

Truth in Translation: Accuracy and Bias in English Translations

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The Bible is the best-selling book of all time. Its estimated total sales is over five billion copies. The complete Bible has been translated into over 700 languages and the New Testament into well over 1,500 languages. Parts of the New Testament have been translated into over 1,000 languages. Since the 16th century, over 900 translations of the Bible into English have been produced. It has had a profound influence both on Western culture and history as well as on cultures around the globe.

A major reason for consulting different Bible versions is to gain a better understanding of the scriptures. Consulting different translations is critical to understand the nuanced meaning of a specific scripture. It also is one way to check for bias in translations. Professor Jason BeDuhn has written a book discussing the problem of bias in modern translations. The takeaway from his book is that *all Bible translations are influenced by at least some bias*. This finding supports the need to consult several versions to help determine the original meaning of specific scriptures. Although no translation is without bias, BeDuhn helps us to realize, just because a translation is different from those we are familiar with, that doesn't mean the difference is due to bias.

BeDuhn reviewed nine major popular English New Testament translations: the *King James Version*, *New Revised Standard Version*, *New International Version*, *New American Bible*, *New American Standard Bible*, *Amplified Bible*, *Living Bible*, *Today's English Version*, and the *New World Translation of the Holy Scriptures*.

BeDuhn documents the fact that, compared to the past, we have a wealth of historical manuscripts today that testify to the incredible preservation accuracy of the text from ancient manuscripts. One translation approach is a literal word-for-word translation, which is often stiff and hard to read. Another approach is a translation of the ideas, events, and meanings from the Greek or Hebrew texts into English. The most extreme example of this translation type is called a paraphrase.

BeDuhn is an Associate Professor and the former Chair of the Department of Humanities, Arts, and Religion at Northern Arizona University. He holds a B.A. in Religious Studies from the University of Illinois, a Ph.D. from Indiana University, and an M.T.S. (Master of Theological Studies degree) in New Testament from Harvard. He also has an excellent knowledge of Greek. A thorough knowledge of Greek is critical to understanding the meaning of the Greek Scriptures and the accuracy of a specific translation. Most translators rely on a printed Greek text as the basis of their translation. One of the most commonly used is the Westcott and Hort text.

BeDuhn compared these versions on nine different translation points, including translating individual terms, difficult passages, and grammar. The book informs readers of the factors that shape the Bible's meanings. His book also functions as a catalyst towards improvement of Bible translations through careful attention to the bias risks in the translation process. Several of the specific nine passages or issues he examined in detail relate to the Trinity.

For example "Should the English translation of John 1:1 say that Jesus is 'God' or is 'divine'?" BeDuhn concluded that proper application of Greek grammar, which he goes into considerable detail to explain, has led many scholars to translate John 1:1 as: "the word (Jesus) was divine." In my opinion, the most objectionable translation is the polytheistic rendering, the Word [*ho Theos* (in Greek *ὁ θεός*)] was "a God," or "was a god," which is used in several translations. Catholic Biblical scholar John L. McKenzie concluded that *ὁ θεός* is God the Father, and that John 1:1 should be translated, "the Word was with the God [the Father], and the word was a divine being." Translations that use the word *divine* instead of God include Moffatt and Goodspeed. BeDuhn concluded another acceptable translation is The New English Bible which translates John 1:1 as "what God was, the Word was."

BeDuhn writes that the two translations most people would assume would be the most biased (*The New American Bible* translated by Catholics and the *New World Translation* translated by Jehovah's Witnesses) turned out to be, in his judgment, the

most accurate translation of the nine that he examined. BeDuhn then lists the reasons why he believes that the translators of these two widely different groups were able to produce the most accurate translations of the nine that he examined.

His book earned 249 ratings on Amazon and 90 percent were 5-star ratings. One useful critique of BeDuhn on Amazon is “BeDuhn takes a dismissive attitude towards religious translators and Greek sources written by religious scholars and puts forth his own historical (and non-religious) approach as superior.” This statement illustrates BeDuhn’s central claim, namely that eliminating 100 percent of the bias in Bible translation is very difficult to achieve.

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