

Feature Article: JAB121-2

**BIBLE VERSIONS:  
THE GOOD, THE BAD, AND THE UGLY  
Part 2**

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**SYNOPSIS**

Christians who are serious about the Bible tend to gravitate toward a single version, which results in the tendency to identify versions that differ from their self-chosen norm as “bad.” In reality, Christians have been blessed with a wide variety of fine versions. When used together and compared to one another, with an understanding of the basic issues in Bible translation, they can greatly enhance one’s Bible study experience. Much of the debate that exists in evangelicalism regarding Bible translation, methodology, gender inclusiveness, and the like, while touching on important, even vital issues, is marked by unnecessary and distracting political and economic rivalries. In the majority of cases when a Bible version has been identified as “bad,” a better term would have been “different,” as in different from what they are comfortable with or used to. There is much to learn from listening to the dialogue regarding translational methodology, and from an examination of key texts raised by all involved in the discussion, as long as the focus remains on communicating the Word of God accurately and with clarity to this generation.<sup>1</sup> Beyond the realm of “bad” versions, however, there are “ugly” versions, perversions of God’s Word produced not by those who seek to handle the Word with integrity and faithfulness, but by those who seek either to undermine the Christian faith (such as the Jesus Seminar) or to pervert it by twisting it into a heretical or cultic form. Representative “ugly” versions include the Scholars Version produced by the Jesus Seminar, which corrupts the canon of Scripture through the addition of the Gospel of Thomas; Oxford’s Inclusive Version, which brings a new level of political correctness to Bible translation through the use of such phrases as “Father/Mother God” and “divine Child”; the Watchtower’s New World Translation, by far the most serious perversion of the Bible, specifically designed to aid Jehovah’s Witnesses in denying the Trinity, the deity of Christ, and other central Christian doctrines; and the Inspired Version produced by Joseph Smith, the founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (the Mormons).

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I still own the first “real” Bible my parents gave me for my seventh birthday. No pictures, no zipper, a real leather Bible (King James Version, of course). It was the Bible I would study until replacing it with one I purchased for myself as a teenager. Since it was the Bible version I read, the Bible version I heard preached from the pulpit of my church, it was *the* Bible. In the rare instance where I heard a different version (there were not nearly as many back when I was young), it simply sounded *wrong*. There was a natural distrust of any version that differed from the “real” one.

Things have changed somewhat today. Most believers have been exposed to multiple versions in their Bible study groups and in other contexts. Many of them, though, remain “single-version” people. Each of

them has his or her favorite version, and rare is the person who puts forth a concerted effort to use even a portion of the English versions available today. There are, of course, editions that contain multiple versions (often in parallel columns), but many people find them cumbersome to carry, let alone study. Others complain that to do Scripture memorization, one needs to adopt one version as standard so as to become accustomed to the meter and cadence of the translation.<sup>1</sup> Still others simply find having different versions confusing.

The fact that most people are still single-version users explains the intense emotions that often accompany the evaluation of English Bible versions. For many readers, the list of good versions is short, and encompasses only those versions that are closest to one's main version in the larger spectrum of versions. For some readers, such as King James Only advocates, the list consists of exactly one version. To make up one's list of good and bad versions based solely on familiarity, tradition, and usage, however, is unwise, no matter how popular and common the translation may be.

I suggest charting a different course in determining good and bad Bible versions. First, Christians need to recognize that a version that would be good and useful in personal study may not function in the same way in the public worship of the church. Some versions, then, may be good in one context, but less useful, or even bad, in another. Once again, education concerning the character and purpose of individual versions greatly would facilitate recognition of the distinction I am drawing. In one's private or family study of the Word, having the New King James Version (NKJV),<sup>2</sup> New American Standard Bible (NASB), English Standard Version (ESV), New International Version (NIV), and the New English Translation (NET) spread out across the table is altogether positive, but few are the formal church settings where having such an arrangement is practical or advisable.

Second, Christians need to recognize that in current conservative, evangelical circles, emotion, based on tradition, usage, and prejudice, has been a factor far too often in discussions of this issue. The discussion of good and bad translation, sadly, also has become political in many instances, because of the millions of dollars involved in the production and promotion of new versions. Prejudice, whether based on marketing or tradition, is not a solid foundation on which to evaluate something as important as Bible translation, but the temptation is to "circle the wagons" and defend one's favorite version against the onslaught of new versions, especially if they fall in the same general portion along the spectrum of versions. As understandable as this may be, it leads to a thoroughly partisan, sectarian attitude toward Bible versions.

