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#178 Bible Translations and Controversies (Replay)

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Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

From Dec 2019: Listeners ask questions on which Bible translations are best and Tom's own translation of scripture 'The Bible For Everyone'. What makes a good translation, why doesn't Tom capitalise 'holy spirit', and what does he make of Pope Francis 'changing' the Lords' Prayer? • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> • More shows, free eBook, newsletter, and sign up to ask Tom your questions: <https://premierunbelievable.com> • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/training> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate>

Transcript

Before we get started with today's podcast, here's a question that we've all wrestled with. Why does God allow suffering? It's not only a question we all wrestle with at times, but an objection that seekers often raise when engaging with issues of faith. It's a deep and challenging question, but one which is possible to answer with clarity and confidence.

To equip you to do that, Premier Insight is produced a free download titled, Why Does God Allow Suffering? To get your free copy today, simply visit [premierinsight.org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/slash/resources). Once again, get your free copy today of Why Does God Allow Suffering by going to [premierinsight.org slash resources](http://premierinsight.org/slash/resources). Please let us updates, free bonus videos and e-books.

That's premierunbelievable.com. And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. Great to be sitting down with Tom Wright again for today's edition of the podcast. And we've got your questions on Bible translations today.

Now, this is something that's obviously close to your own heart recently. Tom, having worked on your own Bible for everyone, come out in this large volume now. In fact,

we've got a copy sitting right in front of us.

John Golden Gay has done the Old Testament, you've done the New Testament. How long did it take you to effectively translate the New Testament yourself, Tom? Of course, what happened was this, that I started this extraordinary project to doing the New Testament for everyone, which was to write little guides to Mark for everyone, Matthew for everyone, Paul for everyone, first Corinthians, et cetera. And the publishers said to me right from the beginning, are we going to include the text of the New Testament in these little books? And we thought about that for a minute and decided we had to, because the point was that these would be the sort of things somebody might read on the bus on their way to work.

And it's quite difficult on a crowded bus to have a Bible on one hand and a book on the other. So we wanted to have text and commentary in the same little volume. But then the question was, which version can you use? And the point was this.

This series, the New Testament to everyone, was designed for people who wouldn't be regular students, they wouldn't have sort of undergraduate degrees or whatever, and to have lots of footnotes saying actually what this word means is really such and such. Or if I was then to say in the commentary, what a pity that the translation said such and such, because really it means this. Those are the sort of things that were, no, we can't say that in this kind of bargain based basement commentary.

So I foolishly said to the publisher, perhaps I should do my own translation. And then I thought, what did I just say? So we set off doing it. And actually I really enjoyed it.

Because the New Testament is vivid and it's dramatic and poignant. And I like English prose. I wanted to try to find ways of bringing that out.

And there were some stylistic tricks which I think enabled me to do that a bit. So for instance, when in the Gospels it says, Jesus said such and such, in the Greek it would be Jesus said such and such. But in English, if you look at a novel, what you tend to have would be, yes, comma said Jesus, comma.

And then so the sentence would be broken. So I deliberately turned things around like that to try to make it more vivid English. The one rule is this, if you take an exciting book and make it dull, it must be a wrong translation, even if literally word for word, it seems to be accurate.

And is it a very different process I assume when you're doing a one man translation, as opposed to Bibles that are effectively written by committee? Sure, sure. Of different people. Yeah, of course.

And I mean, there were editors and proofreaders and people who did check it. And then actually, when the whole thing was done, and part of the question was how long did it

take me in the answer, I said, what's doing other things? Like I was Bishop of Durham for seven of those years. But so I started in the year 2000 with Mark and Luke.

And I finished on the cusp of 2010. I think it was New Year's Eve 2010. I did I did Revelation.

So it was 10 years while doing lots while being a bishop and lots of other things. And what I would do is this, I would first take how long it was five days, seven days, nine days, simply to do a draft of the translation of the whole book, whatever it was. And then I would put that to one side.

And then usually some weeks later, I would take another week or two and carve out that time from the diary. And then I would go back to the translation that I'd done. And I would be praying through it while editing the translation and checking bits to see what from that needed to be said in the commentary.

And so the two would be interacting with each other. And then I would write the commentary. And then finally, we pulled all the translations out and it turned into the system.

And then turned into the Bible for everyone. The New Testament version of that. Both available, of course, SBCK publishing here in the UK, Zondevin, probably in the USA.

It's Harper in my New Testament is Harper. But it's called the Kingdom New Testament. Okay.

As usual, Americans like their own titles. Well, look, we've got one American here on a question says Christian, who's in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Well, we've already answered the first part of your question, Christian.

Why did you choose to write your own translation of the New Testament? But the second part of the question was what can we expect to find new or different verses from other versions popular here in the US, such as the ESV or NIV? Any kind of particular thing that sort of distinguishes or specific verses people might be surprised at the way you've rendered. Goodness. Quite possibly.

Yes. I mean, I naturally gravitate towards Paul because that was my primary research. And that's probably what I'm one of the things I'm best known for anyway.

And part of the difficulty with Paul, and it's an exciting difficulty, is that some of the big words that Paul uses, and I give the example in the preface here of the word *Dikazune*, which we translate as righteousness or justice or something like that, we do not have an English word that corresponds to all the things that *Dikazune* meant in the ancient world in Plato, in the Septuodint translation of the Old Testament, let alone in Paul. And I use the illustration. It's like a huge cargo ship collecting cargo from many different ports and

sailing down that this word is sailing down a river, having picked up cargo.

And do we have a ship that big? No, we don't. Neither in English nor in French nor in German, which is two other modern languages I know best. Do we have a word which will carry? So you have to paraphrase.

