

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

Some Cautions and Translations to Avoid

I wish to preface this final lesson on the history of the English Bible with a personal note. As a biblical scholar and as a teacher of both biblical Hebrew and biblical Greek, I regularly work in the original languages of the Bible. I have translated several books of the Bible from Hebrew to English and Greek to English. However, while my education qualifies me to do this kind of work, I would not want to offer my own version of the Bible. The various English Versions already available are quite sufficient. While I might have small differences of opinion over the translation of this or that phrase or what should be the best English equivalent for some particular Hebrew or Greek word, this does not mean that I should offer my own English Version. To me it would seem presumptuous and superfluous.

With respect to my preferences for Bible translations (a question that I am frequently asked by students), I recommend the *English Standard Version*, the *New Revised Standard Version*, the *New International Version*, the *New Jerusalem Bible*, and J. B. Philips' *The New Testament in Modern English*. These are all responsible translations by excellent scholars. They are not the only responsible translations on the market, for there certainly are others, but they are my personal preferences, because I believe them to be faithful to the ancient text of Holy Scripture. And, of course, I regularly cross-check even these Versions with the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* (the standard Hebrew Bible based on the Masoretic Text), the Septuagint, and the Greek New Testament (both the United Bible Society and the Nestle-Aland versions).

This personal note is appropriate, since in this final lesson I intend to address some English translations of the Bible that I do not consider good options for biblical study. No translator can entirely escape bias, of course, for we are all limited human creatures with less than perfect self-assessment and vision. (This is one reason translations by committee have an advantage over translations by an individual. Where one scholar fails to see his own bias, a fellow scholar will likely point it out.) With the plethora of translations on the market, the average Christian layperson is apt to be bewildered, which is unfortunate, since the work of translating the Bible aims at clarity, not confusion.

Unintentional Bias

Occasionally, I find that even responsible translators fall into traps of misjudgment, even if inadvertently, and they usually do so because they are unwittingly biased at a certain point. Two examples will suffice.

In Kenneth Wuest's *The New Testament: An Expanded Translation* (1956-59), for instance, he falls prey to a personal bias because he is committed to the theology of dispensationalism, only one of several eschatologies within the larger Christian family. In rendering 2 Thessalonians 2:6, compare side-by-side his translation concerning the eschatological man of lawlessness with the more literal ESV translation:

And now you know with a positive assurance that which [namely, the departure of the Church, the saints being assembled together to the Lord] is preventing his being disclosed [as to his true identity]. (Wuest)

And you know what is restraining him now so that he may be revealed in his time. (2 Thess. 2:6 ESV) (2 Thess. 2:6 ESV)

To do Wuest credit, he at least uses the word “expanded” in the title of his Version to indicate that his rendering of passages will sometimes go beyond the actual Greek text. His use of brackets tends toward the same thing. Nonetheless, Paul does not identify the restraining force is, and several different theological positions are possible. As New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce has noted concerning Wuest, ““Sometimes, indeed, one may wonder whether some of the shades of meaning have not been read into the Greek in order to be read out of it.” Some of Wuest’s renderings go beyond a strictly philological treatment of the Greek text and engage in theological supposition, not merely translation.

A similar misjudgment (in my view) comes in the committee translation of the New International Version Inclusive Language Edition, published in London (NIVi). This is an inclusive language version which, in the interests of gender neutrality, replaces the word “man” with a variety of alternatives that are gender neutral. Some of these replacements are not problematic, especially when both males and females seem to be part of the audience. However, in other cases it IS problematic, because the translators have changed singulars to plurals in order to achieve gender neutrality, and this methodology undercuts the orientation of a passage, eliminating its relevance for the individual. Here, as one example, compare the NIVi rendering with a more literal translation:

Here I am! I stand at the door and knock. If anyone hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in and eat with them, and they with me. (Rv. 3:20 NIVi)

Behold, I stand at the door and knock; if any one hears my voice and opens the door, I will come in to him and eat with him, and he with me. (Rv. 3:20 RSV)

What the reader gains in political correctness is lost with respect to the individual’s relationship to Christ.

Intentional Bias

Virtually since the beginning of Bible translation, which started with the early Christians during the Roman Period, it has been the firm conviction of responsible Bible translators that they should avoid injecting personal theological biases into the biblical text. The Bible as the Word of God stands above all biases, whether personal, cultural, Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. Anything less devalues Scripture as the God’s Word and allows sectarian ideas to be imported into the Bible, thus giving them the apparent authority of Scripture, even though they are not actually part of Scripture. Some of these so-called translations seem quite intentionally to import sectarian notions into the Scriptural text. Usually, those who publish them claim to offer new dimensions of spirituality or fresh

perspectives on ancient and/or modern culture. Often using functional equivalency as a gateway, they bring into the text of the Bible ideas they claim can legitimately be read into it, even though those ideas are not themselves part of the text. These are what I call tendentious translations. A tendentious translation is a Bible that intentionally works to support a theological or ideological agendum by bending the language of the translation. Here, we will briefly look at five:

- The New World Translation (1961)
- The Cotton Patch Gospel (published in four volumes between 1968 and 1973)
- Good as New (2004)
- The Voice (2012)
- The Passion (2017)

While I would not say these translations are without value, I would state unequivocally that they should not be used for serious biblical study. As such, I fear that I may tread upon some toes, but be that as it may, I feel it would be irresponsible to speak otherwise.