I believe a good Bible version is one that:

1. clearly identifies its goals and methodology up-front;
2. successfully accomplishes its stated goals;
3. is done by translators (plural; i.e., by committee);
4. openly identifies its translators;
5. seeks consistency first and foremost in rendering the original languages, whether taking a formal or functional approach; and
6. avoids overriding political, social, or historical agendas.

All of the versions noted in the first portion of this article would fall into the good range at this point, even though they represent a widely divergent group as far as translational methodology is concerned. This suggested way of viewing versions will be foreign to many who, for example, are accustomed to dismissing immediately any version more functional or dynamic than, say, the NASB. The die-hard proponent of dynamic translational theory, likewise, is unlikely to want to list formal equivalence versions such as the NKJV as "good." People can understand this generous use of "good," however, if they allow for the reality that there is a place for both methodologies.

At this point it might be useful to ask, "What then makes a version *bad*?" Obviously, some bad versions are so because they are next to impossible to read in English; although the KJV may be quite readable to those who are accustomed to it by a lifetime of use, it is completely unreadable to many of the younger generation. People need to exercise some caution with these. In most cases, however, "bad" versions simply are those that are imbalanced, giving preference to a particular element of translation, which

results in a skewed product. People should exercise more caution with these. The New American Bible, for example, an official Roman Catholic version, is poor on almost every level, including readability. Most Roman Catholics agree with that assessment. The older Douay-Rheims properly could be identified as a poor translation as well, mainly due to its direct connection to the Latin Vulgate (over against the Greek and Hebrew texts) and its obvious doctrinal bias. I also would suggest placing the large majority of single-translator versions in the “bad” category as well, given their propensity for imbalance and for being agenda-driven.

Mentioning the word *balance* brings up the issue of presuppositions. Who gets to define what is balanced in Bible translation? A great debate rages in evangelicalism today over the recently released Today’s New International Version (TNIV). Lengthy lists of well-known scholars, pastors, and leaders have lined up on both sides.<sup>3</sup> Is the TNIV a bad version? I suggest that the only people who should answer that question, at least publicly, are those who have listened to both sides and taken a definitive stand on the issue of formal vs. functional equivalence *and* the issue of gender neutrality and how far the concept should be taken. By saying this I do not mean that the average layperson should have no voice; rather, I am pointing again to the necessity of serious study and education on the part of all believers in this vital area. People who are convinced that the attempts at gender neutrality in the TNIV disrupt and needlessly obscure biblical truths, or lead to misconceptions thereof, will most definitely place it in the “bad” category. Those on the other side, however, will argue that maintaining gender distinctions where the receptor language does not is just as likely to lead to misconceptions. My call is for readers to hear both sides, examine the offered examples, and make an *informed* decision before identifying any serious version as either good or bad. The only possible result I can see from such informed discussion, dialogue, and research is the edification and education of God’s people and an increase in their ability to defend the veracity of Scripture reasonably and clearly.

Appreciation of the availability of excellent versions leads to wider and richer study of the text of Scripture itself. How often have you seen something in a passage simply because you heard it expressed in a way that made you rethink your traditional (and often partial) understanding? Cross-comparison between fine translations along the spectrum between formal and functional equivalence will aid in that kind of study and enlightenment. At the same time, it may educate Christians to avoid identifying as *bad* every version that is actually just *different* than what they may be used to or comfortable with. Likewise, Christians should acknowledge that what works best for them may not work best for other people with different backgrounds. I fully affirm the right to take strong stands on issues such as translational methodology and gender inclusiveness, but I believe the arena of Bible translation should be as free from rancor as possible. Faithful Christians, after all, will not always reach the same conclusions as they seek to bring God’s Word to all people with clarity, accuracy, and passion.

## THE UGLY

I have attempted to chart a course away from single-version viewpoints and toward multiple-version appreciation, given the wealth of excellent English Bible versions available, while at the same time recognizing those versions that would not meet the needs of most apologetically minded evangelicals. I now turn to the fact that there are “translations” available today that clearly are purposefully designed to alter and, in some cases, pervert, the Word of God. Given that most English speaking believers do not have ready access to the original languages, dealing with full-blown mistranslations can be very challenging, especially in a witnessing situation.

