

LOST IN TRANSLATION

(Are Modern Bible Translations Misleading Millions?)

www.thebiblejesus.com

Translation is the subtlest form of commentary.

Dr. Brian Simmons is an internationally known Christian minister who has birthed the Gateway Christian Fellowship in Connecticut, authored several books and is a digital technology expert to boot. Simmons has publicly stated that in 2009 Jesus Christ personally visited his room and commissioned him to write a new translation of the New Testament and the Hebrew Bible — a work he called **The Passion Translation (TPT)**.

His new translation initially received warm endorsements from leading church figures such as Bill Johnson (Bethel Church in California) who praised it as “one of the greatest things to happen with Bible translation in my lifetime”. Another enthusiastic supporter was Bobbie Houston, co-founder of Hillsong Church. However, since that early high praise, controversy over Simmons’s “translation” has increasingly grown to the point where its acceptance has dropped significantly ...

PREVIOUS ENDORSEMENTS REMOVED

For instance, Bible Gateway, a popular site that contains a wide range of Bible versions for ease of comparison, has removed TPT. Their reason for removing **The Passion Translation** from their recommended list of translations is because “it is a very loose paraphrase”.

Dr Andrew Wilson, a pastor with degrees in history and theology from Cambridge (MA) and King’s College London (PhD) and a columnist for *Christianity Today* is a pastor for New Frontiers International Church in London at King’s Church, points out that TPT is “not really a translation” due to its lack of accuracy to the original. It “inserts all kinds of concepts, words and ideas of which the original gives no hint whatsoever (despite the occasional footnotes which say “implied by the context ... and the manuscript sources are sketchy”).¹

I cite TPT to raise the question as to how accurate our Bible versions are anyway? Can anybody who does not read the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts have confidence that the essential message of those documents has been conveyed? After all, we are thousands of years (not to mention many cultural generations) removed from their world.

¹ Dr Wilson supplies a good number of examples to make his point. To see them Google “What’s Wrong With the Passion Translation”?

The intriguing mix of factors which influence translation also raises questions about the personal predispositions of the ones who are doing the translating. It is evident that no translator is completely free from their own predilections and biases.

The question is compounded when it is a panel or a board who are joined together by common convictions doing the translation work. There is of course, a certain system of checks and balances in a collegiate method. But the opposite danger is that one must subscribe to a certain theological creed or perspective to gain entry in the first place. Dissenting voices are either ignored or eventually expelled, no matter how competent their translating skills are. Minority reports are generally not received with enthusiasm!

“BUT I’M ONLY ONE VOICE!”

I had the privilege of sitting down with one of the members of the translation panel who produced the **English Standard Version (ESV)**. More than 100 “leading evangelical scholars and pastors” stated their aim for the **ESV** was to give modern readers “word-for-word accuracy, literary excellence, and depth of meaning” in what they claimed would be an “essentially literal” translation of the Bible. (Some of the highly acclaimed members on the panel included **J.I. Packer, Leyland Ryken, Gordon Wenham, House, J. and Dr. Bruce Winter.**)

I asked this highly accredited Christian academic to read out how the **ESV** translates **John 13: 3**. He read aloud, “Jesus, knowing that the Father had given all things into his hands, and that he had come from God and was going back to God, rose from supper ...”

I said, “You and I both read the Greek. So you know, and I know, the word “back” is not there. Why have you introduced a meaning foreign to what is stated in the text? (²)

“Well” the answer came, “I was only one voice on the panel!”

We must ask, “But did you use that voice?”

I think there are currently 52 different English translations, and still counting. Yes, the truism at the head of this article conveys a cautionary consideration: **Translation is the subtlest form of commentary.**

CAPITALS?

The original Greek Uncials were written with every single letter in every word a capital, and with all the words running into each other. Any punctuation such as a simple full stop

² ὑπάγω/*hypagō* simply means to withdraw, to go away, to leave. The Greeks had a perfectly appropriate word for “to return, to go back to” and it’s ὑποστρέφω/*hypostrephō*. The NT nowhere says Jesus returned or went back to where he was before. Indeed, the **ESV** correctly translates this word in **John 13:33; 14:28; 16: 5,10**, without a hint of returning to where one had been before. Even after his resurrection Jesus said, “Stop clinging to me; for I have not yet ascended to the Father .. I ascend to my Father and to your Father ...” (John 20: 17). The united testimony of the Bible is that Jesus went up to the Father.

