

Ideology and Bible Translation

Part 1: Evangelicals and the Ethics of Translation¹

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1. Introduction: Ideology in the History of Bible Translation

Ideology inevitably affects translation.² This is because we bring *ourselves* to the translation process; and with ourselves, we bring our worldviews, values, beliefs, agendas, expectations and a host of other perspectives and pre-understandings.

Since ideology always affects translation, ideological controversies are pervasive in the history of Bible translation. The two most famous translations of antiquity, the Greek Septuagint and the Latin Vulgate, were both marked by a measure of ideological controversy. While we know little about the reception history of the Septuagint, an apologetic motive no doubt lies behind the traditions related to its origin. The second century BC *Letter of Aristeas*, claims that Septuagint was commissioned by the king of Egypt and his chief librarian Demetrius. Hoping to add a copy of the Hebrew Scriptures to the famed Alexandrian library, Demetrius invited 72 Jewish scholars, six from each of the twelve tribe of Israel, to Alexandria, Egypt, and they produced the translation in 72 days.³ At its grand unveiling, the priests, elders, and community leaders, announced that, “Since this version has been made rightly and reverently, and in every respect accurately, it is good that this should remain exactly so, and that there should be no revision” (*Letter of Aristeas*, 310). How could anyone improve upon a perfect translation? These traditions clearly arose to defend the translation against its detractors.⁴ A later version of the legend in the Babylonian Talmud claims that the 72 elders were sequestered in 72 different chambers, yet produced identical texts in 72 days (*b. Megillah* 9a-9b). Anyone who has ever sat on a Bible translation committee will recognize such unanimity as the stuff of legend and wishful thinking.

The Latin Vulgate, too, was marked by controversy. When in the fourth century AD Jerome was commissioned by Pope Damasus to produce a new edition of the Latin

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² Without getting bogged down in nuanced definitions, let me simply define ideology as “the ideas, beliefs and values held by an individual, a group or a culture.” The term, of course, can have pejorative connotations, meaning “untested assumptions assumed to be true,” or even “ideas and beliefs used to control, oppress or manipulate others.” But I am using the term more neutrally. I use ideology instead of “worldview” as a kind of invitation to be self-critical, since the term ideology alerts us to the potential of *inappropriate* bias. I use the word ideology instead of “theology” because I want to think more broadly about everything we bring to the translation process.

³ This chronology itself is cited by the author as evidence of the translation’s divine origin (*Letter of Aristeas* 307).

⁴ The *Letter of Aristeas* is clearly an apologetic for Judaism generally, likely in the context of the anti-Jewish Hellenization program of Antiochus Epiphanes (See R. J. H. Shutt in Charlesworth, ed., *Pseudepigrapha* 2:9). But it is also meant to defend the translation itself against its detractors (and perhaps other Greek versions?).

Bible, he responded with fear that his critics would castigate him by “calling me a forger, proclaiming me now to be a sacrilegious man, that I might dare to add, to change, or to correct anything in the old books?”⁵ The Vulgate, of course, experienced remarkable success, becoming the standard Bible of the church for 1000 years. Yet criticism of its innovations followed Jerome for the rest of his life.

English Bible translation from the beginning has been marked by ideological controversy. The translation work of John Wycliffe and William Tyndale was not opposed because of incompetence or inaccuracy on the part of the translators, but because of radically different ideologies on questions like who should have access to Holy Scripture and in what form God’s Word should be given to the people. Tyndale paid with his life for standing on his ideals that the Scriptures should be available even to “the boy that driveth the plough.”

The most influential English translation of all time, the King James Version (or AV), itself arose as a result of political and ideological controversies. When James VI of Scotland came to the throne after the death of Elizabeth in 1603, the English Puritans thought that— because of James’ good relations with the Scottish Presbyterians— they would have an ally in their struggle against the Anglican bishops. What they did not know was that James loathed Presbyterianism, which he viewed as a radical movement within Protestantism. He believed the Anglican rule of bishops was the only way to maintain the authority of the monarchy. He especially hated the Geneva Bible (1560), the favorite of the Puritans, because of what he considered to be its anti-monarchical notes. James favored the Bishop’s Bible (1568), the official Bible of the Anglican church.

When the Puritans came to the new king with a long series of demands, James called a conference to be held at the palace of the Hampton Court in January 1604. The conference was stacked against the Puritans from the beginning. A strong Anglican contingent was invited, headed by the powerful bishop of London, Richard Bancroft. Conversely, only four Puritans were invited. They were led by John Reynolds, president of Corpus Christi College, Oxford.

After James gave a long speech defending the divine right of the king, the Puritans presented their requests. James, supported by Bishop Bancroft, began one-by-one to shoot them down. The conference appeared to be headed for disaster for the Puritans, when Puritan leader John Reynolds made a surprising proposal—for a new Bible translation. Bishop Bancroft scoffed at this idea, saying “If every man’s humour were followed, there would be no end of translating.”

But James saw it differently. By agreeing to this one Puritan request, he could, in effect, “throw them a bone” and so give them a minor victory. This could save the

⁵ Jerome, Preface to the Gospels. English translation by Kevin P. Edgecomb available at www.tertullian.org/fathers/jerome_preface_gospels.htm

conference and placate the Puritans. Furthermore, a new translation with a Puritan stamp of approval would likely result in the demise of the Geneva Bible, which he so despised. It would be a double-win for James. So James immediately endorsed the proposal, declaring that he had “yet to see a Bible well translated into English,” and adding, “of all, that of Geneva is the worst.”

The rest, as they say, is history.

You can view the KJV as the result of one king’s clever machinations to placate his opponents and achieve his ideological agenda. Or, you can view it a God’s providential hand in unifying his church and producing a Bible that would stand the test of time for 400 years. Or, you could say, it is both.

2. The RSV Controversy

While all new Bible versions or revisions encounter a measure of criticism, the most notorious example of ideological rejection in the twentieth-century relates to the Revised Standard Version (1952). From all external appearances the RSV should have been an unmitigated success. First, it had precedent, as the second major revision of the KJV. The Revised Version (RV) of 1885 and its American counterpart, the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901 had paved the way for the RSV, introducing updated language and contemporary methods of textual criticism. Second, the RSV’s translation committee was made up of some of the leading OT and NT scholars in the world, with such names as H. J. Cadbury, F. C. Grant, A. T. Robertson, and the famed archaeologist William F. Albright.⁶ Third, the committee had extensive denominational diversity, including Congregationalists, Methodists, Episcopalians, American Baptists, Southern Baptists, Presbyterians, Disciples of Christ, Quakers, and Lutherans.⁷ Fourth, the RSV was in direct line of succession of the great tradition of English Bible tradition stemming from the KJV. Its publicity placed it squarely in position of heir to this tradition—a translation that updated the KJV in terms of contemporary English and advances in biblical scholarship.