The “ugly” category is a mixed bag, to be sure. All “ugly” versions share an unorthodox background and almost all are produced by those who, while claiming biblical fidelity, are actually “wolves in sheep’s clothing” who seek to undermine true Christian faith. Some are open enemies, like the Jesus Seminar, some come from apostate Christendom, others come from cults. Each exists only to promote a particular agenda; hence, texts that are not overly relevant to the key issues may appear without any particular problem, but key texts that bear on the group’s main distinctives will show evidence of mistranslation. A version that comes from any particular such perspective often will be accompanied by prophetic

authority or by some form of assurance that, unlike the “corrupted” Bibles of Christendom, this is the “real thing.” This leads to a cultic dedication to the translation, and a distrust of any variance from the readings of that particular Bible (note especially the New World Translation of Jehovah’s Witnesses in this regard). Cultic mistranslations of the Bible can prove to be a tremendous challenge, especially for the apologetically minded believer.

### **The Jesus Seminar’s Scholars Version**

The late 1980s began wide exposure for the Jesus Seminar, a group of extreme-left scholars who would study a passage of the Gospels and then gather together and vote on whether a particular saying of Jesus was likely to have been said by Him by placing different colored marbles in a bag. This group likewise took upon itself the task of reevaluating, and overthrowing, the entire consensus of Christian history in granting to the second-century Gnostic Gospel of Thomas to be fully canonical status, to the point of publishing this work right along with the four canonical Gospels. If truth be told, the fellows of the Jesus Seminar believe the Gospel of Thomas to be more relevant and useful to historical inquiry than the gospel of John.

In 1993 the Jesus Seminar published *The Five Gospels: What Did Jesus Really Say?* This work also introduced the humbly titled translation work of the group: the Scholars Version. One does not need to look far to ascertain the viewpoint of the translation panel about those who have preceded them in translational work: “Modern translations, especially those made by academics and endorsed by church boards, tend to reproduce the Greek text, more or less word-for-word. English words are taken from an English-Greek dictionary—always the same English word for the same Greek word—and set down in their Greek order where possible.”<sup>4</sup>

To anyone even slightly familiar with modern translations, even in 1993, this rather condescending statement is fallacious to its core. The purpose seems to be to paint “religious” Bible translators as simpletons who can do little more than look up words in a Greek-English lexicon. This description is not accurate of *any* of the major translations that existed when these words were written. One should not be shocked at the willingness of the Jesus Seminar not only to misrepresent those who have labored in this field before them, but to overthrow the very canon through the addition of such a work as the Gospel of Thomas.<sup>5</sup> The inclusion of this version in the “ugly” category is not so much based on the translation itself (which, at times, contains genuinely good renderings) as it is the attitude and agenda of the translators, who seek a radical redefinition of the Christian faith at the cost of truth itself.

### **Oxford’s Inclusive Version**

This version seeks to introduce Christians to a thoroughgoing “politically correct” version of the New Testament and Psalms, starting with the New Revised Standard Version as a base text. With such phraseology as “Father/Mother God” and “divine Child” (instead of the “Son of God”), Oxford’s Inclusive Version (OIV, 1995) insured its own demise by making sure it would never, ever find a place in regular usage among God’s people. A quick glance at just some of its renderings explains why:

We have Abraham as our father and Sarah and Hagar as our mothers. (Matt. 3:9)

For God so loved the world that God gave God’s only Child, so that everyone who believes in that Child may not perish but may have eternal life. (John 3:16)

For just as God has life in Godself, so God has granted the same thing to the Child, and has given the Child authority to execute judgment, because of being the Human One. Do not be astonished at this. (John 5:26–27)

Here one sees the application of an overriding concern at the expense of the text itself. There is an embarrassment at the teaching and perspective of the Scriptures, so, rather than simply do the honest thing and jettison the Scriptures, some seek to reshape them in the image of modern philosophy and liberal worldviews. The result is inevitably gruesome, for such a reworking of the fundamentals of the Scriptures cannot help but produce massive internal conflict and contradiction.