(period) or comma, or question mark, or direct quotation marks, or for that matter, even the modern chapter breaks, reflect matters of subsequent translation convention. This all means that subtle translation — or, commentary? — intrusions have more than likely slipped in upon the original text in various guises.

Take the simple matter of capitalisation. One example is the very obvious and simple choice where modern translations place a capital ‘W’ on the word “**word**” in **John 1: 1**. The first seven or eight English translations prior to the **King James Version (KJV)** all translated “**the word**” with a small “w”. English translations thereafter have tended to capitalise it as “**the Word**”.

However, the capital “W” immediately directs readers’ thoughts a certain way. To the modern reader this capital “W” insinuates that **the Word** is and was a particular person — Jesus, the Son of God — prior to the Genesis creation. The dye has long been set in popular ‘church think’ where the huge majority of modern readers read it as, **In the beginning was the Son...!**

There is, let’s be frank, simply **no textual warrant for the capital ‘W’** — unless we approach the text with the *presupposition* that **the word** is a literal person, a Who. Truth of the matter is, it is perfectly legitimate to take **the word** as meaning precisely what it does in all of its previous OT occurrences, which is to say, the spoken command, the verbal fiat, the expressed promise or, the wise plan, of the Creator God. That’s the usual and natural and overwhelming understanding for “the word” in the Old and New Testament Scriptures. This example shows how a translator’s capital ‘W’ has indeed become **the subtlest form of commentary! (³)** Another example ...

THE TWO ‘LORDS’ IN THE HEBREW BIBLE.

In the Hebrew Bible there are two different words behind the one Greek (and English) word ‘Lord’. The best way to explain these ‘two Lords’ is in a visual and non-technical way. For the sake of the exercise, I have chosen **First Samuel 25** as you read it in any standard version such as the **NASB, RSV, NKJV, NIV**, etc. I have distinguished the ‘two Lords’ by using two contrasting colours which your eyes will immediately spot. After reading the narrative, my comments will make much clearer sense;

When Abigail saw David, she hurried and dismounted from her donkey, and fell on her face before David, and bowed herself to the ground. And she fell at his feet and said, “On me alone my lord be the blame ... Please do not let my lord pay attention to this worthless

³ Another unwarranted capitalisation is found in **John 8: 58** where the simple ‘verb to be’ (**εἰμι/eimi**) has been capitalised to read, “**I AM**” so as to give the impression that Jesus was claiming the Divine Name from **Exodus** for himself — not that I AM is what God claims for Himself there anyway! In every other single case where the ‘verb to be’ is translated in John’s Gospel, it is not capitalised. Another example where **translation is the subtlest form of commentary!**

man, Nabal ... but I, your maidservant, did not see the young men of **my lord** whom you sent.

“Now therefore, **my lord**, as the LORD lives, and as your soul lives, since the LORD has restrained you from shedding blood, and from avenging yourself by your own hand, now let your enemies, and those who seek evil against **my lord**, be as Nabal.

“And now let this gift which your maidservant has brought to **my lord**, be given to the young men who accompany **my lord**. Please forgive the transgression of your maidservant, for the LORD will certainly make **my lord** an enduring house, because **my lord** is fighting the battles of the LORD ... and should anyone rise up to pursue you and to seek your life, then the life of **my lord** shall be bound in the bundle of the living with the LORD your God ...

“And it shall come about when the LORD shall do for **my lord** according to all the good that He has spoken concerning you, and shall appoint you ruler over Israel, that this will not cause grief or a troubled heart to **my lord**, both by having shed blood without cause and by **my lord** having avenged himself. When the LORD shall deal well with **my lord**, then remember your maidservant.”

Then David said to Abigail, “Blessed be the LORD God of Israel, who sent you this day to meet me ...” (1 Sam. 25:23-32).

Even a casual reading of this OT narrative proves there are “two Lords” in the Hebrew Bible. There is the man whom **Abigail** calls “**my lord**” — i.e., David, the one whom she believes is chosen by God to replace King Saul as Israel’s anointed king. Abigail’s immediate superior is her human **lord**.