The RSV was released with huge fanfare and an unprecedented first printing of nearly a million copies. While some evangelicals celebrated its release and wrote in praise of its accuracy, many others were skeptical or openly critical. The most scathing attacks came from the fundamentalist camp, which subjected the RSV to unrelenting castigation.

The passage that raised the most ire was Isaiah 7:14, where the RSV had translated the Hebrew term *‘almāh* (אִלְמָה) as “young woman” instead of “virgin.” From the perspective of the translators, this was a more accurate rendering of the Hebrew

⁶ Peter Thuesen, *In Disconcordance with the Scriptures. American Protestant battles over translating the Bible* (Oxford & New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 74-75. There were nine Congregationalists, five Methodists, four Episcopalians, three American Baptists, three Southern Baptists, two Presbyterians, two member of the United Church of Canada, one Disciple of Christ, one Quaker, and one Lutheran.

⁷ Thuesen, *Disconcordance*, 72.

term, which most commonly referred to a young woman of marriageable age (HALOT 2:835-36), not specifically to a virgin. Hebrew had a more specific term for virginity, *b^etûlâh* (הַתְּלוּהַ), which was not used here. It was certainly true that the Septuagint's use of the Greek term παρθένος in Isa. 7:14—a word which had strong connotations of virginity (BDAG 777)—provided precedence for Matthew to interpret the passage with reference to the virgin Mary in Matthew 1:23. And the RSV *had* retained “virgin” for παρθένος in Matthew 1:23. But from the translators' perspective, the rendering “young woman” in Isaiah 7 was a matter of faithfulness to the meaning of the Hebrew text. The context of Isaiah 7 indicates the birth of a child in Isaiah's day, suggesting that this “prophecy” was typologically rather than uniquely fulfilled in Christ.⁸

Yet in the wake of the modernist-fundamentalist debates of the 1920s, where the virgin birth and other “fundamentals” of the faith had been under attack by liberals, this seemed to many conservatives clear evidence of a conspiracy. One pastor held up a copy of the RSV with the word “fraud” written on it in front of his congregation and then ripped out and burned the page bearing Isaiah 7:14. Another sent Luther Weigle, chairman of the RSV committee, a metal box containing the ashes of a book he claimed was the RSV. Pamphlets appeared with titles like “The New Per-Version of the Bible” and “The Devil's Masterpiece.”⁹

Many other passages in the RSV were similarly criticized. The RSV used the term “expiation” instead of the KJV's “propitiation” in Rom. 3:25 (ἱλαστήριον).¹⁰ While “expiation” carries the sense of a sacrifice that covers or atones for sins, “propitiation” includes the idea of the appeasement of God's wrath.¹¹ Critics claimed that the RSV was going soft on God's righteous wrath and the critically important doctrine of penal substitution.

Romans 9:5 became another crux verse, since it relates to the deity of Christ. The KJV had punctuated in such a way to make the phrase “God blessed forever” in apposition to “Christ”:

KJV Whose are the fathers, and of whom as concerning the flesh Christ came, who is over all, God blessed for ever. Amen.

The RSV interpreted the phrase “God blessed forever” as a closing doxology related to God the Father:

⁸ The translators did list “virgin” as an alternate reading in the notes.

⁹ Another: “Whose Unclean Fingers Have Been Tampering with the Holy Bible, God's Pure, Infallible, Verbally Inspired Word?” See Thuesen, *Disconcordance*, 97-98.

¹⁰ Cf. 1 John 2:2; and 1 John 4:10, where ἱλασμός is used.

¹¹ The interpretation of ἱλαστήριον as “expiation” instead of propitiation had become popular through the work of C. H. Dodd in the 1930s. Dodd argued that while in pagan Greek literature *hilasterion* often meant to appease or propitiate, the Septuagint often chose to translate the Hebrew term *kapporeth* (Hebrew for “atone” or “cover”) with words that meant “to cleanse or remove,” rather than to appease (Dodd, “The Bible and the Greeks”, p. 93).

RSV ... to them belong the patriarchs, and of their race, according to the flesh, is the Christ. God who is over all be blessed for ever. Amen.

Now it is patently *not* true, as critics claimed, that the RSV intentionally denied the deity of Christ. The RSV included strong statements of Jesus' deity in passages like John 1:1 (RSV: "...the Word was God"); Titus 2:13 ("our great God and Savior Jesus Christ"); 2 Peter 1:1 ("our God and Savior Jesus Christ").¹²

The RSV was also heavily criticized for its textual decisions, since it followed the critical text instead of the Textus Receptus. Critics did not seem to care that the earlier RV and ASV had also utilized contemporary methods of textual criticism. Those weaned on the KJV were aghast that the longer ending of Mark was relegated to a footnote.

There is little doubt that these attacks were—for the most part—ideologically rather than exegetically driven.¹³ Fundamentalist opponents viewed the National Council of Churches—the sponsoring body of the RSV—as a liberal organization whose goal was the unification of all denominations into one "Superchurch." It was galling to them that the NCC claimed the RSV was the "new authorized" version. Carl McIntire, who published one of the most influential anti-RSV pamphlets, wrote, "we have here an effort on the part of the NCC to elevate itself to a position in the Protestant world where it will be 'the authority.'"¹⁴

One of the strangest accusations against the RSV was that it was pro-communist. During the heyday of McCarthyism in the 1950s, the politically liberal sentiments of some of the translation committee members became tinder for the fires already raging around the RSV. In 1960 the U.S. Air Force Reserve published a countersubversive training manual that "warned recruits to avoid, among other

¹² These latter two texts come under the purview of the Granville Sharp Rule, which says that *when a single article governs two personal, singular and non-personal nouns, the two nouns refer to the same thing* (D. Wallace, *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 270–77). Ironically the KJV (translated before Granville Sharp) distinguishes God and Jesus in these verses: "... the great God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (Titus 2:13); "the righteousness of God and our Saviour Jesus Christ" (2 Peter 1:1). The RSV here affirms the deity of Christ; the KJV does not!

