the King James version endured bitter attacks. It was denounced as theologically unsound and ecclesiastically biased, as truckling to the king and unduly deferring to his belief in witchcraft, as untrue to the Hebrew text and relying too much on the Septuagint. The personal integrity of the translators was impugned. Among other things, they were accused of "blasphemy," "most damnable corruptions," "intolerable deceit," and "vile imposture."...But the attacks were negligible. The King James version quickly displaced the Bishop's Bible as the version read in the churches.⁶⁹

⁶³ Hannibal Hamlin and Norman Jones write, "Apparently Tyndale must also have had some reservations vis-à-vis Erasmus' text, because it is obvious from his work that he kept an eye on Luther's German translation as well as on the Vulgate, especially where these diverged from the Greek of Erasmus, and that he chose to accommodate readings that could not be justified by Erasmus' text" (*The King James Bible after Four Hundred Years*, p. 111).

⁶⁴ David Daniell, *William Tyndale: A Biography* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), p. 383.

⁶⁵ F. F. Bruce, *History of the Bible in English: From the Earliest Versions*, 3rd ed. (NY: Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 59.

⁶⁶ F. F. Bruce, *The Books and the Parchments*, 5th ed. (London: Marshall Pickering: 1991), p. 219.

⁶⁷ Wegner, p. 309.

⁶⁸ Daniell, p. 331.

⁶⁹ Luther Weigle, "English Versions since 1611," in *The Cambridge History of the Bible: Volume 3, The West from the Reformation to the Present Day*, ed. Evans, Ackroyd, Greenslade, and Hugo, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1963), p. 361.

Over time, Bible translators revised the 1611 KJV in 1769 (same name: King James Version), 1885 (Revised Version), 1901 (American Standard Version), 1952 (Revised Standard Version), 1971 (New American Standard Bible), 1982 (New King James Version), 1989 (New Revised Standard Version), among others. But rather than rehearsing the history of English translation, I want to return to the 1769 KJV and point out two major problems, since many today still regard it as the most trustworthy English translation.

7.1 Flawed Manuscripts and Archaic English

Although the Puritans who settled the Massachusetts Bay Colony eschewed the king’s authorized Bible, preferring instead their Calvinist version of choice—the Geneva Bible—over time the KJV took hold in the United States and outpaced all the other versions. However, the KJV has two major problems with it: (1) it’s based on late, corrupt manuscripts and (2) it’s English is difficult and misleading. In order to illustrate both points, consider Luke 17.9 from the 1611 KJV.

Doeth he thanke that seruant, because hee did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

What first catches our eyes is the unusual spelling of words. This is because most of us have never seen a 1611 KJV, since the 1769 revision replaced it. Here is that version:

Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.

Although this 1769 edition is closer to our English, it still uses “doth” instead of “does” and “trow” instead of “think.” The typical reader today would probably be able to figure out “doth,” but likely wouldn’t have a clue what “trow” means. Furthermore, this is the only usage of the word “trow” in the entire KJV, so readers wouldn’t even be able to figure it out based on context elsewhere. As it turns out, the KJV is chock full of archaic words and spellings that can lead readers away from the original meaning of the text. This, of course, was not on purpose, rather it resulted from the inevitable changes that happen in languages over time. Here are some examples of how our English diverges from what it was four centuries ago.⁷⁰

Term	Meaning in 1611	Modern Meaning
mean man	common man	cruel man
meat	any kind of food	flesh
peculiar	that which belongs to one person	strange
cherish	to keep warm	to care about
passenger	passer by	someone riding in or on a vehicle
prevent	to come before	to hinder
let	prevent (some places)	to allow

⁷⁰ Adapted from Jack Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1991), pp. 55-59.

wealth	welfare	money or riches
wealthy	happy	rich
forward	read or willing	self-assertive
knit	let down	to weave
carriage	something carried	a horse-drawn vehicle

These are not minor differences, but vocabulary traps that will mislead unsuspecting readers. What’s more, the KJV has a second problem related to vocabulary: a limited understanding of Hebrew. Robert Alter explains:

[T]he seventeenth-century translators, for all their learning, had a rather imperfect grasp of biblical Hebrew. At times they get confused about syntax, and they repeatedly miss the nuance, or even the actual meaning, of Hebrew words. Usually this is a matter of being slightly off or somewhat misleading, as when, following the Vulgate, they transpose concrete Hebrew terms into theologically fraught ones—“soul” for *nefesh*, which actually means “essential self,” “being,” “life-breath,” or “salvation” for *yeshu’ah*, which means “rescue,” “getting out of a tight fix.” Sometimes, alas, there are real howlers...Such errors are probably understandable because Hebrew was a book language for them, cultivated for barely a century by Christian humanists.⁷¹

Beyond English and Hebrew vocabulary, the KJV also suffers because of its extremely limited access to both Hebrew and Greek manuscripts. We can return to our previous example of Luke 17.9 to illustrate this point as well.

KJV	Doth he thank that servant because he did the things that were commanded him? I trow not.
CSB	Does he thank that servant because he did what was commanded?

The CSB reads pretty much the same as the KJV, except for the last sentence. It does not have the words “I trow” or any modern equivalent. Although some outspoken critics may balk at the audacity of the CSB to remove words from sacred scripture, in fact, exactly the opposite is happening here. Below are two critical Greek texts: the *Textus Receptus* of Robert Estienne and the Nestle-Aland 28th edition.

TR	μὴ χάριν ἔχει τῷ δούλῳ ἐκεῖνῳ, ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὰ διαταχθέντα; οὐ δοκῶ. not thanks he has to that slave because he did what was commanded? not I think
NA28	μὴ ἔχει χάριν τῷ δούλῳ ὅτι ἐποίησεν τὰ διαταχθέντα; not he has thanks to the slave because he did what was commanded?

Now we can see that this issue has nothing to do with translation. The NA28, which draws on much older manuscripts than the TR, accurately neglects to include the later (probably medieval) addition of

⁷¹ Alter, *The Art*, pp. 7-8.

οὐ δοκῶ (I think not). In this case the accusation of KJV defenders is precisely what they are guilty of, namely, adding to God’s holy scriptures! This is only possible because of a paradox at the heart of this whole issue. The KJV is quite old, so people reason that since its translators lived closer to the time of the apostles, it must be more accurate. However, the whole situation gets flipped upside down when we take into account the subsequent history of manuscript discovery since the 18th century. In that intervening time, we have found 239 more OT manuscripts (not including the Cairo fragments) and 5,800 more NT manuscripts than were available at the time of the KJV. Now, I want to be careful to avoid alarmism here, since the great majority of these discrepancies are extremely minor.⁷² However, I would be remiss if I didn’t mention the most significant differences.

7.2 Who Was Manifested? (1 Timothy 3.16)

First up, let’s examine 1 Timothy 3.16 in two different versions.

Reference	NKJV	NET
1 Timothy 3.16	And without controversy great is the mystery of godliness: <u>God</u> was manifested in the flesh, Justified in the Spirit, Seen by angels, Preached among the Gentiles, Believed on in the world, Received up in glory.	And we all agree, our religion contains amazing revelation: He was revealed in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among Gentiles, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.

I quote the NKJV here, because it reflects the same text as the KJV since it is merely a revision, not a fresh translation. In the first text, 1 Timothy 3.16, the NKJV goes with the eighth century and later manuscripts, reading “God,” whereas the NET and virtually all versions, going back as far as the ASV of 1901 read “He” or “Who” or “He who.” Metzger lists three possible reasons for the original corruption: (1) a scribe accidentally misread the source text, (2) a scribe deliberately wanted to insert a subject for the following six verbs, or (3) a scribe deliberately changed it “to provide greater dogmatic precision.”⁷³ What’s interesting about this manuscript corruption is that scribes went back over older manuscripts and altered them to conform to this new reading, a likely indication that this alteration was no mere slip of the pen. Comfort explains:

The original scribes of κ^* A* C* wrote ὅς [who], which was then changed by later scribes in all three manuscripts to θεός (“God”). Scholars have conjectured that some scribe mistook the word OC (=ος) for ΘC (the *nomen sacrum*⁷⁴ for θεός. But it is difficult to imagine how several fourth- and fifth-century scribes, who had seen thousands of *nomina sacra*, would have made this mistake. It is more likely that the change was motivated by a desire to make the text say that it was “God” who was manifest in the flesh. But in the original text, the subject of the verse is simply “who”—which most translators render as “he” and which most commentators identify

⁷² For example, here is a list of added verses in the KJV not found in earlier manuscripts Matthew 17.21; 18.11; 23.14; Mark 7.16; 9.44, 46; 11.26; 15.28; Luke 17.36; 23.17; John 5.4; Acts 8.37; 15.34; 24.7; 28.29; Romans 16.24.

⁷³ TCGNT, p. 574.

⁷⁴ A *nomen sacrum* (singular) or *nomina sacra* (plural) is a sacred name that scribes abbreviated with the first and last letters. They would customarily put a horizontal bar (overlining rather than underlining) to indicate this was the case. Thus, rather than writing out ΘEOC, they would write ΘC. Also, NT manuscripts tended to use a lunate sigma, C, rather than our traditional sigma, Σ.

as Christ...All English versions since the ASV (and ERV, its British predecessor) have reflected the superior text, and most show the variant(s) in marginal notes.⁷⁵

Regardless of the motives of the scribes, we know that the earlier manuscripts, going back to the fourth century all have “who” and not “God,” so this is what our translations should reflect. This also leads us to an important ordering of priorities. Doctrine should never come before determining the text. The text should decide the translation, which, in turn, determines exegesis. Only after we collect all the relevant scriptures on a subject, carefully interpreting them within their own contexts, should we attempt a doctrinal synthesis. It just won’t do to make manuscript decisions based on our theological commitments. The tail should not wag the dog. We will return to this issue later, but for now, we have one last important scripture to examine before concluding this section on the KJV: 1 John 5.7-8.

7.3 Three that Testify (1 John 5.7-8)

Here is a comparison between the KJV and the Lexham English Bible.

KJV (1 John 5.7-8)	LEB (1 John 5.7-8)
7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one. 8 And there are three that bear witness in earth , the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.	7 For <i>there</i> are three that testify, 8 the Spirit and the water and the blood, and the three are <i>in agreement</i> .

The differences are striking. On the right we have a translation that goes back to the *Textus Receptus* of the 16th, and on the left, we have a rendering based on the oldest manuscripts. The entire bolded section, called the *Comma Johanneum*, is present in no Greek manuscript before the tenth century. Furthermore, in this tenth century manuscript, it is in the margin, not the main body of the text. Scholars date the writing of this marginal note to the fifteenth or sixteenth century. The first manuscript to contain the *Comma* in its actual text is codex *Ottobonianus* from between the 14th and 15th centuries. This codex is a parallel Bible with the Latin and Greek on opposite pages. The *Comma* enjoyed great popularity in late medieval Latin manuscripts, so it is not hard to reconstruct what happened. As with Erasmus’ parallel Bible, any inconsistencies between the Latin and Greek suddenly become apparent. Thus, the scribe(s) chose to back translate the Latin of the *Comma* into Greek to preserve conformity.⁷⁶ Metzger writes “The passage is absent from every known Greek manuscript except eight, and these contain the passage in what appears to be a translation from a late recension of the Latin Vulgate.”⁷⁷ Below is the data in tabular form:

⁷⁵ Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), p. 663.