The translators of the Hebrew text are translating the word **adonj** (with short suffix vowel-pointing and pronounced **adonee**). And this **lord** throughout the OT never refers to the Almighty God who is referred to as the LORD. By capitalising the other ‘Lord’, the translators are advising us that a different word is being used to refer to the Almighty, and it’s the word **adonaj** (with long suffix vowel-pointing and pronounced **Adonay**). Also observe carefully that both David and Abigail define the LORD specifically as the LORD your God Who is the God of Israel. The Hebrew reader of the OT is in no doubt that there are “two Lords” and that one of them is a (human) **lord** and the other is the **LORD God**. (⁴)

THE DETERMINATIVE PSALM 110:1

The human lord, or master, is consistently translated as **lord** in all of its 195 times in the OT — with one very unfortunate exception.

⁴ In actual fact, **Adonaj** is the titular circumlocution for God’s Personal Name. The Hebrew reader sees the “four letters” of Yod hey vuv hey in the text but out of reverence for the Divine Name says **Adonaj**, i.e. LORD.

It's a dreadful exception because this Messianic Psalm is the foundational text for Jesus' identity. Jesus himself identified which 'Lord' he is by appealing to this verse (e.g. Matt. 20:29ff). And the apostles appealed to it in their understanding of Jesus' 'Lordship' (e.g. Acts 2: 33ff). Psalm 110:1 is quoted in the NT either in full or in part approximately 25 times. So we better get "the two Lords" sorted!

I will lay out a small sample of English versions to demonstrate the obfuscation of our translators on this critical text. Bear in mind that up until Psalm 110 in our modern Bibles there are 178 occurrences of *adonai* where a human *lord* (or occasionally an angelic superior) is referenced. Which is to say, that by the time we arrive at the 179th occurrence in Psalm 110: 1 translators have had dozens and dozens of times to get the 'two Lords' properly distinguished in this crucial Christological prophecy ...

The Lord said to my Lord ... (New Living Translation; NASB 1995; NRSV; NAB). No distinction is made between the "two Lords". If you hadn't read our passage from First Samuel 25 you would think there is nothing to see here!

The LORD said unto my Lord ... (KJV, NKJV) Almost the correct distinction! The first "Lord" is Yahweh, the LORD God of Israel. The second *lord* is David's human superior, his future descendant who is destined to inherit the Kingdom of God on behalf of the people of God. But observe how a capital 'L' has slipped in for the second 'lord' — even though in all of its previous OT occurrences it has no capital 'L'!

The Lord says to my lord ... (NAB revised edition) Again, almost right, for at least there is a distinction here, with the first 'Lord' bearing a capitalised "L", but surely, consistency demands the first Lord be all capitalised as per its 420 occurrences in the OT?! It should read **the LORD**.

A declaration of Yahweh to my lord ... (Lexham English Bible) This is perfectly fine, because in the original Hebrew text the first LORD appears as the personal Name of the God of Israel, Yahweh. Scholars call this the Tetragrammaton, or the 'four letters' (YHWH), which Jews to this day do not pronounce. They substitute it with *Adonai* or simply as *Ha Shem* — the Name. And note the second 'Lord' correctly identifies David's coming descendant as *lord*.

As you can see with your own eyes, this small sample of various translations reflects (with one exception) translator hesitancy to acknowledge that David's future son, his Messianic *lord*, is **not** Yahweh God. David's future Messiah is his superior human *lord*. (Stands to reason as no human being can be the father of God!) So, what happens when this foundational Christological text is quoted in the NT? It will come as no surprise to see the inconsistency of the translators is carried over.

THIS OBSERVATION BECAME VERY PERSONAL! When I first saw the "two Lords" staring me in the face, my whole appreciation of the Bible's central message was revolutionised. ^(5)

⁵ I share the story as to the catalyst for this revolutionary paradigm shift in *They Never Told Me This in Church!* I am forever grateful to Professor Anthony Buzzard for that fateful night when he opened my eyes to the "two Lords" in the Hebrew Bible, and especially the pivotal text of Psalm 110:1. You can read about it in the fourth chapter **ANOTHER LORD**.

Once I saw that Jesus is the human **lord** Messiah and **not** Yahweh **the LORD**, then the doctrine of the Trinity tumbled like the proverbial house of cards.