¹³ Other accusations of liberalization may seem odd and quirky to us today. For example, for the most part the RSV eliminated old English second person pronouns like "thee" and "thou," as well as archaic verb endings like "hast" and "keepest." Yet in the interest of reverence and solemnity, they kept this archaic language when God was being addressed. In the Song of Moses in Exodus 15, for example, Moses prays in the RSV, "Thou hast led in thy steadfast love the people whom thou hast redeemed, thou hast guided them by thy strength to thy holy abode." The problem came, however, when Jesus was being addressed. In Matthew 16:16 Peter says, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God" instead of "Thou art the Christ." The Committee explained that they employed "you" when Jesus was addressed in his earthly life, but "thou" when he was addressed in otherworldly contexts (Thuesen, 107). This nuance was hardly sufficient to placate critics, who saw this and similar passages as a direct assault on the deity of Christ

¹⁴ Thuesen, *Disconcordance*, 101.

things, the communist-tainted RSV Bible.”¹⁵ The RSV was not just a red-letter Bible. It was a Red Bible through and through.

In retrospect, it would be difficult to assert that *any* of the RSV readings so vehemently criticized were in fact “wrong”—at least from the perspective of biblical scholarship. They are all possible interpretation of the biblical text. Indeed many were right, that is, almost certainly more accurate than earlier versions. This is especially the case with the textual decisions made by the RSV interpreters. Yet the fact remains that the RSV became the victim of an ideological debate already raging in the church, namely the modernist/fundamentalist controversy.

Thuesen sums up well the impact of the RSV controversy. He writes

Since the beginning of the modern Bible revision movement in the 1870s, most Protestant scholars had regarded translation as an essentially impartial enterprise in the service of truth. Though a certain amount of scholarly subjectivity was taken for granted, at the end of the day Protestants tended to believe that achieving unbiased Bible translation was not only desirable but possible.

The RSV controversy significantly altered the picture. Unlike Bible battles of years past, it summoned Protestants to a sustained conversation—that continues to this day—about the relationship between translation and theology.¹⁶

Or we could say: “translation and ideology.” When it comes to Bible translation complete objectivity is impossible. There is no such thing as an impartial observer.

The result of all this criticism was that, although the RSV experienced significant commercial success and critical acclaim, *it never became a standard translation for the evangelical world*. Growing up in a conservative evangelical (o.k., perhaps fundamentalist) context in the South in the 1960s, I never once heard the RSV read in church. The occasional comments I heard about it were negative. Commonly invoked was the dreaded “L” word—“liberal.” The KJV was still the Bible of choice—the untainted Word of God. When my family moved to Southern California in 1972, the New American Standard Bible had recently come out (in 1971) and—with its impeccable conservative credentials and literal translation philosophy—it became a popular alternative for those who wanted a version that updated the archaic language of the KJV.

Yet in the end it was not the NASB, but the NIV, the *New International Version*, that would come closest to becoming the new evangelical standard. It is to that story I want to briefly turn.

¹⁵ Thuesen, *Disconcordance*, 104.

¹⁶ Thuesen, *Disconcordance*, 123-24.

3. An Evangelical Alternative: The New International Version

Like the RSV, the NIV arose in response to the increasing perception of the inadequacy of the King James Version. The vision for the NIV began with a businessman named Howard Long.¹⁷ An avid evangelist, Long found the KJV increasingly inadequate for sharing his faith. Though he personally loved the KJV's style and noble prose, he was often met with incomprehension and derision when he quoted verses from it to others. A member of the Christian Reformed Church (CRC), he approached his pastor, Peter De Jong, who showed great interest and began to advocate within the denomination for a new translation. After a series of delays and setbacks, a proposal for a new translation was eventually approved at the 1958 annual Synod of the CRC. Meanwhile, similar proposals for a new Bible translation were making their way through committees of the National Association of Evangelicals. Made up of 30 denominations and hundreds of individual churches, the NAE had been formed in 1942 in response to the liberalizing tendencies of the National Council of Churches.

To make a long story very short, the NAE and the CRC eventually came together and formed a joint committee, which in 1965 called a conference on Bible translation at Trinity Christian College in Palos Heights, IL. Present at this conference were members of 28 evangelical theological institutions and a wide variety of denominations (Assemblies of God, Baptists, Presbyterian, Lutherans, Methodists, Nazarene, Mennonite, and Christian Reformed). These groups shared one thing in common. They were all what we would call today, "evangelicals."

A number of papers were given at the conference. Most significant were those assessing the adequacy of other versions. After all, the question at hand was whether a new translation was deemed necessary. Discussion centered especially around the RSV and the NASB (which was then in preparation). The RSV, though a significant improvement over the KJV in many respects, was deemed too linked to higher-criticism. In passages like Isaiah 7:14 it failed to reflect the canonical unity of the Scriptures held by evangelicals.¹⁸ The conclusion: it would never gain wide acceptance among evangelicals. The NASB, though thoroughly evangelical and reflecting a high view of Scripture, was criticized for faulty linguistic assumptions. Like its predecessor, the ASV, an overly wooden translation policy created awkward style and inaccurate renderings.

The conclusion reached was that a new version was needed. The conference resulted in the following proposal:

¹⁷ Most of the following material comes from John H. Stek, "The New International Version: How It Came to Be," in *The Challenge of Bible Translation. Communicating God's Word to the World* (Festschrift Ronald F. Youngblood; eds. G. G. Scorgie, M. L. Strauss, S. M. Voth; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003), 235-263.

¹⁸ Stek, "New International Version," p. 243.

It is the sense of this assembly that the preparation of a contemporary English translation of the Bible should be undertaken as a collegiate endeavor of evangelical scholars.
August 27, 1965

Hence what would eventually be called the New International Version was born. I'm going to skip most of the rest of the history: How a committee of 15 oversaw the project (called the Committee on Bible Translation—CBT). How the translation involved over a hundred evangelical scholars. How funding came from the New York Bible Society, which almost went bankrupt in the process. How board members of the NYBS mortgaged their homes to keep the Society alive and the translation moving forward. How CBT members themselves engaged in fundraising. How Zondervan Publishers eventually stepped in and provided advanced royalties to see the project through to completion.

The NIV NT was published in 1973; the whole Bible in 1978. Substantial revision occurred in 1984 and 2011. The NIV remains the only English language Bible to year-by-year exceed sales of the King James Version. At one point it achieved approximately 40% of the English Bible translation market. Over 450 million copies have been sold worldwide.

In some ways the NIV had the deck stacked against it, since *innovation* is not usually a virtue praised by conservatives. Yet the NIV was innovative in at least three ways. (1) First, it was a new translation, not a revision in a venerable tradition like the KJV. The RSV should have beaten it in this regard. (2) Second, it utilized a translation method not favored by most conservatives, who preferred a more literal approach. In this regard, too, the RSV should have had the advantage. (3) Third, like the RSV, it utilized contemporary methods of textual criticism, sharply contrasting it with the KJV and opening it up to accusations of “leaving out verses” of Holy Scripture.