⁷⁶ The evidence for this is simple. The Greek version does not contain the definite article (the word “the”), which is very strange since Greek employs the definite article before all three: father, word, and spirit. However, Latin does not have a definite article. So, someone translating from Latin into Greek could easily neglect to add articles when appropriate.

⁷⁷ TCGNT, p. 647.

Greek Manuscripts Containing the Comma in Their Main Text

#	name	location	date	notes
629	Codex Ottobonianus	Vatican, Italy	14th/15th	Latin/Greek parallel Bible with the Comma back translated from Latin
61	Codex Montfortianus	Dublin, Ireland	16th	this is the manuscript Erasmus was given so that he would include the Comma in his 3rd ed.
918	none	Escorial, Spain	16th	n/a
2318	none	Bucharest, Romania	18th	likely influenced by the Clementine Vulgate

Greek Manuscripts Containing the *Comma* in the Margin

#	location	ms. date	date of marginal note
221 ^{v.r.}	Oxford	10 th c.	15 th /16 th c.
88 ^{v.r.}	Naples	14 th c.	16 th c.
429 ^{v.r.}	Wolfenbüttel	14 th /15 th c.	16 th c.
636 ^{v.r.}	Naples	16 th c.	16 th c.

Apart from codex *Ottobonianus* (629) nearly all of the Greek manuscripts containing the *Comma* came into existence or had marginal notes added in the sixteenth century. From these manuscripts we get the impression something significant happened in the 1500s. Fortunately, we don't have to guess, because we know exactly what happened. When Erasmus put out his first GNT in 1516, he did not include the *Comma Johanneum* and found himself the target of a serious accusation of heresy. People were used to seeing the *Comma* due to its inclusion in their versions of the Latin Vulgate (although Jerome's original did not include it). So, when Erasmus refused to include the forgery, they accused him of removing it from the text. Even as late as his second edition, Erasmus refused to fabricate and insert the *Comma* into his Greek text. He wrote:

If a single manuscript had come into my hands, in which stood what we read then I would certainly have used it to fill in what was missing in the other manuscripts I had. Because that did not happen, I have taken the only course which was permissible, that is, I have indicated what was missing from the Greek manuscripts.⁷⁸

Comfort explains what happened next:

Erasmus did not include "the heavenly witnesses" passage in the first two editions of his Greek New Testament [in 1516 and 1519]. He was criticized for this by defenders of the Latin Vulgate. Erasmus, in reply, said that he would include it if he could see it in any Greek manuscript. In turn, a manuscript (most likely the Monfort Manuscript, 61, of the sixteenth century) was especially fabricated to contain the passage and thereby fool Erasmus. Erasmus kept his

⁷⁸ Cited in James White, *The King James Only Controversy* (Grand Rapids: Bethany House Publishers, 2009), pp. 100-101.

promise; he included it in the third edition. From there it became incorporated into TR [*Textus Receptus*] and was translated in the KJV. Both KJV and NKJV have popularized this expanded passage. The NKJ translators included it in the text, knowing full well that it has no place there.⁷⁹

This sad story shows how seductive it was to allow dogmatic concerns to trump the text of scripture.⁸⁰ Thankfully, from the twentieth century onward, translators have courageously stood against including this corruption. These days the only ones who fight for it are King-James-Only defenders.⁸¹

7.4 A Final Word about the King James Version

In the end, the KJV is a generally accurate translation of late corrupt manuscripts with archaic spelling and vocabulary that make it easy to misunderstand today. At its time, it was a monumental accomplishment. It continues to influence English Bible translations as well as countless works of secular literature. I do not fault the committee that worked on the KJV since they did their best with what they had available to them. However, for us today, to return to this translation when we have far more accurate ones is not only unnecessary but dangerous, since it puts more weight on younger less accurate manuscripts than the older less corrupted ones. Furthermore, any reading from a *Textus Receptus* Bible (KJV, NKJV, KJ21, YLT, AMP, GNV, Darby, Douay-Rheims, etc.) causes confusion for those following along during sermons and interruptions in Bible study groups, because of the numerous differences.

We do well to remember that at one time the KJV itself was a new translation and the committee that worked on it likewise faced opposition. Indeed, they wrote in the 1611 preface:

Zeale to promote the common good...findeth but cold intertainment in the world...Many mens mouths have bene open a good while (and yet are not stopped) with speeches about the Translation so long in hand, or rather perusals of Translations made before: and aske what may be the reason, what the necessitie of the employment: Hath the Church bene deceived, say they, all this while?...Was their Translation good before? Why doe they now mend it? Was it not good? Why then was it obruded to the people?⁸²

I find it oddly encouraging to see how the KJV translators had to deal with the same issues that our modern versions face. In its time this translation was a huge step forward, but now we have better source materials, linguistic knowledge, and a different kind of English, so we cannot cling to the past as if God directly and infallibly inspired the KJV. We cannot allow traditionalism and personal familiarity to trump accuracy. In the end our goal is to get as close as we can to what the prophets and apostles originally wrote. Generation by generation we are making progress, even if about one percent of the text remains open for discussion. Now, I realize that any uncertainty about this matter can be incredibly troubling, especially if we grew up thinking the scriptures are flawless and perfectly preserved. Even if most denominations with statements about inspiration are careful to distinguish between the original

⁷⁹ Comfort, *New Testament*, p. 785.

⁸⁰ For more information about where this reading came from see my “The Story behind the Comma Johanneum,” (Clifton Park, NY: Restitutio, 2015), <https://restitutio.org/2015/12/08/the-story-behind-the-comma-johanneum-1-john-5-7/>.

⁸¹ See Appendix 2 for reasons why virtually all textual critics refuse to prioritize the Majority Text over the older manuscripts.

⁸² quoted in Weigle, p. 361.

writings and what we have today, many of us have not appreciated that nuance. Nevertheless, what has survived of both the OT and NT over the centuries is so much better preserved than any other ancient literature that it's hard to find any other word than "miraculous" to describe it. The KJV was one step along the way of improving access to the Bible in English—a step for which we should be grateful, while continuing in our quest to draw closer to the original scriptures.

8 The Message Bible

On the opposite end of the spectrum from the KJV we find *The Message Bible* (MSG). I have chosen this version to analyze, because it provides us a window into the realm of single-person translations and it demonstrates the advantages and disadvantages of keeping to a thoroughgoing dynamic equivalence strategy for translation. Although most of the best-selling and therefore, most popular, translations are the result of committees, one-person translations are neither new nor uncommon. For example, Jerome famously translated the Bible into Latin in the late fourth century, called the Vulgate. In the sixteenth century, Martin Luther translated into German (1534), William Tyndale into English (1535), and Jacques Lefèvre d'Étaples into French (1530).⁸³ In the last hundred years, we've seen plenty of single translator Bibles or partial Bibles, including those by James Moffatt (1922), J. B. Phillips (1958), Kenneth Taylor (1971), David Stern (1998), N. T. Wright (2012), David Bentley Hart (2017), John Goldingay (2018), and Robert Alter (2019). Generally, single translator Bibles are more stylistic and more consistent, however, they also are more susceptible to private interpretation. We'll explore this issue in some depth, but first, allow me to introduce the MSG.

Having studied Semitic languages in graduate school, pastored a church for twenty-nine years, and taught at a seminary for another seven, Eugene Peterson finished his work on the MSG in 2002. "His primary goal," according to the introduction, "was to capture the tone of the text and the original feel of the Greek, in contemporary English."⁸⁴ Peterson had two main audiences in mind: the unchurched and the jaded. For the unchurched, he wanted to remove religious sounding language and give them direct access to the message of scripture without having to explain cultural differences. For the jaded—those who have ruminated upon scripture so much that the flavor is gone, like an old piece of gum—he wanted to inject fresh flavor that would enliven scripture for them. Instead of leaving it to the reader to figure out cultural issues, theological terms, or Hebrew idioms, he worked for instant comprehension. Above all, Peterson designed the MSG to "help them understand what they read."⁸⁵ As he went through, Peterson repeatedly asked himself questions like, "How would Isaiah speak today?" and "How would Paul write in the twenty-first century?" The result of all this work was what Peterson called a "reading Bible;" and it has sold more than seventeen million copies.

Although praised for its readability and engaging style, the MSG also has some significant problems. These did not enter the text due to any malice on Peterson's part, but simply as a result of his methodology. Philip Comfort helpfully explains a key vulnerability in the dynamic equivalence strategy:

⁸³ Technically Tyndale did not complete the entire Bible in English. The date 1535 refers to Miles Coverdale's version, which Tyndale's NT and about half of the OT.

⁸⁴ Eugene H. Peterson, *The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 2018), see "Version Information," accessed April 15, 2020, <https://www.biblegateway.com/versions/Message-MSG-Bible/#vinfo>.

⁸⁵ *ibidem*

Indeed, it is true that a word-for-word rendering can be executed more easily than a thought-for-thought one; in doing the latter, the translator must enter into the same thought as the author—and who can always know with certainty what the author’s original, intended meaning was? ”⁸⁶

Comfort is right that rewriting the Bible into modern American idiom is a tremendously challenging task, compared to rendering it more literally. However, what happens when the translator thinks he or she has entered the thought world of the original author, but in fact has read in his or her own idiosyncrasies, cultural norms, and theological biases?

8.1 Old Testament Analysis

In order to show exactly how the MSG diverges from the literal meaning of the text, I have compiled a list of texts for comparison. I've chosen to compare Peterson's translation to Robert Alter's because they are both single-person translations and because they follow largely opposite translation philosophies. Alter wanted to put the modern reader in touch with the Hebrew as much as possible whereas Peterson's focus was to employ maximally accessible English.

Reference	Eugene Peterson	Robert Alter
Genesis 1.1-3	1 First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don't see. 2 Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God's Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss. 3 God spoke: "Light!" And light appeared...	1 When God began to create heaven and earth, 2 and the earth then was welter and waste and darkness over the deep and God's breath hovering over the waters, 3 God said, "Let there be light." And there was light. "...
Deuteronomy 6.4-5	4 Attention, Israel! God, our God! God the one and only! 5 Love God, your God, with your whole heart: love him with all that's in you, love him with all you've got!	4 Hear, Israel, the LORD our God, the LORD is one. 5 And you shall love the LORD your God with all your heart and with all your being and with all your might.
Psalms 1.1-2	1 How well God must like you— you don't hang out at Sin Saloon, you don't slink along Dead-End Road, you don't go to Smart-Mouth College. 2 Instead you thrill to God's Word, you chew on Scripture day and night.	1 Happy the man who has not walked in the wicked's counsel, nor in the way of offenders has stood, nor in the session of scoffers has sat. 2 But the LORD's teaching is his desire, and His teaching he murmurs day and night.