But my battle was not over. I spent the next few years continuing in prayerful research and was about to send the draft for *They Never Told Me This in Church!* to the publishers to see if they considered the book worth printing. But before I did that, I thought it proper to first send the draft of Chapter Four (which goes into detail about the “two Lords”) to an independent professor who reads both the Hebrew and the Greek for verification.

The reply from the esteemed scholar came back: “Greg. You are wrong! The distinction you make between the “two Lords” in the Hebrew Bible is inaccurate.” You can imagine how distraught I felt. After all the time and effort and prayer and study, I was *wrong*!? What was I to do? I decided to marshall a half dozen or so of the best Hebrew Lexicons who all verified the “two Lords” distinction. I wrote to the professor again: “You say the distinction of “the two Lords” is invalid. These Lexical authorities all agree the distinction is justified. Who should I trust?” (⁶)

He wrote back, “Greg, of course you are right. I knew that. However, I wanted to spare you the rejection, the ostracism I know will inevitably come as the result. You have a great ministry, and I don’t want you to jeopardise it.”

I had no idea that a matter of faithful translation would be so problematic! I had come from a tradition that valued sound Bible exegesis. In my naivety I imagined my companions would be overjoyed to see this. Turns out the concerned professor’s anxieties were well-founded.

Before we conclude this little article, there is one more loose end to tie up ...

WHAT HAPPENS TO THE “TWO LORDS” IN THE NEW TESTAMENT?

Let’s look at what happens to **the LORD God** and to David’s human **lord messiah** once we enter the translation world of the NT.

Dr Luke starts with the story of **Zacharias** and his wife **Elizabeth**. In every verse where we should expect to read **the LORD (God)** we now have **the Lord**, thus severing the clearly established translation method already laid down in the OT Scriptures where God is **the LORD**;

Then an angel of the Lord appeared ... (1:11).

For he will be great in the sight of the Lord ... and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God ... to make ready a people prepared for the Lord (1: 15-16).

Thus the Lord has dealt with me ... (1:25).

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God ... and he said to Mary ... “The Lord is with you ... (1: 28).

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest: and the Lord God will give him the throne of his father David (1: 32).

⁶ A cautionary note: For the *bone fide* definition do not rely on a Concordance such as **Strong’s**. Always refer to a Hebrew & Greek Lexicon. I list some of the best Hebrew Lexical authorities for this matter in chapter 4 of

For with God nothing will be impossible ... Then Mary said, “Behold, the handmaid of the Lord!” (1: 37-38).

So far, it is obvious that **the Lord** being referred to is **the LORD God**. But let’s read on ...

Elizabeth is overjoyed when the now pregnant **Mary** pays her a visit ... But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my lord should come to me? (1: 43).

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit has rejoiced in God My Saviour (1: 46-47).

The same befuddlement continues into chapter 2 when the angels are in the fields at night; And behold, an angel of the Lord stood before them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them (2: 9). And the angel announces ...

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the lord (2:11). Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the Lord has made known to us ... then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God (2: 15, 20). And it had been revealed to Simeon by the holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the Lord’s Christ ... And he took [the baby Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God and said: ‘Lord, now you are letting your servant depart in peace ... (2:26, 28-29).

Why haven’t the translators consistently maintained their own acknowledgement of the “two Lords” from the OT? Which “Lord” is God in these NT verses, and which “Lord” is Christ in the NT? Or, are they one and the same Lord? Would it not be more consistent to put in all capitals whenever the context demands that it is **the LORD (God)**? And shouldn’t it be obvious that baby Jesus is the human **lord** who fulfils **the LORD God’s** prophetic word from **Psalm 110:1**? Jesus is NOT **Adonai** — **the LORD**. Jesus is **adoni** — **lord**. (⁷)

After all, **Elizabeth** calls the baby in Mary’s womb **my lord** (She had been hoping, like every pious Jew for the fulfilment of God’s promise to David in **Psalm 110: 1**. Not for a single moment did she think **Mary** was pregnant with **the LORD God** himself kicking in her womb!)