The New World Translation

Led by Frederick William Franz with an anonymous committee working under him, the Jehovah's Witnesses produced own translation of the Bible in 1961 with both Old and New Testaments.¹ Claiming accuracy, clarity, and a translation made directly from the original languages, they nonetheless rendered a number of passages so that they supported Jehovah's Witness theology and bent the translation accordingly. A central feature of Jehovah's Witness doctrine is that Christ was a created being. Here are two glaring examples of translational sleight of hand:

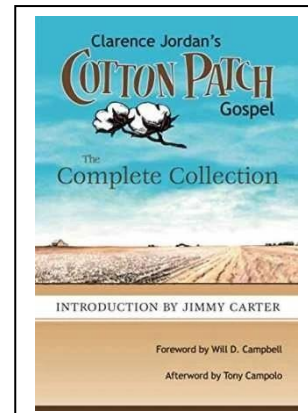
The Word was in the beginning with God and was a god. (Jn. 1:1-2, NWT) By using the phrase "was a god" to refer to Christ, they support the idea that Jesus was not fully God. Faithful translations render this as "The Word was God," not "a god."

Because by means of him all other things were created in the heavens and on the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, whether they are thrones or lordships or governments or authorities. All other things have been created through him and for him. Also, he is before all other things, and by means of him all other things were made to exist. (Col. 1:16-17, NWT) By inserting the word "other" four times in this passage (a word that is entirely absent in the Greek of this text), they obviously are protecting their theology that Christ was a created being. He may have created all "other" things, but in their theological view he was himself created as well, and they have bent their translation to support this position.

¹ In November 1954, Mr. Franz appeared in a court trial in Scotland, where he was asked if he was familiar with Hebrew. Under oath, he claimed he could read and follow the Bible in Hebrew, Greek, Latin, and several other languages. The following day, during the same trial, he was presented with a Hebrew text and asked if he could translate it. Alas, Mr. Franz was unable to do so and was forced to admit his inability. The Hebrew text they presented him was Genesis 2:4, and year after year I have my first year Hebrew students translate this passage—which invariably they are able to do without difficulty.

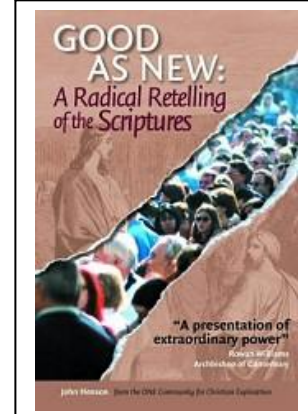
The Cotton Patch Gospel

Issued in four volumes, Clarence Jordan offered a highly unique translation of the New Testament that recasts the story of Jesus within the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s. Instead of Bethlehem, Jerusalem, and Galilee, the scenes are Selma, Birmingham, and Atlanta. Matthew 2, for instance, reads: “When Jesus was born in Gainesville, Georgia during the time that Herod was governor, some scholars from the Orient came to Atlanta and inquired, ‘Where is the one born to be governor of Georgia?’” While I am deeply sympathetic to the application of the Bible to the injustices of American culture, this effort toward relevancy falls far short of responsible translation.



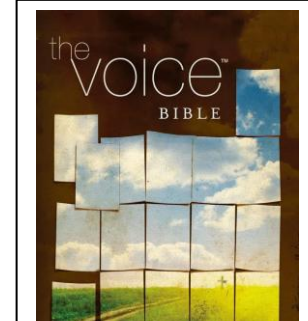
Good as New

In seeking a “less homophobically translated” English Version, John Henson imports a gay-friendly agendum into the Bible by restructuring or eliminating clear biblical language. Where St. Paul wrote, “*Now concerning the things about which you wrote... because of immoralities, let each man have his own wife, but let each woman have her own husband*” (NASB), Henson translates this as, “*Some of you think the best way to cope with sex is for men and women to keep right away from each other... My advice is for everyone to have a regular partner*” (1 Cor. 7:1 GN).



The Voice Bible

Brian McClaren assembled a team of scholars, artists, and musicians to produce an English Version with new insight into the “passion, grit, humor and beauty that is often lost in the translation process.” The end-product, however, is more of a paraphrase than a translation, and if used, one should remember that its use of stylized expansion-italics or additional phrasing intended to clarify the narrative are interpretative commentary, not canonical text.



The Passion Translation

Brian Simmons offers a translation that capitalizes on charismatic Christian themes, often reading into the text ideas that cannot be supported in the text itself. For instance, where Paul writes, “Paul and Timothy, servants of Jesus Christ...” (Phil. 1:1a ESV), Simmons translates, “My name is Paul and I’m joined by my spiritual son Timothy, both of us passionate servants of Jesus, the Anointed One...”