Comparing these translations, Peterson’s decisions become apparent. In the first text (Genesis 1.1-3), we can see where the MSG includes extra explanatory phrases, such as “all you see, all you don’t see” and “like a bird.” Where the Hebrew stopped, Peterson kept going. It’s hard to argue about his additions on stylistic grounds, but it’s equally impossible to argue that this is the obvious meaning of the Hebrew. Genesis 1.1 talks about אֵת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֵת הָאָרֶץ “the heaven(s) and the earth,” but Peterson

⁸⁶ Comfort, *Essential Guide*, pp. 105-106.

translates this, “the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see.” That may be correct, but it depends on other doctrinal commitments that are decidedly external to the text at hand.⁸⁷ Likewise, the participle in verse 2, מְרַחֶפֶת “hovered” became “brooded like a bird.” Now although Deuteronomy 32.11 uses this word to describe an eagle fluttering over its nest, Jeremiah 23.9 employs it for someone’s bones trembling. Although it would be theologically satisfying to have Genesis foreshadow the bird imagery that we find at Jesus’ baptism, the Hebrew Lexicon (HALOT) says, “this translation is fitting for Dt 32.11...though less so for Gn 1.2, where simply ‘to hover’ (while moving back and forth constantly) is probably more fitting.”⁸⁸ These two, seemingly trivial examples, nicely illustrate the chief vulnerability in the MSGs’ way of employing the dynamic equivalence strategy. In both incidents, Peterson might have been right, or he could have gotten it wrong, but his methodology didn’t allow for him to leave any ambiguities in the English text. The MSG’s translation philosophy strives to relieve the burden from the reader of these kinds of technical issues and make the Bible as readable as possible—a noble aspiration. But here is the danger: each time Peterson hazards a guess at what meaning the Bible intended, he introduces a probability. Even if he gets it right 90% or more of the time, once applied to the sheer number of verses in the Bible (31,000), eventually he will get it wrong over and over, producing an unreliable result. Of course, every translation makes judgements on a whole range of issues, but they generally don’t paraphrase as much as the MSG, resulting in less risk and more overall reliability. This will become clearer in subsequent examples.

In the second example, Deuteronomy 6.4 loses its whole point. The original text reads שְׁמַע יִשְׂרָאֵל שְׁמַע יְהוָה יְהוָה אֶחָד: “Hear, Israel, Yahweh (is) our God; Yahweh (is) one.” Admittedly, scholars debate whether to pronounce יְהוָה “Yahweh” or “Yehovah,” but that this is God’s personal name is beyond question. So, the point of this text, also known as *the shema*, is to identify Israel’s God as Yahweh and to single him out as their one God. The MSG utterly fails to communicate that message, stuttering through the text by overusing the word “God” and obfuscating the main point. Sadly, in this case Alter’s own translation likewise falls short, owing to his substitution of “the LORD” for “Yahweh.”

Our third example from Psalm 1.1 shows just why so many have come to love the MSG’s edgy and attention-grabbing style. Even so, it diverges significantly from the original text. The Hebrew diminishes the action of the sinner from “walking” to “standing” to “sitting.” This has the effect of intensifying the commandment. One should not only avoid walking with the wicked and standing with offenders, but even sitting with scoffers. Peterson’s version has inverted the direction from “hang out” to “slink along” to “go to.” Furthermore, his choice of “Dead-End Road” is not equivalent to “the way of sinners,” since many sinners don’t end up at the proverbial dead end. Many of them end up flourishing in our present evil age. Once again, the MSG has compromised what the Hebrew says for a translation that is fresh and relatable.

⁸⁷ In particular, the idea of *creatio ex nihilo* has its historical roots in the third century conflicts with the Gnostics. It is not the obvious meaning of verse one. This is even more problematic because of the grammar of the first word of Genesis 1.1, “בְּרֵאשִׁית,” which many Hebrew experts take indefinitely as in Alter’s translation, “When God began to create” or John Goldingay’s rendering, “At the beginning of God’s creating.”

⁸⁸ רחף (Hal8761) in Ludwig Koehler, Walter Baumgartner, and Johann Jakob Stamm, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, vol. 1-5, (Leiden: Brill, 1994-2000).

8.2 New Testament Analysis

Before moving on, I want to cover a few examples from the NT. I have chosen David Bentley Hart’s translation as a contrast, because like Alter, Hart is a single translator who strives for a literal rendering.

Reference	Eugene Peterson	David Bentley Hart
Matthew 5.5	You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought.	How blissful the gentle, for they shall inherit the earth;
John 3.16	This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life.	For God so loved the cosmos as to give the Son, the only one, so that everyone having faith in him might not perish, but have the life of the Age.
John 14.28	...you would be glad that I’m on my way to the Father because the Father is the goal and purpose of my life.	...you would have rejoiced that I am going to the Father, because the Father is greater than I.
Acts 16.30-31	30 He led them out of the jail and asked, “Sirs, what do I have to do to be saved, to really live?” 31 They said, “Put your entire trust in the Master Jesus. Then you’ll live as you were meant to live—and everyone in your house included!”	30 And conducting them outside he said, “My lords, what must I do to be saved?” 31 And they said, “Have faith in the Lord Jesus, and you and your house shall be saved.”

What we saw in the OT is even more acute in the NT. For Matthew 5.5, Peterson completely rewrote the verse. Perhaps he didn’t notice that Matthew 5.5 is a quotation of Psalm 37.11, which he translates, “Down-to-earth people will move in and take over, relishing a huge bonanza.” Sadly, his own translation contradicts itself, rendering “inherit the earth” as “relishing a huge bonanza” in one place and “find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought,” in the other. Tragically, both translations fall far short of the biblical teaching about God’s kingdom coming at Christ’s return, resulting in the saints ruling upon the earth. The MSG obfuscates “the gentle will inherit the earth” into vague talk of relishing bonanzas and owing what can’t be bought.

The second and fourth examples show how Peterson inserted his own view of salvation into the text. In the former (John 3.16), he changes “eternal life” or “life of the age” into “a whole and lasting life.” This phrase is so vague that it could easily apply to atheists also occasionally do well in life and die old and content. Like the prosperity gospel theology, the MSG takes the focus off the future and puts it onto the present, promoting a good life now if we only believe. We find the same textual tweaks in Acts 16.30-31 where Peterson redefines salvation as really living. Instead of becoming saved from sin and death, one lives “as you were meant to live” whatever that means. Eternal life is gone from these texts, replaced with a kind of therapeutic humanism.

Lastly, the final clause of John 14.28 reads, ὁ πατήρ μείζων μου ἔστιν “the father is greater than I.” This is neither ambiguous nor complicated. However, Peterson had Jesus say, “the father is the goal and

purpose of my life.” I am at a loss to see how he got from the one to the other. The two phrases appear completely independent of each other.

8.3 A Final Word about the Message Bible

Now, it’s true, that if our theological commitments align with those of a translator using the dynamic equivalence method, we won’t find anything wrong with his or her Bible. But, aren’t our beliefs and practices supposed to come out of scripture (exegesis) rather than read into it (eisegesis)? If I agree with Peterson’s theology at the outset, his Bible will only confirm my beliefs, because he injected them into the text in the translation process. This is a dangerous place to be, since it means I’ve handed over huge interpretive decisions to a fallible human that affect my salvation, how I think, and what I do. Can we agree that this style of translation gives far too much power to the translator? If translators are going to make all the decisions for the reader about what the text means, then their theology is integrally intertwined with the text they produce.

Of course, we could look at many more texts, but we have already seen the point made over and over. A thoroughgoing dynamic equivalence translation by a single translator introduces inherent dangers into Bible translation. Now, I realize it is customary to say the MSG is just a paraphrase and not a dynamic equivalence translation. But this distinction is not particularly helpful since all dynamic equivalence translations are paraphrases. A paraphrase, after all, is “a restatement of a text, passage, or work giving the meaning in another form.”⁸⁹ Dynamic equivalence versions seek to find corresponding meanings between groups of words (whole thoughts) instead of limiting the scope to word-for-word correspondence. Having said that, it’s also true that within dynamic equivalence methodology we find a wide range of approaches. On the conservative side we find versions like the NIV and NET that are much closer to formal equivalence translations and on the other extreme we encounter freer versions like the GNT and MSG. Even so, I chose the MSG precisely because of Peterson’s boldness; he was not afraid to break from tradition. This resulted in a version where anomalies leap of the page, making it a good specimen to illustrate this issue, even if other dynamic equivalence versions take many fewer risks. Nevertheless, just to show that this problem pervades other dynamic translations as well, I will provide a couple of examples in the next section.

For now, I want to be clear. The MSG is not a reliable Bible, precisely because the reader does not know when Peterson made an interpretive decision and when he was faithfully communicating the message of scripture in his artful way. Sometimes it magnificently sums up what the original text says with power and clarity while other times it completely misses the target. Once again, I’m neither impugning Peterson’s motivations nor his character. I’m sure he did the best he could within the parameters of his translation philosophy. Still, from what we can see above, this method of eliminating ambiguities and substituting instead clear language, informed by Peterson’s own interpretation, leads to systemic untrustworthiness. The MSG has served us well as an example of a single translator Bible who freely steers readers toward his own bias, but what about committee Bibles? We’ll consider them shortly, but first, I’d like to offer some remarks on a new translation that may dethrone the MSG over the next few years—*The Passion Translation* (PT).

⁸⁹ Merriam-Webster.com Dictionary, s.v. “paraphrase,” accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/paraphrase>.

8.4 Evaluating the Passion Translation

Brian Simmons received training as a linguist before heading off to serve as a missionary in Panama for decades. He planted churches among the Kuna people and co-translated the NT into the Paya-Kuna language. Then, after pastoring in Connecticut for another eighteen years, he felt called to work on a new translation of the Bible. His goal was “to transfer the essential meaning of God’s original message found in the biblical languages to modern English.”⁹⁰ The PT claims to be an “essential equivalence” translation, putting “the essence of God’s original message and heart into modern English.”⁹¹ It’s a heart translation designed to help people engage their emotions while reading. In many ways this version has the same marketing claims as the MSG, however, Simmons swims in charismatic streams while Peterson belonged to the Presbyterian Church (USA). As with the MSG, the PT sometimes wows with flashes of insight and other times boldly reshapes scripture into the mold determined by Simmons’ doctrinal peculiarities. Here are four quick examples that ably illustrate this tendency.