Nevertheless the NIV had two decisive factors in its favor: (1) First, it had impeccable evangelical credentials. (2) Second, it had a mediating or balanced translation philosophy. The first gave it credibility and so at least a hearing. The second resulted in its widespread popularity among those seeking a readable Bible. Let me just say a brief word about each of these, starting with the second.

3.1 A “Balanced” Translation Approach

By adopting a modified dynamic/functional equivalent translation philosophy, the NIV was far more readable than its predecessors. Of course other versions available about the same time, like the *Living Bible* (1971) and *Today's English Version* (1966; 1976; now GNT), were written in even more natural and idiomatic English. Yet for people who grew up in the church, these were mere “paraphrases.” Neither sounded like the “real Bible,” i.e., the King James Version. Stuffy Bible scholars would huff that these versions were fine for devotional reading, but they were inadequate for serious study.

This was the beauty of the NIV. Though it was clear and understandable, it still *sounded* like the real Bible. The translators consciously sought to keep the cadence and rhythm of the KJV, particularly in well-known passages. One of my favorite examples is Psalm 23, which the NIV rendered, “The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.” The phrase “to be in want” is hardly a normal English collocation. But this is perhaps the most beloved and well-known psalm in the Psalter; and the KJV reads, “...I shall not want.” The NIV still reverberated with the sound and rhythm of KJV, but in more contemporary—if somewhat awkward—English. (As a side issue, not until the 2011 edition did we finally change this to real English: “The LORD is my shepherd, I lack nothing.”—I know...it doesn’t sound like the *real* Bible). This balanced approach—idiomatic yet traditional—helps to explain why the NIV exceeded its evangelical competitors.

3.2 Evangelical Credentials of Translators & Supporters

More important to the NIV’s initial acceptance than its balance, however, was its evangelical credentials.

So how do you create an “evangelical” version? First, as we have said, you build a strong coalition of evangelicals to produce and support the text. The NIV was clearly viewed as an evangelical translation, with translators from practically every evangelical theological institution in the country: Calvin, Dallas, Southern, Reformed, Biola, Wheaton, Oral Roberts, Denver, Bethel, Gordon-Conwell, Grace, Westminster, Moody, Trinity, Asbury.¹⁹ Now it is true that the RSV also had a strong coalition of mainline denominational support. But this would never win the day, because, as everyone knows, liberals don’t buy Bibles—at least not in the number evangelicals do. (O.k. I’m joking, but you understand.)

Second, in addition to building a coalition, you identify yourself as evangelical. The preface of the NIV reads, “the translators were united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form.” All NIV translators were required either to sign the Evangelical Theological Society statement of faith (which reads, “The Bible alone, and the Bible in its entirety, is the Word of God written, and is therefore an errant in the autographs”) or a similar evangelical confession.²⁰

Third, you choose “evangelical” alternatives on controversial passages. For the rest of this essay, I want to focus on this.

4. Evangelical Ideology and Bible Translation

A word about methodology here. I will focus primarily on the NIV, but will also discuss other versions. There are many sponsoring agencies for Bible versions, but

¹⁹ <http://www.bible-researcher.com/niv-translators.html>

²⁰ Including “The Westminster Confession, the Belgic Confession, the New Hampshire Confession, or the creedal basis of the National Association of Evangelicals; or some other comparable statement” (Stek, “New International Version,” 246).

I'm going to divide contemporary translations into two broad categories, "mainline" versions and "evangelical" versions. I realize these are not precise categories, but they are certainly serviceable. The evangelical versions were produced by sponsoring agencies that are unabashedly evangelical in their view of Scripture.

"Mainline"	"Evangelical"
RSV (1952)	NIV (1978)
NEB (1970)	NASB (1971)
REB (1989)	NKJV (1982)
NRSV (1990)	NLT (1996/2004)
CEB (2011)	NCV (1986)
	ESV (2001)
	HCSB (2004)
	NET (2005)

Not included on this list are Roman Catholic versions (Douay, NAB, NJB) nor the Bible Society-inspired versions (TEV [GNT], CEV). The Catholic versions create theological complexities that must be left for another time. The TEV and CEV are not so easily categorized in an ideological camp as these other. I will mention them in the discussion but will not place them in either category.

4.1 *Isaiah 7:14*

On the passage that almost single-handedly sunk the RSV, *Isaiah 7:14*, the NIV, of course, used "virgin" over "young woman":

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. (NIV)

Is this a legitimate translation? Certainly. It has precedent in the pre-Christian Septuagint (LXX), which used *parthenos*. It also picks up on the intertextuality reflected in Matt. 1:23. Matthew, an inspired first century author and LXX reader, clearly understood the term to mean "virgin."

What about the recognition by most scholars that *Isaiah 7:14* is *typologically* rather than uniquely fulfilled by Christ and that it had an initial fulfillment in *Isaiah's* time (presumably with a normal conception)? Well, the translation "virgin" is still possible here, since the woman would be a virgin until she conceived. You could paraphrase, "the virgin will get married and become pregnant, and give birth to a son."

So it is certainly a *legitimate* rendering. But there is little doubt that ideology is influencing the translation. If you line up various versions, they divide for the most part, on ideological lines. The "mainline" versions —RSV, NRSV, REB, CEB—all render "young woman." The "evangelical" versions (NIV, NASB, NKJV, NLT, NCV,

ESV, HCSB) almost all use “virgin”. Only the NET Bible goes with “young woman,” but it includes a massively long footnote (237 words) explaining its decision.²¹

We might call the retention of “*virgin*” theological conservatism: *if in doubt, play it safe*. There are numerous examples in the NIV and other “evangelical” versions, where the translation tends toward theological conservatism.²² Let’s look at other translations that reflect conservative theology, beginning with Christology.

4.2 Christology

Remember that Romans 9:5 was another one of the many passages that came under attack in the RSV. The NIV chose the traditional rendering that emphasized the deity of Christ. Instead of identifying the final clause as a doxology to God the Father, “God who is over all be blessed for ever” (RSV), the NIV placed “God” in apposition to Christ: “...Christ, who is God over all, forever praised! Amen.

Versions that identify Jesus as God include all the evangelical versions: NASB, NKJV, NET, NCV, GW, ESV, HCSB. The mainline versions are actually split, with the earlier versions (RSV and REB) separating off the doxology as referring to God, while the more recent ones (NRSV and CEB) identify Jesus explicitly as “God.”