And old **Simeon** calls the child Jesus **the LORD’S Christ**, and as he takes the child Jesus up into his arms he gives praise to **God** saying, “**Now LORD let me depart in peace**”, which is to say, **Simeon** believes Jesus is his **lord** messiah. **Not** for one moment does he think he is holding **the LORD God** Himself in his arms as a child!

Thereafter in the entire NT Jesus is NEVER called **the LORD God**. In the NT Jesus is always **our lord Christ**. In the NT **the LORD God** is always the Father. He is always **the God and Father of our lord Jesus Christ**, which is to say, Jesus is our lord messiah, or, our messianic lord Jesus. The lord Messiah Jesus always has a God above him **the LORD!**

THE DAY OF PENTECOST

But let’s quickly move on to the **Day of Pentecost** where the apostle Peter announces that, in the event of the resurrection of Jesus, God has fulfilled His promise from **Psalm 110: 1** to David’s greater Son: The man Jesus of Nazareth is the one who is David’s Messianic **lord** now exalted to God’s right hand ...

⁷ For the interested reader I have put these same verses into the format I did earlier for **First Samuel 25** in a **POSTSCRIPT**.

“This Jesus God has raised up, of which we are all witnesses ... For David did not ascend into the heavens, but he says himself: ‘The LORD said to my Lord, “Sit at my right hand, Till I make your enemies your footstool”’

“Therefore let all the house of Israel know assuredly that God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ” (Acts 2: 32-36 NKJV).

The Lord said unto my Lord ... (American Standard Version; Darby; ESV; Lexham; NRSV; RV; NIV) No distinction between the “two Lords”!

The LORD said unto my Lord ... (KJV; NKJV) But ...

CAN YOU SPOT THE MAGIC TRICK IN THE NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE?!

THE LORD SAID TO MY LORD ... (NASB 1963) You need the eyes of an eagle to see the two exceptional capitals here. There is a capital ‘T’ to start the sentence which is fair enough. And there is the larger capital ‘L’ for the first ‘Lord’. But notice how all of a sudden their own translation of **Psalm 110:1** is now all capitalised? However, their later edition reads differently again ...

THE LORD says to my Lord ... (NASB 1987) Yes, whichever way you squint and look at it, there are “two Lords” in the Hebrew Bible and in the New Testament. Unfortunately, our translators have done a confusing job and so much of this basic, critical and easy to understand matter has been lost in translation. **It involves nothing less than the identity of the one God of the Bible — the LORD — and of His Son, our lord Jesus the Messiah!**

I would not wish for my readers to go away with the idea that I think our translations are overall unreliable. Generally speaking, they are excellent. It’s just such a shame however, that in a few critical points, they are wide of the mark. So, sadly, millions of well-meaning Christians are continuing to be misled on the critical doctrine of the identity of God and of His Son, our lord Jesus the Messiah.

Yes, *sometimes* **translation is the subtlest form of commentary!**

POSTSCRIPT

Then an angel of the LORD appeared ... (1:11).

For he will be great in the sight of the LORD ... and he will turn many of the children of Israel to the LORD their God ... to make ready a people prepared for the LORD (1: 15-16). Thus the LORD has dealt with me ...(1:25).

Now in the sixth month the angel Gabriel was sent by God ... and he said to Mary ... “The LORD is with you ...(1: 28).

He will be great, and will be called the Son of the Highest: and the LORD God will give him the throne of his father David (1: 32).

For with God nothing will be impossible ... Then Mary said, “Behold, the handmaid of the LORD!” (1: 37-38).

Elizabeth is overjoyed when the now pregnant Mary pays her a visit ... But why is this granted to me, that the mother of my lord should come to me? (1: 43).

And Mary said, “My soul magnifies the LORD, and my spirit has rejoiced in God My Saviour (1: 46-47).

And behold, an angel of the LORD stood before them, and the glory of the LORD shone around them (2: 9). And the angel announces ...

For there is born to you this day in the city of David a Saviour, who is Christ the lord (2:11).

Let us now go to Bethlehem and see this thing that has come to pass, which the LORD has made known to us ... then the shepherds returned, glorifying and praising God (2: 15, 20).

And it had been revealed to Simeon by the holy Spirit that he would not see death before he had seen the LORD’S Christ ... And he took [the baby Jesus] up in his arms and blessed God and said: ‘LORD, now you are letting your servant depart in peace ... (2:26, 28-29).