Reference	<i>The Passion Translation</i> (PT)	<i>New Revised Standard Version</i> (NRSV)
Song of Songs 1.6	Please don’t stare in scorn because of my dark and sinful ways. My angry brothers quarreled with me and appointed me guardian of their ministry vineyards, yet I’ve not tended my vineyard within.	Do not gaze at me because I am dark, because the sun has gazed on me. My mother's sons were angry with me; they made me keeper of the vineyards, but my own vineyard I have not kept!
Psalms 37.9	For one day the wicked will be destroyed, but those who trust in the Lord will live safe and sound with blessings overflowing.	For the wicked shall be cut off, but those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land.
Psalms 91.5	You will never worry about an attack of demonic forces at night nor have to fear a spirit of darkness coming against you.	You will not fear the terror of the night, or the arrow that flies by day
Romans 8.38	...I’m convinced that his love will triumph over death, life’s troubles, fallen angels, or dark rulers in the heavens. There is nothing in our present or future circumstances that can weaken his love.	For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers

Simmons’ reading of Song of Songs entirely changes the meaning of it from talking about a girl darkened because of long hours working in the vineyards to someone who was appointed to a position in ministry and fell into dark and sinful ways. In Psalm 37.9, Simmons translated *הֵמָּה יִרְשׁוּ-אֶרֶץ* “they will inherit the land” to promises about safety and prosperity, which are nowhere in the text, but fit in nicely with some brands of charismatic prosperity gospel. In our third example Simmons translated *מִפְּחַד לַיְלָה* “from terror of night” as “demonic forces at night.” Now, demonic forces would certainly be a cause of terror, but this psalm could just as easily refer to a dangerous animal on the prowl, a nocturnal human

⁹⁰ “Translation Philosophy,” *The Passion Translation*, (Savage, MN: BroadStreet Publishing), accessed March 24, 2020, <https://www.thepassiontranslation.com/translation-philosophy/>.

⁹¹ *ibidem*

invasion, or a spreading fire in the village. Simmons reworks מִן יַעֲרֵב יְהוָה “from (an) arrow (that) will fly by day” to “spirit of darkness coming against you.” These two are not even similar and I’m at a loss to see why he spiritualized an obvious reference to human warfare. Lastly, we see in Romans how he adds in words to clarify what he thinks the Bible says. He reworks ζωὴ “life” to “life’s troubles,” ἄγγελοι “angels” to “fallen angels,” and ἀρχαὶ “rulers” to “dark rulers.” This example shows how he injects his views of spiritual warfare into scripture, making it teach what he already believes even when the original had a multitude of interpretations.

In addition to modifying and adding to scripture, Simmons employs a somewhat novel technique of double and triple translating phrases, especially in the psalms. For example Psalm 23 begins with the words יְהוָה רֹעִי “Yahweh (is) my shepherd,” but the PT renders it as “The Lord is my best friend and my shepherd.” In the footnote, Simmons states that the root word for shepherd is the same as best friend so he double translates, employing both possible meanings of the word.⁹² This way of intensifying his version is not unlike the old *Amplified Bible*. However, Simmons’ method is flawed, because when ambiguities arise, the context dictates the meaning. So, in Psalm 23 the poet has a shepherd in mind not a friend, much less a best friend—even if we could make some connection between the etymologies of these words. The question is not how to squeeze out of every word all its juicy goodness as determined by the translator, but what meaning does a particular word have in its context?

Lastly, the PT works hard to intensify the emotion of scripture. For example, Ephesians 5.2 says καὶ περιπατεῖτε ἐν ἀγάπῃ, καθὼς καὶ ὁ Χριστὸς ἠγάπησεν ἡμᾶς “and walk in love, just as also Christ loved us,” but Simmons renders it, “And continue to walk surrendered to the extravagant love of Christ.” To amplify the emotion of the passage, we get “extravagant love” instead of “love.” Such intensifying additions, one might argue, help us to encounter the magnitude of what scripture is saying. However, this practice, once again, is inherently dangerous because it allows the translator to substitute interpretation for translation. One could even say that this style of intensifying and double-translating results from a presumption that the original texts need us to improve them—as if they needed our help to say what they really meant.⁹³ Of course, bringing out the meaning of a text, illustrating it, and explaining it is standard operating procedure for commentaries, but it is not within the purview of translation.

9 Bias in Committee Translations

Now that we’ve considered the issue of bias in single translator Bibles, we can move on to consider committee translations. My Hebrew teacher is fond of saying, “Every translation is a commentary.” This is especially evident when we consider theological biases found in English Bibles today whether dynamic or formal equivalence. Let’s begin with dynamic equivalence versions. Alter claims they suffer from “a rage to explain the biblical text.” He doesn’t like how thought-for-thought translations seem compelled to “explain through translation” since the end result is that they “make the Bible conform to modern

⁹² This is a bit complicated to explain because “shepherd” in Psalm 23.1 is actually a participle, going back to the verb רעה, which means to shepherd or to associated with.

⁹³ For a much more in-depth review of the TPT, see Andrew G. Shead, “Burning Scripture with Passion: A Review of the Psalms (The Passion Translation),” vol. 43, iss. 1, Themelios, accessed on March 25, 2020, <https://themelios.thegospelcoalition.org/article/burning-scripture-with-passion-a-review-of-the-psalms-passion-translation/>.

views or modern ideologies.”⁹⁴ Hart agrees when he says, “their loyalty to some prevailing theory of translation (such as ‘dynamic equivalence theory’)...encourages them to make the line between translation and interpretation perilously hazy.”⁹⁵ Indeed, this is precisely what we saw above with the MSG and the PT. However, as we will see, translators regularly cross this hazy line from translation right into interpretation in committee-based dynamic equivalence versions as well. In order to illustrate this tendency, I’ve chosen two of the most popular thought-for-thought versions:

John 17.3 (NLT)

And this is the way to have eternal life-- to know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ, the one you sent to earth.

Here the NLT adds the words “to earth” to clarify what they think Jesus is saying here. However, the term “the one you sent” could just as easily refer to commissioning as in John 1.6 where John the Baptist was “sent from God.” Even though the language is more suggestive, the NLT doesn’t add the words “to earth” in John 1.6, because they don’t believe John lived in heaven prior to his earthly ministry. Here is an example where the interpretation could go in at least two directions, but the NLT translators excluded one view so that their readers would understand it their way. Let’s consider another example, but this time, from the NIV.

Psalms 51.5 (NIV)

Surely I was sinful at birth, sinful from the time my mother conceived me.

The NIV substitutes interpretation for translation, probably out of a concern that readers may see this verse as condemning all intercourse as inherently sinful. It actually reads “Behold, I was born in guilt, in sin my mother conceived me” (NAB). This sounds like the sin was David’s mother’s whereas the NIV transfers the sin to David from the moment of conception onwards. Alter explains the issue nicely:

Christian interpreters through the ages have understood this verse as a prime expression of the doctrine of Original Sin...It may, however, be unwarranted to construct a general theology of sinful human nature from this verse. The speaker of this poem certainly feels permeated with sinfulness. He may indeed trace it back to the sexual act through which he was conceived, but there is not much here to support the idea that this is the case of every human born.”⁹⁶

Ironically, the Catholic translation I quoted adds in the footnote: “The verse does not imply that the sexual act of conception is sinful” (NAB). But whether we see this verse as condemning procreation as sinful, as supporting the idea of inherited sin, or merely as an instance of hyperbole, shouldn’t that decision be up to the reader? The NIV does not leave any wiggle room here and boldly makes the decision for everyone.

9.1 Reasons for Bias in Popular Translations

However, this problem of crossing the line from translation into interpretation is not limited to thought-for-thought translations. Even formal equivalence versions have vulnerabilities and blind spots that sometimes result in perpetuating traditional phraseology. Hart explains in his inimitable way:

The inevitable consequence of this [decisions made by committees] is that many of the most important decisions are negotiated accommodations, achieved by general agreement, and

⁹⁴ Alter, *The Art*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ David Bentley Hart, *The New Testament* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2017), pp. xiv.

⁹⁶ Alter, *The Writings*, p. 133.

favoring only those solutions that prove the least offensive to everyone involved. This becomes, in effect, a process of natural selection, in which novel approaches to the text are generally the first to perish, and only the tried and trusted survive. And this can result in the exclusion not only of extravagantly conjectural readings, but often of the most straightforwardly literal as well...In the end even the most conscientious translations tend, at certain crucial junctures, to use language determined as much by theological and dogmatic tradition as by the “plain” meaning of the words on the page. And in some extreme cases doctrinal or theological or moral ideologies drive translators to distort the text to a discreditable degree. Certain popular translations like *The New International Version* and *The English Standard Version*, are notorious examples of this. This may represent the honest zeal of devout translators to communicate what they imagine to be the “correct” theology of scripture, but the preposterous liberties taken to accomplish this end often verge on a kind of pious fraudulence.⁹⁷

Hart’s vituperations may exaggerate the situation a tad, but he makes good points about the committee effect. We’ve already seen the insurmountable impulse toward tradition in Daniel Wallace’s failed attempt to rid the NET of the forgery in John 7.53-8.11. Even he, as the senior NT editor, could not sway the committee to omit it. Wallace had hinted at economics as the culprit behind the curtain, but I’m convinced there’s more to it than that.

Bias is tricky to detect. It’s easy enough to spot someone else’s bias when they have significantly different beliefs, but executive committees generally restrict translation teams to those who share their same core beliefs. This is most pronounced in single denomination translations like the CSB (Southern Baptist), NWT (Jehovah’s Witnesses), JPS (Jews), NJB and NAB (Roman Catholics). However, even the cross-denominational translation teams limit translators to those who share their overarching dogmatic (or antidogmatic) concerns. For example, the NRSV is the result of mostly mainline denominations, which is why liberal leaning American churches prefer it like the Presbyterian Church (USA), Episcopal Church, United Methodist Church, Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, etc. Such is also the case with the NIV, which required adherence to an evangelical statement of faith and then restricted all final decisions to a team of fifteen theologians. Likewise, the NLT, somewhat aware of the invisibility of bias touts, “In order to guard against personal and theological biases, the scholars needed to represent a diverse group of evangelicals who would employ the best exegetical tools.”⁹⁸ The NLT marketing materials go on to explain that they “recruited teams of scholars that represented a broad spectrum of denominations, theological perspectives, and backgrounds within the worldwide evangelical community.”⁹⁹ Nevertheless, they did not pursue talent outside of the evangelical sphere. Even though as Jason BeDuhn points out, “Creedal commitment has nothing to do with linguistic skill,” committees remain keen to restrict their teams to their own kind.¹⁰⁰

Thus, translations, even literal ones, bake bias in from the outset. We find it especially pronounced when it comes to doctrines that many agree on today, but that were not widely held in the early church. Even though Christians of all brands struggle with bias, Catholic translators have more freedom since their doctrine does not have to come directly from scripture. However, Protestants are under

⁹⁷ Hart, pp. xiv-xvi.

⁹⁸ “Translation Process,” New Living Translation website, accessed March 26, 2020, <https://www.tyndale.com/nlt/translation-process>.