## The Watchtower's New World Translation

I have identified the New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures (NWT) in my apologetics lectures as the single most dangerous piece of anti-Christian literature known to the church. It is the "translation" carried from door to door by millions of Jehovah's Witnesses worldwide, read in Kingdom Halls throughout the world, and cited in all literature that pours forth from the presses of the Watchtower Bible and Tract Society. Every active Jehovah's Witness has been told, repeatedly, that the NWT is the best translation in existence, veritable manna from the "faithful and discreet slave" (i.e., the Watchtower Society), and the only translation not contaminated by the Babylonian doctrine of the Trinity. Reading the NWT may be about as enjoyable as chewing on aluminum foil, but one must realize that when speaking to Jehovah's Witnesses, they will always take the NWT's rendering over any other English translation. It introduces a dynamic to witnessing that has frustrated even the best of God's saints.

It is a fair complaint that the NWT is one of the worst reading English translations in existence. "Wooden" or "stilted" is a compliment to the NWT. Here is how it renders the first portion of the beautiful "Carmen Christi" of Philippians 2:5-6:

Keep this mental attitude in YOU that was also in Christ Jesus, who, although he was existing in God's form, gave no consideration to a seizure, namely, that he should be equal to God.

Here is another example:

Do not be afraid, for I am with you. From the sunrising I shall bring your seed, and from the sunset I shall collect you together. (Isa. 43:5)

Style is the least of the problems with the NWT. This publication is a bold, blatant attempt to alter the teaching of the Bible on the key issues at stake between the Watchtower Society and historic Christianity. The NWT may provide amateur, bad translations throughout its text, but it is only when one gets to those topics that define the field of battle with Jehovah's Witnesses that one finds consistent *mistranslation*. Since it is these texts that make up the bulk of the conversation a believer might have at the door with a Jehovah's Witness, it is important for the believer to be aware of them and how they are used. The consistency of the mistranslation is plain:

In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god.  
(John 1:1)

This is by far the best-known "issue" with the NWT. On a practical level, it is always best to avoid debating this passage until one has laid a strong foundation elsewhere.

Jesus said to them: "Most truly I say to YOU, Before Abraham came into existence, I have been."  
(John 8:58)

Here the NWT seeks to obscure the "I am" sayings of Jesus (see John 8:24, 58; 13:19; 18:5-6).

He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation; because by means of him all [other] things were created in the heavens and upon the earth, the things visible and the things invisible, no matter 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. 1:15-17)

When the NWT was first released, the term "other" that is now found in brackets was placed directly in the text without any indication that it was supplied. The translation is based on the assumption that the "firstborn" is a part of the creation itself.

Because it is in him that all the fullness of the divine quality dwells bodily. (Col. 2:9)

Modern translations consistently render the disputed term *deity*. The KJV's *Godhead* is an equivalent term for deity.

While we wait for the happy hope and glorious manifestation of the great God and of [the] Savior of us, Christ Jesus. (Titus 2:13; cf. 2 Pet. 1:1)

Here the NWT rejects Granville Sharp's Rule, which indicates that in the original Greek here and at 2 Peter 1:1 both terms that are translated "God" and "Savior" refer to one person, the Lord Jesus Christ. It

does so despite using the same rule correctly in numerous other places, presumably because the Watchtower's theology is not threatened in those passages.<sup>6</sup>

I have addressed all of these passages elsewhere, but it is clear that the NWT sets the standard for seeking to change the message of the Scripture on the key truths of the faith. It is easy to see the agenda of most of the "ugly" Bibles, but the NWT's approach is much harder to detect, and therefore significantly more challenging to the average believer.

### Joseph Smith's Inspired Version

Those who found new religions often feel the need to "correct" the Bible, and Joseph Smith, Jr., the founder and first president of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, was no exception. Once he developed the concept of his own prophethood, he undertook to "correct" the only Bible he knew, the King James Version. The result was humbly named the Inspired Version. The official version of the Bible for the LDS Church today remains the King James Version, but starting in 1981 the LDS Church placed Joseph Smith's "translation" in footnotes, or, when the emendation was too large, in an appendix, in their officially produced Scriptures.

The changes he made are comparatively minor and in many cases innocuous, showing only that Smith, in general, did not really understand the task of biblical translation. He did, however, insert a huge chunk of text containing a self-serving prophecy in Genesis 48:5–11 and 50:24–38. On the whole, however, the changes are hit-and-miss with little discernable pattern. While Genesis receives a fair amount of emendation, the Psalms are barely touched.