The NRSV renders Colossians 1:15, “He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn *of all creation*” (cf. RSV). Because this translation of the genitive phrase (πρωτότοκος πάσης κτίσεως) could be construed as indicating Jesus was a created being, the NIV and other evangelical versions render it as a genitive of subordination: “the firstborn over all creation”²³ (cf. NKJV; NLT; HCSB; NET; cf. CEB; REB). Again, this is a *legitimate* rendering, since this function of the genitive appears elsewhere in the New Testament in undisputed examples (Matt. 9:34; Mark 15:32; 2 Cor. 4:4; John 12:31; Acts 4:26; Rev. 1:5; 15:3).²⁴ But a particular Christological concern is certainly influencing the translation.

4.3 Ethics

Exodus 21:22: Miscarriage or premature birth? Another translation that has theological and ethical implications is Exodus 21:22. The NIV reads “If people are

²¹ The two Bible Society-inspired versions—TEV and CEV—split on this. The TEV had “young woman” (with a long footnote), while the (usually more progressive) CEV goes back to “virgin” (I would love to have been a fly on the wall for that discussion).

²² Some of the examples below were discovered through Paul Davidson’s highly polemical article, “Deliberate Mistranslations in the New International Version (NIV),” available at <https://isthatinthebible.wordpress.com/articles-and-resources/deliberate-mistranslation-in-the-new-international-version-niv>. While a thought-provoking look at how evangelical theology affects translation, the article also shows extreme bias, consistently accusing the NIV of “changing the Bible” whenever translators have chosen an interpretive option that harmonizes or resolves theological difficulties—even when that option represents the most likely meaning of the text in context.

²³ Wallace, *Greek Grammar*, 103-04.

²⁴ A tension clearly arises here for the more literal versions, since they normally render genitives with the “default” of + NOUN construction. The NASB and ESV therefore retain “firstborn of all creation” while the NKJV and HCSB use “firstborn over all creation.”

fighting and hit a pregnant woman and she *gives birth prematurely*, but there is no serious injury,... the offender must be fined..." The RSV and NRSV read, "...so that there is a miscarriage." The Hebrew phrase, which means something like, "the child goes out," could refer to a miscarriage or a premature birth. And the statement about there being "no harm" could relate to the mother (in the case of a miscarriage) or to the baby (in the case of premature birth). If this is a miscarriage, the implication would be that a fetus is not as valuable as a human life, since the loss incurs a fine instead of the death penalty. Obviously the translation has ideological implications for the abortion debate.

Significantly, the evangelical versions almost unanimously go with premature birth (NIV; NLT; NET; NASB; ESV; HCSB); while the "mainline" translations have miscarriage (RSV; NRSV; REB; CEB; also TEV; CEV). A conservative ideology or theology seems to be at work here.

4.4 Resolving Apparent Discrepancies

Evangelical concerns become especially important when it comes of apparent discrepancies and historical problems in the text. For evangelicals, there is an inevitable tension between exegesis and orthodoxy, between a (so-called) dispassionate pursuit of truth and belief in the authority and inspiration of Scripture. *How much should one allow their view of the authority and infallibility of Scripture guide their translation decisions?*

There is a clear tendency in evangelical versions to harmonize apparent contradictions and to resolve historical difficulties. I've categorized a number of these with reference to *the manner* in which the apparent discrepancy is resolved: (1) Through lexical choice; (2) through explanation, clarification or expansion; (3) through textual emendation; and (4) through text-criticism.

4.4.1 Through Lexical Choice

Some difficulties are resolved through lexical choice, that is, by appealing to the semantic range of a word. Two accounts of Saul's conversion in Acts 9 and 22 appear to contradict one another. While Acts 9:7 RSV describes the men traveling with Saul as "... *hearing the voice* (ἀκούοντες...τῆς φωνῆς) but seeing no one" the account in Acts 22:9 RSV says, they "*did not hear the voice*" (τὴν φωνὴν οὐκ ἤκουσαν). The same two Greek terms, (ἀκούω + φωνή) appear in both passages. The mainline versions translate both phrases the same, introducing an apparent contradiction (RSV; NRSV; REB; CEB). The NIV, however, renders the two passages differently:

Acts 9:7 NIV "they **heard the sound** but did not see anyone"

Acts 22:9 NIV "they did not **understand the voice**"

The same two Greek terms (ἀκούω + φωνή) translated "heard the sound" in 9:7, are now translated "understood the voice." Other "evangelical" versions do something similar:

Acts 9:7 NLT “they **heard** the **sound**”
 Acts 22:9 NLT “didn’t **understand** the **voice**”

Acts 9:7 NASB “**hearing** the **voice**” (cf. NET; ESV)
 Acts 22:9 NASB “did not **understand** the **voice**”

Acts 9:7 HCSB “**hearing** the **sound**”
 Acts 22:9 HCSB “they did not **hear** the **voice**”

Now from the perspective of lexical semantics this is certainly acceptable. The semantic range of ἀκούω includes “hear,” “understand,” “obey”; and φωνή can mean “sound” or “voice.” Assuming that Luke would not contradict himself, the NIV harmonizes the passages by interpreting the same words with two different senses. But there is little doubt that a particular view of Scripture is guiding this rendering.

Other passages also use alternative senses within a word’s semantic range to resolve textual problems. Since the Hebrew and Aramaic words for “son” (*ben/bar*) can also mean “descendant,” the NIV twice renders “Zechariah son of Iddo” (most versions) to “Zechariah, a descendant of Iddo” (Ezra 5:1; 6:14), presumably to avoid an apparent contradiction with Zechariah 1:1, which says Zechariah was the son of Berechiah.²⁵

Similarly, in 1 Kings 15:10, the NRSV reads “his [Asa’s] mother’s name was Maacah daughter of Abishalom.” The NIV (cf. NLT; ESV; NET; NKJV) translates the Hebrew *’im* as “grandmother” (“His grandmother’s name was Maakah”) to avoid a contradiction, with 15:2, which identifies Maacah as the mother of Asa’s father, Abijah.²⁶

In 2 Chronicles 36:10 the RSV and other versions say Nebuchadnezzar made Jehoiachin’s “brother” (*’āh nā*) Zedekiah king over Judah (so NRSV). This apparently contradicts 2 Kings 24:17 where Zedekiah is identified as Jehoiachin’s uncle. Yet, since Hebrew term *nā* can mean “relative,” the NIV, NLT, harmonizes the texts and says Zedekiah was Jehoiachin’s “uncle.” Other evangelical versions less obtrusively use “kinsman” (NASB) or “relative” (NET).²⁷

4.4.2 Through Explanation, Clarification and Expansion

Sometimes apparent contradictions are resolved through a small change of wording providing explanation, clarification or expansion. Consider the following examples:

²⁵ No other evangelical versions do this here.