⁹⁹ *ibidem*

¹⁰⁰ Jason David BeDuhn, *Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations of the New Testament* (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 2003), p. 33.

tremendous pressure to conform their translation of scripture to their doctrinal commitments. BeDuhn calls this the Protestant Burden. He writes:

Protestant forms of Christianity, following the motto of *sola scriptura* [scripture alone], insist that all legitimate Christian beliefs (and practices) must be found in, or at least based on, the Bible. That's a very clear and admirable principle. The problem is that Protestant Christianity was not born in a historical vacuum, and does not go back directly to the time that the Bible was written. Protestantism was and is a *reformation* of an already fully developed form of Christianity: Catholicism. When the Protestant Reformation occurred just five hundred years ago, it did not reinvent Christianity from scratch, but carried over many of the doctrines that had developed within Catholicism over the course of the previous thousand years and more. In this sense, one might argue that the Protestant Reformation is incomplete, that it did not fully realize the high ideals that were set for it.

For the doctrines that Protestantism inherited to be considered true, they had to be found in the Bible. And precisely because they were considered true already, there was and is tremendous pressure to read those truths back into the Bible, whether or not they are actually there. Translation and interpretation are seen as working hand in hand, and as practically indistinguishable, because Protestant Christians don't like to imagine themselves building too much beyond what the Bible spells out for itself. So even if most if not all of the ideas and concepts held by modern Protestant Christians can be found, at least implied, somewhere in the Bible, there is a pressure (conscious or unconscious) to build up those ideas and concepts within the biblical text, to paraphrase or expand on what the Bible does say in the direction of what modern readers want and need it to say.¹⁰¹

BeDuhn goes on to provide example after example where translators pad and tweak the text through punctuation, capitalization, and word choices to bend scripture toward their preferred interpretations. In what follows, we will consider five cases to illustrate this bias as well as empower readers to make their own interpretations.

9.2 God's Form or God's Nature? (Philippians 2.6-7)

Let's begin with Philippians 2.6-7—a text that many see as evidence for the incarnation of God (the Son) into human flesh in the person of Jesus Christ. However, the text allows for other possibilities that some of our translations exclude from view. For example, the NAB says in the footnote, “Either a reference to Christ's preexistence and those aspects of divinity that he was willing to give up in order to serve in human form, or to what the man Jesus refused to grasp at to attain divinity.”¹⁰² Here is what the Bible says followed by a word-for-word translation and then three of popular dynamic equivalence versions:

Philippians 2.6-7

NA28	ὁς ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ ὑπάρχων οὐχ ἄρπαγμὸν ἠγήσατο τὸ εἶναι ἴσα θεῷ, ἀλλ' ἐαυτὸν ἐκένωσεν μορφὴν δούλου λαβών...
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¹⁰¹ BeDuhn, pp. 163-164.

¹⁰² See note on Philippians 2.6 in *New American Bible*, revised edition, (Washington DC: Confraternity of Christian Doctrine, Inc., 2011).

ESV	who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, by taking the form of a servant...
NLT	Though he was God, he did not think of equality with God as something to cling to. Instead, he gave up his divine privileges; he took the humble position of a slave...
NIV	Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant...
GNT	He always had the nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to remain equal with God. Instead of this, of his own free will he gave up all he had, and took the nature of a servant...

The NLT translates out the ambiguity here in the phrase ἐν μορφῇ θεοῦ “in form of God/god” and outrightly asserts Jesus’ deity. The NIV and GNT change the word to “nature” probably as a nod to the term οὐσία *ousia* (substance) found in the Nicene Creed. (Greek has a word for nature (φύσις), but that is not what occurs here.) More literal versions like the ESV, NASB, CSB, NRSV, and even the NET preserve the original terminology, “form of God,” allowing readers to make up their own minds on how to interpret this passage.

9.3 Bow or Worship? (*Proskuneo*)

We can find a similar issue in how Bibles render προσκυνέω (*proskuneo*), a word that simply means to bow down, prostrate oneself, or pay homage. This gesture of respect was customary when greeting someone of a higher status whether a wealthy person, a king, an angel, or God himself. It is at the discretion of the reader of the GNT to decide what the physical act of bowing implies. In other words, *proskuneo* contains an inherent ambiguity of meaning. It could mean religious worship or just a sign of respect. To make matters worse, our English word worship has narrowed over the centuries to specify an act done to God alone. As a result of the broadness of the Greek word and the narrowness of the English word, some translators have decided to literally translate *proskuneo* as “bow down” while others render it “worship” subtly nudging readers toward thinking the recipient of this gesture is, in fact, God. Let’s consider two incidents from a variety of translations to see how they translate this word.

Version	Matthew 18.26	Matthew 2.11
NA28	πεσὼν οὖν ὁ δοῦλος προσεκύνει αὐτῷ λέγων· μακροθύμησον ἐπ’ ἐμοί...	...εἶδον τὸ παιδίον μετὰ Μαρίας τῆς μητρὸς αὐτοῦ, καὶ πεσόντες προσεκύνησαν αὐτῷ...
Literal	falling therefore the slave bowed to him saying, "Be patient with me"	...they saw the child with Mary his mother, and falling they bowed to him...
NET	Then the slave threw himself to the ground before him, saying, "Be patient with me..."	...they...saw the child with Mary his mother, they bowed down and worshiped him...
NIV	At this the servant fell on his knees before him. "Be patient with me," he begged...	...they saw the child with his mother Mary, and they bowed down and worshiped him...

NAB	At that, the servant fell down, did him homage, and said, "Be patient with me..."	...they saw the child with Mary his mother. They prostrated themselves and did him homage...
NRSV	So the slave fell on his knees before him, saying, "Have patience with me..."	...they saw the child with Mary his mother; and they knelt down and paid him homage...

What we find is that all these versions of Matthew 18.26 translate the combination of “falling” and “bowing” in an action of respect. Translators correctly recognize that the person receiving the bowing here is another human being. However, theological bias shows its face in our second example. In Matthew 2.11, the magi arrive at the house to pay their respects to the child they believe is the king of the Jews (cf. Matthew 2.2). The text gives us no indication that these magi believed that this baby was divine. However, the NET and NIV force the issue by translating “bow” as “worship.” Even though both texts (Matthew 18.26 and 2.11) use the same two words for falling down (πίπτω) and prostrating (προσκυνέω), the translators rendered them differently. BeDuhn helpfully explains the problem:

[T]ranslators have *interpreted* the gesture referred to by the Greek term *proskuneo* as implying “worship.” They then have *substituted* that interpretation in place of a translation. I am not going to enter into a debate over interpretation. It is always possible that the interpretation of the significance of the gesture *may be* correct. But the simple translation “prostrate,” or “do homage,” or “do obeisance” is *certainly* correct. So then the question is raised, why depart from a certain, accurate translation to a questionable, possibly inaccurate one? The answer is that, when this occurs, the translators seem to feel the need to add to the New Testament support for the idea that Jesus was recognized to be God...When we observe how these same translators choose “worship” when the gesture is made to Jesus by certain persons, and choose other English words to translate the very same Greek term when the gesture is directed to someone other than Jesus, or is directed to Jesus by someone whom they regard as not qualifying as a true believer, their inconsistency reveals their bias...The Reformation fought for the access of all believers to the Bible and the right of the individual to directly encounter and interpret the text. Modern translators undermine that cause when they publish interpretations rather than translations, still trying to direct readers to the understanding acceptable to the beliefs and biases of the translators themselves.¹⁰³

This is the key issue for us: publishing interpretations as translations. Exegesis is the responsibility of the reader not the translator. When these two get muddled together, translations become frighteningly vulnerable to doctrinal biases.

9.4 Firstborn of or Firstborn over? (Colossians 1.15)

A third example of translators’ bias comes from Colossians 1.15. The key phrase here is “firstborn of all creation” or “firstborn over all creation.”

Version	Colossians 1.15
NA28	ὁς ἐστὶν εἰκὼν τοῦ θεοῦ τοῦ ἀοράτου, πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως,

¹⁰³ BeDuhn, pp. 48-49.

Literal	who is image of the invisible God, firstborn of all creation
NASB	He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.
CSB	He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation.
NLT	Christ is the visible image of the invisible God. He existed before anything was created and is supreme over all creation
GNT	Christ is the visible likeness of the invisible God. He is the first-born Son, superior to all created things.

The NASB, along with a majority of formal equivalence versions, has “of” whereas the other versions I cited mostly have “over.” Although this may seem like a small difference, it has significant consequences. According to traditional doctrine, the son of God is uncreated, or as the Nicene Creed put it, “begotten not made.” The word “of,” which is the standard and most common way of translating the genitive case in Greek, implies that Jesus is the first member of creation to be born whereas “over” separates Christ from creation.¹⁰⁴ The former translation lays the classical dogma of eternal generation¹⁰⁵ open to dispute whereas the latter unequivocally endorses it. Still, the NLT and GNT could not content themselves to inject a smidgeon of interpretation into their translation when they could spell out precisely what they want their readers to believe. Thus, they both add in the word “supreme” though there is no corresponding Greek word to justify this editorialization.

Ironically, the translations that most egregiously succumb to the temptation to tweak, add, or rewrite scripture are those with the most stringent faith commitments to the inspiration of scripture. Yet, such tampering betrays a low confidence in what the Bible says on its own. Translators are better off conveying the text of scripture without adjusting it and empowering readers to figure out what it means.

9.5 Did Jesus Claim To Be “I AM?” (John 8.58)

We can find another example of widespread translation bias in John 8.58. In this short verse, we have two major issues to examine. One pertains to how translations render ἐγὼ εἰμί (*ego eimi*) and the other is how they order the words. Here are a smattering of translations to compare.

Version	John 8.28	John 8.58	John 9.9
NA28	τότε γνώσεσθε ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι	πρὶν Ἀβραάμ γενέσθαι ἐγὼ εἰμί.	ἐκεῖνος ἔλεγεν ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι

¹⁰⁴ In Daniel Wallace’s discussion of this text, he argues (rather weakly) for a genitive of subordination “over” instead of a partitive genitive “of.” Even though this text fails to meet the grammatical criteria, he decides the matter on exegetical grounds, substituting interpretation for translation. However, his honesty shines through in his classification of Colossians 1.15 under the heading “Disputed Examples” rather than “Clear Examples.” Daniel Wallace, *Greek Beyond the Basics* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), p. 104.

¹⁰⁵ Eternal generation is the classical understanding of how Jesus can be both eternal and a son. To be eternal means never coming into existence while sonship implies a beginning due to procreation. The idea of eternal generation attempts to preserve both the filial and eternal aspects of the son by teaching the father generated him from all eternity.

Literal	then you will know that I am	before Abraham came to be I am	that one was saying "I am"
CSB	then you will know that I am he	before Abraham was, I am.	He kept saying, "I'm the one."
NWT	then you will know that I am he	before Abraham came into existence, I have been.	The man kept saying: "I am he."
LB	then you will realize that I am he	I was in existence before Abraham was ever born!	And the beggar said, "I am the same man!"
NAB	then you will realize that I AM	before Abraham came to be, I AM.	He said, "I am."
NKJV	then you will know that I am He	before Abraham was, I AM.	He said, "I am he."