In the New Testament, however, the changes show much more specific theological or doctrinal concern. The gospel of John receives a fair amount of attention. The following verse, for example, expands greatly (italicized type indicates the additional wording):

No man can come unto me, except *he doeth the will of him who hath sent me, that ye receive the Son; for the Father beareth record of him; and he who receiveth the testimony, and doeth the will of him who sent me, I will raise up in the resurrection of the just.* (John 6:44)

Nowhere does the impact of Smith's "inspiration" come more to the fore than in Paul's epistle to the Romans. In Romans 4:4–5, the apostle contrasts the attitude of the one "working" and expecting reward and the one who instead believes on the one who "justifies the ungodly." Smith's understanding of the gospel was so deficient, so in error, that he changed this verse to read,

But to him that *seeketh not to be justified by the law of works*, but believeth on him who justified *not* the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness. (Rom. 4:5)

Not only is there no basis for such emendations in the Greek manuscript tradition, but one will note the complete reversal of the glorious description of God as the one who justifies "the ungodly." The Book of Mormon presents a different story. For example, Smith's view comes forth in the following:

Yea, come unto Christ, and be perfected in him, and deny yourselves of all ungodliness; and if ye shall deny yourselves of all ungodliness, and love God with all your might, mind and strength, then is his grace sufficient for you, that by his grace ye may be perfect in Christ; and if by the grace of God ye are perfect in Christ, ye can in nowise deny the power of God. (Moroni 10:32)

This is why he felt it proper to say that God does *not* justify the ungodly, but in altering the text of Scripture as he did, he demonstrated he had no concept of the Christian gospel itself.

Given the current evolution in LDS theology and the uncertainty of the future of the LDS faith, the Inspired Version has fallen on hard times. Since Mormonism is seeking to "mainstream," promoting a peculiar and truly indefensible "translation" based solely on Smith's claim to prophethood would be counterproductive.

### ENGLISH VERSIONS: BLESSINGS AND CHALLENGES

The majority of those versions available today that are produced by committees of dedicated, believing scholars are useful and beneficial. As in everything else, each individual believer must take his or her

responsibility before God seriously and therefore must become equipped to exercise wisdom and discernment in choosing Bible versions. Learning the original tongues is always a great blessing and aid (especially in apologetics work!), but the knowledgeable utilization of the plethora of fine translations, including both formal equivalence and functional equivalence versions, will also greatly enhance one's study of the Word of God.

At the same time, such wise discernment will lead one to recognize that some versions are not as useful for public worship or instruction as others, and that some versions are useless in almost any setting. Beyond the good and bad versions, outright perversions of the text are produced in every generation, and with greater frequency today, given the ever-increasing availability of printing technology. Discerning Christians should be quick to warn younger believers of the dangers of these perversions of God's Word.

## NOTES

1. To avoid ambiguity, throughout this article I will use *version* when referring to a whole work, such as the New International Version or the King James Version, and *translation* when referring to the act of translating or to a particular rendering of a passage.
2. I believe the NKJV, although a fine translation and thus listed here, to be a translation of an inferior text. Textual critical issues enter into the evaluation of English translations. The KJV and NKJV are both translations of the so-called *Textus Receptus*, or "Received Text." This particular text is manifestly inferior even to the "Majority Text," let alone to the text that the majority of scholarship supports, the Nestle-Aland platform. One will find variations even between versions that are based on the modern Greek texts, but there is a much wider range between the modern texts and the *Textus Receptus*. The NKJV contains readings that differ from the NIV or NASB, and this has been known to cause confusion in a mixed-version setting.
3. Note the list of those on the positive side at [www.tniv.info](http://www.tniv.info), and on the negative side at [www.no-tniv.com](http://www.no-tniv.com), which includes statements from the Southern Baptist Convention and the Presbyterian Church in America that oppose the version.
4. Robert Funk, Roy Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar, *The Five Gospels* (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1993), xiv.
5. See my review, "The Jesus Seminar and the Gospel of Thomas: Courting the Media at the Cost of Truth," *Christian Research Journal*, 20, 3 (1999): 51-52.
6. See in particular 2 Peter 1:11, a direct parallel to 1:1, correctly translated by the NWT.