²⁶ REB and CEB also render “grandmother,” while NASB and ESV have “mother.” These decisions are likely related to a formal vs. functional translation philosophy.

²⁷ Here again the versions don’t split quite so cleanly along ideological lines. CEB and REB identify Zedekiah as Jehoiachin’s uncle, while the conservative ESV and HCSB retain the apparently contradictory “brother”. Again, translation philosophy seems to be driving the various renderings.

Did God command sacrifices for the Israelites? Jeremiah 7:22 RSV reads, “For in the day that I brought them out of the land of Egypt, I did not speak to your fathers or command them concerning burnt offerings and sacrifices” (cf. NRSV; REB). This verse has sometimes been used to claim that the Pentateuchal laws were given late. The NIV makes it clear this is not the sense by translating, “I did not *just* give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices” The NET similarly has “merely.” The NLT smooths over by translating, “it was not burnt offerings and sacrifices I wanted from them.”²⁸

Commented [MLS1]: Changed in CBT in 2017: For when I brought your ancestors out of Egypt and spoke to them, it was not to give them commands about burnt offerings and sacrifices,

How big was Nineveh? Jonah 3:3 NRSV, reads “Now Nineveh was an exceedingly large city, a three days’ walk across” (cf. RSV; REB; CEB; the Hebrew is something like: “a distance of three days”). This is historically problematic. Although one ancient source (Diodorus Siculus, 1st c. B.C.) claimed the city of Nineveh had a circumference of sixty miles, modern archaeology has shown the walls to have about eight miles long—certainly nowhere near a three days’ journey either around or through.²⁹ To resolve this difficulty, the NIV 1984 reads, “A visit required three days” and the NLT, “it took three days to see it all.” More vague is the NIV 2011, “it took three days to go through it” and NASB: “an exceedingly great city, a three days’ walk.”³⁰

Another example: *When were the animals created?* (Gen. 2:19). In Genesis 2:19 most versions read, “So out of the ground the LORD God *formed* every beast of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man...” the NIV reads, “Now the LORD God *had formed* out of the ground all the wild animals and all the birds in the sky” (cf. ESV). This translation of the vav consecutive piel verb *wayyiser* (וַיִּצֶר) as a past perfect harmonizes with the creation account in chapter one, where the animals are created before humans. Some scholars consider this verbal use unlikely,³¹ Others argue in support of it.³²

Where was Abraham called? (Gen. 12:1), A similar chronological harmonization appears in Genesis 12:1, where the RSV and NRSV read, “Now the LORD *said* to

²⁸ CEB seems to actually heighten the problem by making the statement absolute and emphatic: “I didn’t say a thing—I gave no instructions—about entirely burned offerings or sacrifices.” Some of the formal equivalent versions perhaps avoid the problem by translating more literally, “in the day,” (NASB; ESV), since these commands were not given *on that particular day*.

²⁹ H. L. Ellison, “Jonah,” in *Expositors Bible Commentary* (ed. F. Gaebelin; Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

³⁰ A simpler solution may be that the text is referring not to the city proper, but to greater Nineveh, which may indeed have had a circumference of sixty miles or so—a three days journey around.

³¹ See S. R. Driver, *A Treatise on the Use of the Tenses in Hebrew* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1874), 84–88, pp. 84–88; R. Buth, “Methodological Collision between Source Criticism and Discourse Analysis,” *Biblical Hebrew and Discourse Linguistics*, 138–54. John Sailhamer writes “Not only is such a translation ... hardly possible ... but it misses the very point of the narrative, namely, that the animals were created in response to God’s declaration that it was not good that the man should be alone.” *Expositor’s Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan).

³² Bruce K. Waltke and M. O’Connor, *Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, Ind. : Eisenbrauns, 1990), 552–53 §33.2.3 and C. J. Collins, “The *Wayyiqtol* as ‘Pluperfect’: When and Why,” *TynBul* 46 (1995): 117–40.

Abram, “Go from your country and your kindred and your father’s house to the land that I will show you” (RSV; cf. NRSV, etc.). The NIV renders, “Now the LORD *had said* to Abram...” rendering the vav consecutive *yō’mer*, as a past perfect. The NLT and NKJV do the same thing. This harmonizes the text with Acts 7:2, where Abram’s call is said to have come “while he was still in Mesopotamia, before he lived in Haran.”³³ Again, this is a legitimate grammatical function of the verb, but would probably not have been introduced if the text had not created chronological difficulties. A particular view of the authority of the text is clearly playing a role.

How old was Ishmael? (Gen. 21:14). A chronological problem of a different sort appears in Gen. 21:14, where Abraham sends Hagar and Ishmael away. The NRSV reads, “Abraham rose early in the morning, and took bread and a skin of water, and gave it to Hagar, putting it on her shoulder, along with the child...” This makes it appear as though Ishmael is a baby. But the previous chronology makes it clear that Ishmael was 15-17 years old (cf. Gen 16:16; 21:5). Other mainline versions translate similarly (RSV; REB; CEB). The CEB actually seems to intentionally accentuate the problem: “He put the boy in her shoulder sling and sent her away.” The Hebrew is ambiguous as to what the phrase “and the boy” (*w^eet-hayyeled*) goes with. Is it “bread and the skin of water” or is it “sent her away”? The NIV and other evangelical versions avoid the chronological problem by choosing the latter. The NIV reads, “Abraham... set them [the bread and the water] on her shoulders and then sent her off *with the boy*.” Similarly, the NLT reads, “Abraham ... strapped them on Hagar’s shoulders. Then he sent her away *with their son*” (NET; NASB; NKJV). Again, a particular view of Scripture is guiding the translators.

4.4.3 Through Textual Emendation

On rare occasions the text is actually emended under the assumption that an error has crept in through the transmission process. This is not a text-critical choice since there is no textual-variant support for this reading (from the LXX, the Dead Sea Scrolls, etc.)

Who killed Goliath? (2 Sam. 21:19). 2 Samuel 21:19 identifies the one who slew Goliath not as David, but as Elhanan. The RSV reads, “And there was again war with the Philistines at Gob; and Elhanan the son of Jaareoregim, the Bethlehemite, slew Goliath the Gittite, the shaft of whose spear was like a weaver’s beam.” (RSV; cf. NRSV; REB; CEB). The NIV and some other evangelical versions change this to “slew the brother of Goliath,” since the parallel passage in 1 Chr. 20:5 says Elhanan killed “Lahmi, the brother of Goliath” (NIV; NET; NLT; footnote in NASB and HCSB). The translators add the phrase “the brother of,” under the assumption that it had been inadvertently dropped from the Hebrew text.³⁴

³³ The ESV adds a footnote reading, “Or, *had said*.” Presumably the translators, seeking to follow formal equivalency, did not feel free to change the text itself; but they added a harmonizing footnote.