Reading down the middle column for John 8.58, we see that the NAB and NKJV capitalized the words "I AM" whereas the other versions in the table, not to mention, most others as well, did not capitalize the word "am." The reason these translations capitalized "am" is because they believe Jesus is claiming a connection to Exodus 3.14 where God speaks from the burning bush to Moses, "This is what you are to say to the Israelites: I AM has sent me to you" (CSB). Now, maybe Jesus is alluding to this title for God, but that is a matter of interpretation. The Greek manuscripts are in all capitals, so this is a translation's editorialization. What's more, the Hebrew phrase traditionally translated "I AM" in Exodus 3.14 (אֲנִי הוּאֵ) is in the imperfect tense, which typically maps to a future tense in English (i.e. "I will be" not "I am").¹⁰⁶

I have quoted three texts in the chart above as a way of ferreting out bias. If translations render the exact phrase differently, we are on good grounds to suspect philological shenanigans. As it turns out, the NAB is the most grievous offender here. For it translates "I AM" in all capitals when Jesus says it (John 8.28, 58) and "I am" when we find the identical phrase on the lips of the blind man in John 9.9. If the term really is a divine title, then why should the blind man get a pass? Translations should have consistency and leave interpretation up to the readers rather than eliminating ambiguity and forcing them to see it their way.

Next, let's examine the word ordering for John 8.58. Greek typically does not follow English rules for word order. To illustrate, let's consider these two texts from John, both of which have similar constructions to John 8.58.

Version	John 14.9	John 15.27
NA28	τοσοῦτω χρόνω μεθ' ὑμῶν εἰμι	ἀπ' ἀρχῆς μετ' ἐμοῦ ἔστε

¹⁰⁶ John Goldingay's *The First Testament* has "I will be," Robert Alter's *The Hebrew Bible: The Five Books of Moses* has "Ehyeh" with a footnote that says "I will be," *The Stone Edition* has "I Shall Be," Everett Fox's *The Shocken Bible* has "EHYEH/I-WILL-BE-THERE," and Martin Luther had "Ich werde sein." If Exodus 3.14 said "I am" the Hebrew would have been אֲנִי הוּאֵ not אֲנִי הוּאֵ. The Greek from the Septuagint translates the phrase ὁ ὢν "the being" rather than ἐγὼ εἰμί "I am." Whether we read from the Hebrew or Greek, "I am" is simply not what God said to Moses.

Literal	for so much time with you I am	from (the) beginning with me you are
NASB	Have I been so long with you	you have been with Me from the beginning.

The literal translation is obviously inverted, which is why the NASB (along with virtually every other translation) reorders it as shown. Furthermore, the NASB correctly changes the tense from present to perfect (from “am” to “have been”) based on timing signals in the clause.¹⁰⁷ This is standard operating procedure. So, what happened in John 8.58. In the examples above, the CSB, NAB, NKJV, along with dozens of other English versions, all retain the original Greek word order. Leaving the sentence inverted is not proper English (unless maybe your name is Yoda). I cited two translations above that part from the traditional inverted order to render the sentence in straightforward English: the NWT and the LB. The former is the translation of the Jehovah’s Witnesses and the latter was the work of an evangelical scholar, Kenneth N. Taylor. These are strange bedfellows. However, plenty of other translations likewise reorder the sentence in John 8.58, including the 1996 version of the NLT.¹⁰⁸ BeDuhn writes:

Why would translators, whose job it is to make the Bible into comprehensible, good quality English, choose an awkward, ungrammatical rendering instead? Why do Bible translations which in thousands of other verses freely change word order relative to the original Greek, suddenly find a reason to follow exactly the Greek, producing an ungrammatical and syntactically strained sentence, in this instance?...The answer is theological bias.¹⁰⁹

Now, before moving on, I want to mention one more translation possibility for John 8.58. As we saw above in John 8.28 and 9.9, nearly all the versions add in an implied predicate when they translate ἐγὼ εἰμί (*ego eimi*) as “I am he” or “I am the one.” The text does not read “I am he,” but merely “I am.” Nevertheless, in Greek, saying “I am” often just means “it is I” or, more colloquially, “it’s me.” Furthermore, earlier in the Gospel of John “I am he” stands in for “I am the Christ.” Here is that incident:

John 4.25-26 (NRSV)

25 The woman said to him, “I know that Messiah is coming” (who is called Christ). “When he comes, he will proclaim all things to us.” 26 Jesus said to her, “I am he, the one who is speaking to you.”

¹⁰⁷ See Smyth’s rule 1885: “The present, when accompanied by a definite or indefinite expression of past time, is used to express an action begun in the past and continued in the present. The ‘progressive perfect’ is often used in translation.” Herbert Weir Smyth, *Greek Grammar* (Oxford: Benediction Classics, 2014), pp. 422-423. The BDF addresses this situation in rule 322 under “the perfective present” where it cites examples of present tense verbs with a past tense meaning, including Luke 13.7; 15.29; John 15.27; and John 8.58 (though there is a typo and it read John 5.58, which doesn’t exist). F. Blass, A. Debrunner, Robert Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1961), p. 168.

¹⁰⁸ For translations that reorder the sentence, see the *Wessex Gospels* (1175), *The Bible* by James Moffatt (1935), *The New Testament in the Language of the People* by C. B. Williams (1937), *An American Translation* by Edgar J. Goodspeed (1939), *The Original New Testament* by Hugh Schonfield (1985), and *The International English Bible* by a committee under Stanley L. Morris (2014). See also *The Unvarnished New Testament* by Andy Gaus (1991), which renders it “before Abraham was born, I have already been.” Also, see the footnotes in the original 1971 NASB and the 1996 NLT.

¹⁰⁹ BeDuhn, p. 107.

The phrase translated “I am he” here is ἐγὼ εἰμί (*ego eimi*)—the identical two words of John 8.58. What’s more, in the two previous instances of this very phrase in chapter eight, both of them work the same way as John 4.26. Here they are:

John 8.24 (NRSV)

I told you that you would die in your sins, for you will die in your sins unless you believe that I am he."

John 8.28 (NRSV)

So Jesus said, "When you have lifted up the Son of Man, then you will realize that I am he, and that I do nothing on my own, but I speak these things as the Father instructed me.

Jesus was obviously not working hard to convince his interlocutors that he existed here. He wasn’t saying, “You will die in your sins unless you believe that I exist,” though that is a possible translation. He wasn’t saying, “You will die in your sins unless you believe that I AM,” as if this would be recognizable code for his unbelieving enemies. Who is Jesus in the Gospel of John? It’s clear from John 4.26, that he thinks of himself as the messiah. But, we don’t have to depend on that sole reference, since John tells us quite plainly his overarching point for writing the gospel:

John 20.31 (NRSV)

But these are written so that you may come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, the Son of God, and that through believing you may have life in his name.

We don’t have to guess at the point here. John’s express purpose was to convince people that Jesus is messiah. So, it is possible that this was what Jesus meant in John 8.58 as the following translations put it¹¹⁰:

Version	John 8.58
ED	Before Abraham was born, I am he.
REV	before Abraham was born, I am the one.
KGV	Before Abraham came into existence, I am the one!
OGFT	before Abraham ever existed, I am the Messiah.
WGM	Before Abraham appeared on the scene, I am (the one anticipated)

My goal here is not to take a side on this interpretational issue, but merely to show the possibilities. Jesus may have employed “I am” in order to signal his deity; he may have asserted his existence prior to Abraham; or he may have been claiming to be the messiah. All of these are possible, but only one of them is allowed in most translations. And this boycott on other renderings is not for grammatical but theological reasons, which by definition is bias.

¹¹⁰ One version takes “before” as priority and renders it, “I am of higher status than Abraham ever was” (NEV).

9.6 Spirit Who or Spirit Which?

Another area where bias shines through in many of our English translations is how they deal with spirit. In Hebrew spirit is רֹחַ *ruach* (feminine) and πνεῦμα *pneuma* (neuter) in Greek and gets translated as air, breath, wind, mind, spirit, or Spirit. Even though translators refrain from bias in the majority of spirit usages, when they come to God’s spirit or holy spirit, suddenly theological prejudices begin manifesting. Before discussing this issue further, I want to look at three examples: one from the OT and two from the NT. First up is the incident when God decided to empower other leaders in Israel beyond Moses to lead the people.

Version	Numbers 11.17
BHS	וְאַצְלֹתִי מִן־הָרוּחַ אֲשֶׁר עָלֶיךָ וְשִׂמְתִּי עֲלֵיהֶם
Literal	And I will withdraw from the spirit which (is) on you and I will put on them
ESV	And I will take some of the Spirit that is on you and put it on them
NASB	and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put Him upon them
NET	and I will take part of the spirit that is on you, and will put it on them
NRSV	and I will take some of the spirit that is on you and put it on them;
JPS	and I will draw upon the spirit that is on you and put it upon them

As we can see from the Hebrew, all the letters are capitalized, so when it comes to capitalization in our translations, that is the prerogative of the translators. Both the ESV and the NASB, two of the most literal English versions, capitalized the ‘S’ on Spirit while the NET, NRSV, and JPS did not. These two committees did this for theological reasons, thinking that Spirit here is the Holy Spirit, mentioned primarily in the NT. The NASB goes still further by adding in the word “whom” to nudge the reader towards seeing the spirit as a person rather than a thing. The other translations all employ “that,” which is a flexible word used for both people and objects. Did God take a thing called spirit from Moses and distribute it to the seventy others or did he take an individual named Spirit and somehow expand his reach to include the seventy others? Since the context does not give any clues to the latter idea, translations are wise to either stick to the former or at least preserve the ambiguity. Let’s now turn to take into account two texts from the NT.

Version	John 7.39	1 Corinthians 2.12
NA28	περὶ τοῦ πνεύματος ὃ ἔμελλον λαμβάνειν οἱ πιστεύσαντες εἰς αὐτόν	ἡμεῖς δὲ οὐ τὸ πνεῦμα τοῦ κόσμου ἐλάβομεν ἀλλὰ τὸ πνεῦμα τὸ ἐκ τοῦ θεοῦ
Literal	concerning the spirit which those who believed in him were about to receive	and we received not the spirit of the world but the spirit which (is) from God
NIV	meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive.	What we have received is not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God

CSB	about the Spirit. Those who believed in Jesus were going to receive the Spirit	Now we have not received the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who comes from God
NLT	of the Spirit, who would be given to everyone believing in him	And we have received God's Spirit (not the world's spirit)
NRSV	about the Spirit, which believers in him were to receive	Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit that is from God

Now that we are in NT territory, the theological bias comes through much stronger. Not only does each of these translations capitalize Spirit, but they all also change the word “which” to “who(m).” The Greek in each of these verses is not confusing or ambiguous. As I showed in the literal translation, both John 7.39 and 1 Corinthians 2.12 refer to the spirit as a “which” not a “who” (or, to put it differently, as a thing and not a person). Once again, the NRSV shows restraint, but ends up with something of a hybrid solution. It capitalizes Spirit as if a name, but then follows the Greek grammar of things in John 7.39.

What is going on here? What we are seeing here is not the result of difficult or confusing Greek, but the effect of a theological tradition, going back to the fourth century. In AD 381 Christian leaders gathered in Constantinople and defined the spirit as Spirit with a capital ‘S’—a person equally worshipped and glorified with the Father and the Son. They did not see the holy spirit as God’s presence in the world or a gift to aid believers, but as *the* Holy Spirit, a distinct person of God with *his* own mental life distinct from the Father and Son, though fully sharing in their one essence. Now, my intention here is not to argue with this dogma, but merely to point out that this post-biblical theology lurks in the background for many translators today whether they are conscious of it or not. Perhaps more explanation can help clarify this point.

The Greeks have three genders: masculine, feminine, and neuter. As it turns out, the word for spirit is neuter, so pronouns that refer back to it are likewise neuter. Thus, the Greek reader of the NT gets the impression that the spirit is an “it” not a “he.” Now, it was possible for the NT authors to indicate that they saw the spirit as a person and not a thing. They could have intentionally broken the rules of grammar to employ masculine pronouns instead of neuter ones as they do in other places.¹¹¹ For example, In Colossians 2.19, Paul uses the grammatically feminine word “head” for Christ, yet when he uses a pronoun to refer back, he chooses a masculine one. Additionally, in Matthew 25.32, Jesus talks about gathering in all the nations (neuter) and dividing them (masculine). So, if the NT writers could bend gender from impersonal to personal when neuter words referred to persons, then we should expect the same sort of anomaly in reference to the spirit—if they really did believe the spirit was a person.

However, as we saw above, this is not the case. Nevertheless, some scholars have pointed to a smattering of other texts¹¹² to make a grammatical argument for natural gender with respect to the spirit in the NT. However, after working through each of these, Greek grammar expert and evangelical scholar, Daniel Wallace, concluded:

¹¹¹ More examples of natural gender are Matthew 28.19; Galatians 4.19; Acts 21.36; Mark 9.25-26. See also Daniel Wallace’s impressive list in “[Greek Grammar and the Personality of the Holy Spirit](#),” Bulletin for Biblical Research 13.1 (2003) pp. 97-125, Institute for Biblical Research, 2003, fn. 6, p. 98.

¹¹² John 14.26; 15.26; 16.7, 13-14; Ephesians 1.14; 2 Thessalonians 2.6-7; 1 John 5.7

There is no text in the NT that clearly or even probably affirms the personality of the Holy Spirit through the route of Greek grammar. The basis for this doctrine must be on other grounds...I am not denying the doctrine of the Trinity, of course, but I am arguing that we need to ground our beliefs on a more solid foundation.¹¹³

Thus, one must make a case for the personality of the spirit on theological not grammatical grounds.¹¹⁴ If this is the case, then translations shouldn't read into the text their doctrinal conclusions, but instead do their best to preserve the ambiguity so readers can make up their own minds.

Of course, we all read scripture in light of our current convictions, but we have to be careful not to change scripture to exclude other interpretations as well. For relative pronouns we have a ready solution at hand. By translating it "who" we establish the personhood of the Spirit while rendering it "which" eliminates personhood. However, translators could use the word "that," which is equally able to refer to persons or things. In so doing, translations would make both interpretations available and pass on the ambiguity to the reader who can then make the decision on the basis of the total counsel of scripture on the topic.

We should not allow our doctrines to determine the text even if we are confident that they are correct. To do so is like a doctor who believes that cancer is the root cause of all sickness. Someone comes in for an examination, and though the patient's symptoms line up perfectly with the common flu virus, the doctor finds ways of convincing himself that cancer is the true culprit. Every test he orders comes back negative, but still he knows, in his bones, that chemotherapy is the right treatment. When translators predetermine what they know the Bible should say at the outset, they fall into the same pattern of misdiagnosing the grammar. Synthesizing scripture into doctrine is an important endeavor, but we have to be careful about the order. If we remake our English versions in the image of our beliefs, then we fall victim to circular reasoning and lose the ability to employ that translation as evidence at all. BeDuhn nicely concludes:

Why make the Bible less by making it an echoing voice of later, and by no means universally accepted doctrine? Why make it a prop for the creeds of later centuries, of later interpretations, rather than a world-changing event in its own right? And what does that sort of imposition on the Bible say about the "truth" of those who would commit it? To me, it expresses a lack of courage, a fear that the Bible does not back up their "truth" enough. To let the Bible have its say, regardless of how well or poorly that say conforms to expectations or accepted forms of modern Christianity is an exercise in courage or, to use another word for it, faith.¹¹⁵

10 Conclusion

Now, that we have worked through the pertinent issues of textual criticism and translation philosophy for English Bibles, we are in a good position to consider how to choose a great translation. Let's begin by reviewing what we've seen so far. We started by considering the textual base of Bible translations. This is absolutely foundational since the best translators in the world cannot produce an accurate translation when their source texts have corruptions in them. For the OT, it's important that the

¹¹³ Wallace, "Greek Grammar," pp. 122, 125.

¹¹⁴ See my "[Translating the Holy Spirit 1](#)," (2015) which goes into greater depth on the grammatical question and my "[Translating the Holy Spirit 2](#)," (2016) which focuses on the theological question at restitutio.org.

¹¹⁵ BeDuhn, p. 168.

translation use not only the Leningrad Codex, but also other Hebrew manuscripts, including the Dead Sea Scrolls, the other half a dozen manuscripts from the tenth century, and the Samaritan Pentateuch. Furthermore, translators should consult ancient translations in Syriac, Greek, and Latin. All this information is accessible in the apparatus of the *Biblia Hebraica Quinta* (BHQ) though some of it is lacking in earlier versions like the *Biblical Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (BHS). For the NT, the translation should use the latest critical Greek text available, which at the time of this writing is either the *Nestle-Aland 28th Edition* (NA28) or the *United Bible Societies 5th Edition* (UBS5). Using older editions excludes recent manuscript discoveries from the translation.

Next, we looked at the two main translation philosophies: dynamic and formal equivalence. Although dynamic equivalence versions are more readable, and, in some cases, more insightful and refreshing, they cede too many interpretation decisions to the translator. Now, a few dynamic equivalence translations have compensated for this by including copious notes in their margins, letting readers know when they could have translated a section differently, but this is more the exception than the rule. Formal equivalence translations, however, generally strive to put readers in touch with the original languages as much as English syntax will allow. This sometimes results in less idiomatic, unfamiliar language, which can be difficult for inexperienced Bible readers.

Then we surveyed a number of translation decisions that get made at the outset, including units of measurement, idioms, God's name, gender inclusiveness, lexicography, editorial helps, and vocabulary. Although most of these are matters of personal preference, I'd like to address two of these briefly. Even the most literal translations have customarily hid God's name, יהוה "Yahweh," from readers, replacing it with "the LORD." Striking God's personal name from the record seems to me not only bold and hubristic, but outright deceptive, since it changes the meaning of countless verses and introduces confusion once the reader arrives in the NT. The second issue I'd like to revisit is lexicography—the kinds of dictionaries that translators use. Over the years, we've gained a better understanding of many Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek words used in the Bible. This means that, once again, older translations not only had limited access to the best manuscripts, but that their understanding of the language was not as good as ours is today. This underscores one of the overarching points we've repeatedly seen throughout—newer translations are often more accurate than older ones.

After looking at the standards translations set for themselves, we considered two enduring corruptions: Mark 16.9-20 and John 7.53-8.11. I made the case that these two texts are foreign to the initial versions of Mark and John, and therefore, they should not appear in English Bibles. The last two decades have witnessed increased honesty on this issue, with translators employing square brackets or font changes to alert readers to the problem. Many versions also insert phrases like "the earliest manuscripts do not include these verses" right in the main text. Although, I'm thankful for the increased honesty, we need to go further and omit the forgeries from the Gospels and relegate them to the footnotes as all recent Bibles have done for the corruption in 1 John 5.7-8.

Next, we took some time to review the *King James Version* (KJV). We saw that the KJV was itself a revision of earlier English Bibles, going back to William Tyndale's magisterial work in the sixteenth century. Even though the KJV was a stunning work of literary art and it upheld a high standard for accuracy, we found two major flaws with it. The first was that the source texts they translated from were very late by today's standards. In the four centuries since the KJV, we've found thousands of more Hebrew and Greek manuscripts, many of which are much younger than the ones available to the KJV translators. This means that the KJV is an accurate translation of late, corrupted manuscripts. Secondly,

we saw that many of the archaic English words in the KJV no longer mean today what they meant originally (even in the 1769 revision). This results in the unintentional deception of readers, something that the original translators would never have wanted. Thus, we concluded that recent translations are better than the old KJV (or the NKJV).

Then we swung to the opposite perspective and analyzed a recent single-translator idiomatic translation: *The Message* (MSG) by Eugene Peterson. We saw first-hand how a translation dedicated to readability, immediate comprehension, and fresh insight results in reading speculations about what the text means into the translation. Some of Peterson's insights were probably spot on while others were off. However, there's no way for the reader to know when the MSG took some liberty with the text and when it accurately reflected the original. The end result of this extreme form of dynamic equivalence is a fresh, exciting, but wholly untrustworthy translation.

Lastly, we looked at more insidious examples of bias found in popular committee-based translations from both dynamic and formal equivalence traditions. We looked at Philippians 2.6-7, the word προσκυνέω (*proskuneo*), Colossians 1.15, John 8.58, and personal pronouns for the spirit/Spirit. We saw over and over again where translations tweaked the text to make it conform better to their doctrinal commitments. Although we found that this tendency was more pronounced with thought-for-thought versions, it also appeared in word-for-word translations to varying degrees.

With all of this in mind, here is a brief list of diagnostic questions to ask when considering an English translation to read.

1. Did the translator(s) consider important textual alternatives in the Hebrew text apart from the traditional Leningrad Codex?¹¹⁶
2. Did they use the latest Greek critical text?
3. Did they prioritize accuracy over readability, sales, or emotional impact?¹¹⁷
4. Did they preserve biblical units of measure or convert them to modern quantities?
5. Did they preserve biblical idioms or provide modern equivalents?
6. Did they preserve masculine language or strive for gender inclusiveness?
7. What editorial helps did they add in?
8. What vocabulary standards did they employ?
9. Did they use the latest and best Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek lexicons?
10. Did they preserve God's name or replace it with the LORD?
11. Did they omit Mark 16.9-20 and John 7.53-8.11?
12. How much bias did they inject into texts like Philippians 2.6; Matthew 2.11; Colossians 1.15; John 8.58; and John 7.39?

Of course, this list of twelve questions is not exhaustive, but it should at least enable us to arrive at a solid diagnostic for any given version. We should keep in mind, also, that questions four through eight

¹¹⁶ Here are a couple of quick verses to check. In Genesis 47.21 the Leningrad text translates as "he removed them to the cities" but the Samaritan Pentateuch, Septuagint, and Vulgate read "he made servants of them." In Isaiah 14.4 the Leningrad text has "the golden city ceased" but the Dead Sea Scrolls read, "his assault has ceased."