³⁴ Other commentators suggest other solutions: (1) that Elhanan was a throne name for David; (2) that there was more than one Goliath or (3) that Goliath was a common noun that had come to designate a particular class of warriors.

4.4.4 Through Text-Critical Choices

In a number of cases, historical or chronological difficulties are resolved by appealing to alternate textual traditions. This is especially the case in the Old Testament, when Septuagintal readings are preferred to Masoretic ones if they resolve historical difficulties or harmonize with New Testament quotations. In such cases, a footnote provides the alternative. It should be noted that this kind of harmonization runs counter to the text critical principle that the *harder* reading is usually the better reading.³⁵

Harmonizing Old Testament parallels. In 2 Chronicle 36:9, the NIV and some other evangelical versions (HCSB; NET; ESV; cf. CEB) identify Jehoiachin as “eighteen” years old when he became king, despite the fact that most Hebrew manuscripts read that he was “eight” years old. This harmonizes the text to 2 Kings 24:8, which says “eighteen.” The same thing happens in 2 Chronicles 22:2, where the NIV follows some LXX manuscripts in identifying Ahaziah as twenty-two years old when he became king, in agreement with 2 Kings 8:26 (so NASB; HCSB; NET; ESV). The Masoretic text, by contrast, says he was forty-two. Among “mainline” versions, REB and CEB also harmonize to the LXX, while RSV and NRSV say “forty-two.”

In 2 Samuel 8:4 the NIV (cf. NLT) follows the LXX and a reading in the Dead Sea Scrolls that says that David captured “7000 charioteers.” The Masoretic text reads 1700, which apparently contradicts 1 Chronicles 18:4.

In 2 Samuel 17:25, the Hebrew text reads, “Ithra the Israelite.” The NIV (cf. NLT) follows some LXX manuscripts to read “Jether, an Ishmaelite,” harmonizing the verse with 1 Chronicles 2:17.³⁶ Footnotes identify “Ishmaelite” as coming from the Septuagint and Jether as a variant of Ithra.

In 1 Chronicles 1:17 most Hebrew manuscripts list nine sons of Shem. The NIV (cf. NLT; ESV; NET; REB; CEB) follows one Hebrew manuscript and some LXX manuscripts to identify the last four names as sons of Aram, harmonizing the text with Genesis 10:23.

In 1 Chronicles 1:36 the NRSV (RSV; REB; CEB) follows the Hebrew text in identifying seven “sons of Eliphaz: Teman, Omar, Zephi, Gatam, Kenaz, Timna, and Amalek.” However, Genesis 36:12 says that Timna was Eliphaz’s *concubine* and that Amalek was *her* son. The NIV and other evangelical versions (cf. NLT, ESV; HSB; NET; NKJV) therefore follow some LXX manuscripts and “correct” the MT by

³⁵ Of course, the transmission of the text itself shows (to state it anachronistically) “evangelicalizing” tendencies, where copyists smoothed over and “corrected” difficult readings in the interest of historical consistency or orthodoxy. Most textual critics consider the Byzantine text type, with its many harmonizations and “easier” readings, to be a result of the standardization of the text of Scripture. There are numerous examples where the Byzantine text type reflects scribal tendencies to move the text in a more orthodox direction or to avoid historical and theological difficulties.

³⁶ ESV has Ithra, the Ishmaelite and NET reads, “an Israelite man named Jether.”

separating Timna and Amalek from the rest: “The sons of Eliphaz: Teman, Omar, Zephi, Gatam and Kenaz; by Timna: Amalek.”

Harmonizing OT quotes in the NT. Genesis 47:31 in the NRSV reads “Israel bowed himself on the head of his bed.” The NIV instead reads “Israel worshiped as he leaned on the top of his staff,” following the LXX to harmonize with the quotation in Hebrews 11:21.³⁷

The Hebrew of Psalm 2:9 reads, “You shall break them with a rod of iron.” The NIV 1984 followed the LXX, “You will rule them with an iron scepter” (ποιμανεῖς αὐτούς ἐν ῥάβδῳ σιδηρᾷ), which agrees with the quotation in Revelation 2:27.³⁸ The NIV 2011 returned to the Hebrew text, “you will break them with a rod of iron,” with the LXX alternative in a footnote.³⁹

In summary, there are many examples in the NIV and other Bible versions produced by evangelical scholars where a particular translation decision is made in order to avoid apparent discrepancies or historical problems. One’s view of Scripture, be it high or low, is inevitably affecting the way one translates. There is no such thing as a completely “objective” translation.

5. Conclusion: Dealing with Ideology

In light of this conclusion, it is important to establish certain principles concerning how we handle our own ideological biases. In closing, let me just suggest three.

5.1 With Transparency: Acknowledging the tension

It is important, first of all, to “come clean” in terms of presuppositions and assumptions. Most evangelical versions inform the reader of their high view of Scripture. The NIV Preface, for example, reads: “Our work as translators is motivated by our conviction that the Bible is God’s word in written form.” A little later in the Preface, they add, “the [present] committee mirrors the original group of translators in its diverse international and denominational make-up and in its unifying commitment to the Bible as God’s inspired Word.”⁴⁰ The Introduction to the HCSB is perhaps most emphatic, describing the Bible as “God’s revelation to man...the only book that gives us accurate information about God, man’s need, and

³⁷ No other evangelical versions I could find do this.

³⁸ No other evangelical versions I could find do this.

³⁹ Cf. Psalm 8:2, where the NIV 1984 follows the LXX, “From the lips of children and infants you have ordained praise because of your enemies,” which matches the quote of this passage in Matthew 21:16. The Hebrew text reads “...you have founded a bulwark because of your foes” (NRSV). The NIV 2011 revised to reflect the Hebrew: “...you have established a stronghold against your enemies” but begins the verse with “Through the praise of children...,” an idiomatic rendering of “out of the mouth of children...”

⁴⁰ “Preface,” *New International Version* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001). The Introduction to the NLT says nothing about the translators’ view of Scripture, but does note that the translation team was made up of a diverse group of scholars “within the worldwide evangelical community.”

God's provision for that need...it is God's inspired Word, inerrant in the original manuscripts."⁴¹

By contrast, the NRSV is much more nuanced.