¹¹⁷ By accuracy, I do not mean the translation must be formal equivalence since some of the more conservative dynamic equivalence versions do a great job of staying close to the text and they provide marginal notes to clue readers in about alternate translation possibilities.

are more matters of personal taste than objective accuracy. Thus, I don't believe there is one translation that can perfectly deal with everyone's needs and situation. Sadly, many versions don't clue readers into what decisions they've made on these twelve questions in their prefaces.

One solution to all the problems we find in translation is to just stop using them and learn to read the actual Bible. Why hand over to others something so important? Why not learn the biblical languages? After all, we live in an age when many of us enjoy unprecedented quantities of leisure time. How do we spend this valuable currency? We watch Netflix, Hulu, and cable TV. We spend countless hours scrolling through social media and playing trivial games on our phones and tablets. We play engrossing video games on consoles and gaming computers. We read novels about mystery, romance, and fantasy. Meanwhile, we hardly pick up our Bibles, and if we do, we want something that's easy and emotionally exciting even if that means we must sacrifice accuracy. We don't want to read a literal translation since that takes work to understand. Meanwhile the great majority of us, living in this golden age of information access, free education, and copious leisure time, have never even read our Bibles—not even once. Most of us have never even read a single verse of scripture. We've only ever read translations, imbibing other peoples' take on what they think scripture says. Why not learn Greek online? Why not study Hebrew at a local synagogue? Trust me when I say that so much of the nuance and flavor of the language gets filtered out in translation. As the Italian saying goes, *traduttore, traditore* “translator, traitor,” any translation inevitably betrays the original to some degree. Why not take a class at the local university to get the foundations of Hebrew or Greek grammar? Now some of us are just too busy; we've got too many responsibilities to attend to right now. Others don't have the aptitude to learn a new language. Are the rest of us just lazy?

However, impassioned my plea is, I realize that most people will not take the time to learn to read either the OT or the NT in its original languages. In that case, we are left with analyzing our options and picking the best one we can. Furthermore, since there is no such thing as a perfect translation, we do well to read several different versions, especially from differing wings of Christianity whether evangelical, mainline, Roman Catholic, Jewish, or a minority group.¹¹⁸ Doing so will enable readers to spot hidden differences that would otherwise go unnoticed if we only drank from one stream of Christian thought. It will not do to tally up all the translations on a particular text as if popularity guaranteed truth. Nor is it helpful to compare a version to the KJV as if it was the arbiter of truth. Nor can we exclude single-author translations outright, because they can sometimes correct longstanding errors in the committee versions. In the end, we need to do the hard work of reading translation prefaces, carefully noting footnotes and marginalia, and comparing translations.

Lastly, I want to speak a word to other pastors and teachers of the Bible. The practice of scrolling through a bunch of translations until we find a version that puts the verse in a way that most agrees with the point we've predetermined to make is a seriously flawed methodology. First of all, we do well to recognize that any version we cite while teaching the Bible signals to our audience that we endorse that translation (unless we explicitly add a disclaimer). However, we may not even know how that translations handles other more controversial texts and we could unwittingly lead others astray, all for the sake of a slick phrasing or an attention-grabbing slide. Secondly, this practice is methodologically problematic, since it reduces the Bible to taste, giving in to the excessive subjectivism of our postmodern culture. Now, to be sure, some translations have more panache than other blander

¹¹⁸ Interestingly, Jason BeDuhn found over and over that the Jehovah's Witnesses *New World Translation* outperformed mainstream evangelical Bibles when it came to accuracy (at least on the texts he analyzed).

versions, but this cannot be our sole selection criterion. Rather, a Bible teacher whether online, in a church, at a home group, or in seminary should choose a version based on its accuracy. Thankfully today we have so many options from which to choose.

Although by now readers may be left with the impression that English Bibles are in a deplorable state, the situation is so much better than it was. We continue to find new manuscripts, increase our linguistic knowledge, and improve our grammatical precision. Furthermore, the past couple of decades have seen translation prefaces expanding to include many important details that remained hidden in older versions. Increasingly, the old practice of keeping translators' identities anonymous has given way to more transparency. Additionally, many well-established translations go through extensive revisions over the years, correcting inaccuracies and incorporating the suggestions of scholars. I believe we still have a long way to go when it comes to theological bias, but I find the increasing tendency to supply alternative renderings in the margins encouraging. Hopefully, these trends will continue, and we will steadily improve accuracy with time.

Appendix 1: Abbreviations

BDAG	Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich Greek Lexicon of the New Testament
GNT	Greek New Testament
HALOT	Hebrew Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament
HOT	Hebrew Old Testament
LXX	Septuagint (ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament)
ms.	manuscript
MT	Masoretic Text (Hebrew manuscripts written by the medieval scribes called Masoretes)
NT	New Testament
OT	Old Testament

English Bible Translations Referenced:¹¹⁹

Abv.	Full Name	Translator(s)	Year	Style
AG	The Unvarnished New Testament	Andy Gaus	1991	formal
BBE	The English Bible in Basic English	Samuel Henry Hooke	1964	formal
CBW	The New Testament in the Language of the People	Charles B. Williams	1937	dynamic
CSB	Christian Standard Bible	Evangelical Committee	2017	mixed
DBH	The New Testament	David Bentley Hart	2017	formal
ED	Emphatic Diaglott	Benjamin Wilson	1864	formal
EF	The Shocken Bible	Everett Fox	1997	formal
EJG	An American Translation	Edgar J. Goodspeed	1939	dynamic
FT	First Testament	John Goldingay	2018	formal
GNT	Good News Translation	Committee	1992	dynamic
HS	The Original New Testament	Hugh Schonfield	1985	dynamic
IEB	International English Bible	Evangelical Committee	2014	dynamic
JG	The First Testament	John Goldingay	2018	formal
JM	The Bible	James Moffatt	1935	dynamic
JPS	Jewish Publication Society	Jewish Committee	1985	formal
KGV	Kingdom of God Version	Ray Faircloth	2013	formal
KJV	King James Version	Anglican Committee	1769	formal

¹¹⁹ Year specified is the latest revision.

LEB	Lexham English Bible	Logos Software Committee	2011	formal
MSG	Message Bible	Eugene Peterson	2016	dynamic
NAB	New American Bible	Catholic Committee	2010	dynamic
NASB	New American Standard Bible	Evangelical Committee	1995	formal
NET	New English Translation	Evangelical Committee	2006	dynamic
NEV	New European Version	Christadelphians	2017	formal
NIV	New International Version	Evangelical Committee	2011	dynamic
NJB	New Jerusalem Bible	Catholic Committee	1985	dynamic
NKJV	New King James Version	Committee	1982	formal
NLT	New Living Translation	Evangelical Committee	2007	dynamic
NRSV	New Revised Standard Version	Mainline Committee	1989	formal
NWT	New World Translation	Jehovah's Witnesses	1984	formal
OGFT	One God, the Father, One Man Messiah Translation	Anthony Buzzard	2014	formal
PT	Passion Translation	Brian Simmons	ongoing	dynamic
RA	The Hebrew Bible	Robert Alter	2019	formal
REV	Revised English Version	Spirit & Truth Fellowship	ongoing	mixed
SE	The Stone Edition	Orthodox Jewish Committee	1998	formal
WGM	The Idiomatic Translation of the New Testament	William Graham MacDonald	2008	dynamic
YLT	Young's Literal Translation	J. N. Young	1898	formal

Appendix 2: A Case against Majority Text Priority

A small but vocal and popular group of scholars have pushed for the privileging of the Greek Majority Text of the NT over the eclectic critical texts of our time. This hypothesis was put forward way back in 19th century when John Burgon reacted against the work of Westcott and Hort. He argued that God would protect copyists from making errors. He writes:

I am utterly disinclined to believe—so grossly improbable does it seem—that at the end of 1800 years 995 copies out of every thousand, suppose, will prove untrustworthy; and that the one, two, three, four or five which remain, whose contents were till yesterday as good as unknown, will be found to have retained the secret of what the Holy Spirit originally inspired. I am utterly unable to believe, in short, that God's promise has so entirely failed, that at the end of 1800 years much of the text of the Gospel had in point of fact to be picked by a German critic out of a waste-paper basket in the convent of St. Catherine; and that the entire text had to be remodeled after the pattern set by a couple of copies which had remained in neglect during fifteen centuries, and had probably owed their survival to that neglect; whilst hundreds of others had been thumbed to pieces, and had bequeathed their witness to copies made from them.¹²⁰

Textual critics did not engage Burgon's points and more or less moved on without regard to his complaints. However, seven decades later, in 1956, Edward Hills renewed Burgon's critique followed by Zane Hodges in 1970. This perspective grew in popularity in subsequent decades and retains its ardent supporters online in the twenty-first century. However, these scholars and advocates for the majority text base their reasoning on a theological rather than a textual argument. They believe that God had to preserve scripture in an accessible manner throughout history. They argue that the majority text must be the original because it was most accessible to most Christians over the life of the Church. This is an interesting hypothesis, but it fails to comport with the facts of history. For this theory to be true, we would have conclude that all of the earliest manuscripts, including over a hundred papyri, and the earliest majuscules had gotten the Bible wrong and that the Christians who lived in those earliest centuries only had access to corrupted scripture. According to Daniel Wallace, "what is today the majority did not become a majority until the ninth century."¹²¹ Thus, did the majority of Christians have to wait nine centuries to gain access to the pure text of scripture? Now the keen majority text defender may respond that the majority text dominated in the early centuries too, but they were so well used that they did not survive to leave a textual trail of witnesses. This response begs the question, assuming the theory is true to prove it.

Take, for example, the *Pericope Adulterae* (John 7.53-8.11), which is lacking in the early versions of John. This whole incident is only found in Codex Bezae and later Byzantine manuscripts. So, should we conclude that the earliest Christians whose Bible simply went from John 7.53 to John 8.12 were all in the dark whereas medieval Christians were the enlightened ones with greater accuracy? Or, should we

¹²⁰ John Burgon, *Traditional Text of the Holy Gospels Vindicated and Established*, ed. Edward Miller (London: George Bell, 1896), pp. 11-12.

¹²¹ Daniel Wallace, "The Majority-Text Theory: History, Methods and Critique," *Journal of Evangelical Theological Studies* (June 1994) p. 205.

conclude, rather, that later scribes added this story in and then this corruption carried on into what became the majority text? The latter hypothesis is eminently more plausible, since it recognizes the tendency of texts to gather additions and corruptions over time, rather than the other way around.

We all do well to remember that the differences between the majority text and the other textual families do not affect any key doctrines. We can just easily find the way of salvation reading a majority text Bible as we can reading a Bible translated from the modern critical texts. Even so, why wallow in error when we have access to better manuscripts today?

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