In traditional Judaism and Christianity, the Bible has been more than a historical document to be preserved or a classic of literature to be cherished and admired; it is recognized as the unique record of God's dealings with people over the ages.⁴²

While a number of versions express the translators' view of the inspiration and authority of Scripture, few acknowledge that this in fact affects translational decisions. The impression given, rather, is that the translation is simply accurate and reliable with reference to the original text.

It seems to me the recent move toward functionalist theories, like *Skopostheorie*, have been a positive development in this regard. (I was pleased to see Christiane Nord here as a plenary speaker, since she has been a pioneer in functionalist approaches.) *Skopostheorie* claims that "the prime principle determining any translation process is the purpose (*Skopos*) of the overall translation action."⁴³ The translation represents a kind of contract between translator and receptor audience, with the purpose and function clearly set out. In the case of an evangelical version, the translator should set out clearly that their translation is guided by a high view of Scripture.

In addition to more transparency with reference to our approach to Scripture, translators ought also to establish the limits and parameters of harmonization and resolution.

5.2 With Consistency/Integrity: Establishing the limits of harmonization

This is the most difficult principle to quantify. There comes a time when harmonization becomes untenable and the translator needs to allow the reader to wrestle with the difficulties inherent in the text.

Let me give you a few examples from the 2011 revision of the NIV, where I think the translators have wisely rolled back translations that, in my opinion, went too far

⁴¹ "Introduction to the Holman Christian Standard Bible," *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (Nashville: Holman, 2009).

⁴² "To the Reader," *New Revised Standard Version* (National Council of Churches, 1989). They continue: "The Bible carries its full message, not to those who regard it simply as a noble literary heritage of the past or who wish to use it to enhance political purposes and advance otherwise desirable goals, but to all persons and communities who read it so that they may discern and understand what God is saying to them."

⁴³ Christiane Nord, *Translating as Purposeful Activity. Functionalist Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome, 1997, 2012), 27.

toward harmonization or theological orthodoxy (cf. the example from Psalm 2:9 above).

Matt. 26:64 (cf. *Matthew 27:11; Luke 23:3*). In Jesus' trial before the Sanhedrin in Matthew, the high priest questions Jesus: "Tell us if you are the Christ, the Son of God." In the NIV 1984 Jesus says, "Yes, it is as you say (σὺ εἶπας)...But I say to all of you: In the future (ἀπ' ἄρτι) you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven."

There are two problems here. First, the translation, "it is as you say," is too definitive to reflect Jesus' cryptic response (σὺ εἶπας- "you said"). Second, the phrase, "in the future," though avoiding the difficulty of how the high priest would possibly see the exaltation of the Son of Man "from now on," does not accurately represent the sense of immediacy suggested by the Greek ἀπ' ἄρτι.⁴⁴

The NIV 2011 corrects both these: "*You have said so...But I say to all of you: From now on you will see the Son of Man sitting at the right hand of the Mighty One and coming on the clouds of heaven.*" The contemporary reader is now left to wrestle with a difficult and puzzling response by Jesus, but one that more accurately reflects the meaning of the Greek text.

Consider also Matthew 13:32. Speaking of the mustard seed, the NIV 1984 translated, "Though it is the smallest of all *your* seeds, yet when it grows, it is the largest of garden plants and becomes a tree." Nothing in the Greek text corresponds to the possessive pronoun "your." The Greek says, ὁ μικρότερον μὲν ἐστὶν πάντων τῶν σπερμάτων ("which is the smallest of all the seeds"). The original NIV rendering was evidently meant to deflect criticism that the mustard seed is *not* in fact the smallest of all seeds in the world. But it is the smallest seed *known* in first century Judaism (i.e., "the smallest of all *your* seeds").

While this may in fact be what Jesus meant, it is not really what he said. It shows more integrity to translate the text in a more straightforward manner and allow the reader to work out that Jesus is speaking phenomenologically. The NIV 2011 therefore revised the text to "it is the smallest of all seeds." This rendering represents greater consistency and integrity.

John 19:14 NIV says Jesus' trial before Pilate took place on "the day of Preparation of Passover." If this means the day the Jews prepare for Passover it would apparently contradict the Synoptics, which depict Jesus as eating the Passover meal the day before, at the Last Supper, Thursday evening. One solution proposed by evangelicals is to identify this as preparation for *the Sabbath* during Passover week.⁴⁵ NIV 1984 seems to follow this interpretation, rendering the phrase "the day of Preparation of

⁴⁴ Both of these also reflect apparent harmonizations with Mark 14:62 (ἐγώ εἰμι, καὶ ὄψεσθε...).

⁴⁵ See D. A. Carson, *The Gospel according to John* (Pillar New Testament Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991), 603-04.

Passover Week. The NIV 2011 reverts to the more straightforward “the day of Preparation of Passover” (19:31). This retains the chronological difficulty and allows the reader to work out the difficult question of a chronological harmonization with the Synoptic parallels.

A third necessary—and perhaps most important—principle for dealing with our ideological biases is humility, recognizing and acknowledging that our solution is not the only one or necessarily the best.

5.3 With Humility: Acknowledging the limitations of translator & translation.

This is perhaps the greatest challenge, especially because of marketing and economic forces driving the production and distribution of English Bible versions (a topic which merits a paper all to itself). The introductions to English Bibles inevitably tout their versions as an ideal balance between accuracy and readability, precision and literary beauty. While this pride in a particular version’s accomplishment is understandable, it is necessary also to acknowledge the limits of communication through language and the necessity of continual revision.

I appreciate the original lengthy preface of the KJV, which demonstrates just this kind of humility. The translators identify themselves as just one link in the long chain of necessary revisions:

Truly, good Christian Reader, we never thought from the beginning that we should need to make a new translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one;...but to make a good one better.⁴⁶

Though all translations contain some “imperfections and blemishes,” the translators affirm that even the “meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession...containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God.”⁴⁷

The Preface to the 2011 NIV has a similar statement of limitation. I will conclude with it:

The committee has again been reminded that every human effort is flawed—including this revision of the NIV. We trust, however, that many will find in it an improved representation of the Word of God, through which they hear his call to faith in our Lord Jesus Christ and to service in his kingdom.⁴⁸

That, I hope, is our passion and goal as we continue this never-ending task of rendering God’s Word into language people can understand.

⁴⁶ The Translators to the Reader, ‘Preface to the King James Version,’ reproduced in Appendix C of Dewey M. Beegle, *God’s Word into English* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1960). For this quote see p. 146.

⁴⁷ The Translators to the Reader, ‘Preface to the King James Version,’ in Beegle, *God’s Word into English*, p. 142.

⁴⁸ “Preface,” to the NIV 2011.