And so you have to talk about covenant faithfulness or or God's justice or something. And that will be different because Paul is moving between different to us shades of meaning. So I've done my best to reflect that.

And so there's a constant to and fro between what I discern Paul to be saying when he's alluding to Genesis 15 or Isaiah or whatever, and how we could say something like that in English. That's really difficult. Reiss in New Zealand asks, and also Soder's Ruth in Westwood, New Jersey, actually, same question from both of them.

Why in your version of the New Testament is the Holy Spirit spelt in lowercase? And Ruth also adds, I'm bothered by it by your breaking with tradition and not capitalizing Holy Spirit, as in Matthew 1 verses 18 and 20. I know the original Greek text did not use capital letters there. Is that your only reason for not doing so? Actually, a lot of the early Greek texts were in block capitals.

Some of the earliest manuscripts are precisely in what we would call block capitals. But this is the sort of question that could only arise within an English-speaking world, because it's only, I think, in the English-speaking world that we have had the convention of using capital letters when we want to emphasize this word. And older Christian English in 16th and 17th century used to have not only God, Holy Spirit, Messiah, etc., with capitals, but also any pronoun related to this, so who his etc., they would all have capitals.

And that continued until the middle of the last century, and then it started to sort of quieten down. For me, there's two things going on here. One, it's partly a rejection of what in the trade we call docetism, which is the idea of a Jesus who's sort of floating six inches above reality in the Holy Spirit who's floating there, as though you have to say these words in a special sort of hushed tone of voice.

And actually, the whole point of Christianity is that the word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld his glory, and that it's the glory of God with the feet very firmly in the muddy ground, and that any attempt to say, oh no, we've got to use capitals for these because that makes it sort of religious and special. I have a kind of an allergic reaction to that on good theological grounds. But here's the second thing.

In Paul's world, the word plumber, which is the word we translate, wind or spirit, was a very common word, in spirituality, in philosophy, in psychology, in meteorology, whatever. And when Paul talks about the panuma or the hagon panuma, he has no

means of differentiating it by using a trick of orthography like that, of just making it a different thing. In other words, the Holy Spirit, as far as Paul and John and so on are concerned, had to make its way in a world where there were many plumeter, many spirits, and Paul trusts that that will happen, and that's part of the game discerning the spirits and to cheat, as it were, by giving this one the capital there so we all know we all feel comfortable.

I think that that rather is a point. I mean, I just picked up a copy of just to check for myself, but you obviously do use capitalization for God and Jesus and those sorts of things. So why in that case is it valid and in case of the whole spirit? I do, yes, I just opened it random here and Lord, and that maybe if I was doing it again, I might actually want to do the same with Lord because Karyos were in a world of many, Karyos, many Lords, as he says in 1 Corinthians 8. And interested to know what I do with that.

Yes, the many Gods and many Lords, but for us there is one Lord and I've then capitalized it. I think I might want to change that now. That's interesting.

I want to say this is not, if you're in German, every noun has a capital letter at the beginning. So in German the Holy Spirit is a Heiliger Geist and Heiliger has a small letter because it's an adjective and Geist has a capital letter because it's a noun. There's nothing whatever to do about theology.

Afeard, which is a horse, has a capital P, etc. So this is a perception of usually, sadly, the monolingual English speaking. Yeah, and in a sense, a perfect example of the way in which, obviously, we're always working from translations of what was originally written down in Greek by and large, but which equally was, if you like, taking what were to have originally been Aramaic, often words and those sorts of things when Jesus would have spoken.

Yes, and I remember Rowan Williams in a sermon ages ago on the celebration of an anniversary to do with William Tyndale. The great Bible translator, Rowan said, Christianity has been a translating faith from the beginning. And translation is always a risk because the language, again, people who only speak one language, or at most too often imagine wrongly that languages simply have counters.

So here is a table, the German is Tisch, the French is Tabler, and we know what that is. But then as soon as you start to get into abstractions, whether it's love or righteousness or whatever, no, these words do not correspond one on one at all. And so one is constantly, and I think this is part of the joke of being human and of being part of a worldwide family called the followers of Jesus.

We're going to come to some questions on specific translations. One that I had, though, I was recently involved in a debate with an atheist. I normally chair these debates, but on this occasion, we were in Oxford.

It was put on by the Christian Union there. And the main case against Christianity, that the atheist had one of the main cases, was that, well, why would a God choose to communicate this essential truth through this incredibly broken form of using people writing things down 2000 years ago, and then it being copied and errors being made? And then finally, we end up with something that might be approximate. And he said, any God worth its salt would give you a far more reliable method of communicating this truth.

And, well, I tried to answer that firstly, I tried to say firstly, we actually have quite a good way of getting back to the original text. So it's not quite as bad as you're making out. I suppose there's that question of, could God have done it a different way? This seems like a very sort of prone to us being able to take our own thing from it and re-understand it.

Absolutely. Just like when Jesus was walking around, people just heard a bit on the edge of a conversation and misunderstood it. Or people saw him and thought he was demon-possessed or whatever.

And it's the most extraordinary risk if there was a sensible God, why on earth would he become incarnate? And why there in the messy, muddled Middle East? And wasn't that a risk that he might have been run over by a camel or died of flu at the age of 19 or whatever? And yes, of course it was, and that's part of the point. Because, I mean, the question, which many Christians actually approach things like this as well? If there is a God, he must want to, if there is a God, he would have to do A, B and C. And I want to say, when you hear that word must run for the hills, this is a bad way of doing theology. But as a Christian theology, anyway, though many Christians have tried to do it that way, the only way we know about Christian theology, as I argue in that book there, is by starting with Jesus.

John says no one has ever seen God, but the only begotten son who's in the bosom of the Father, he has made him known, you see that again, how do you translate the Greek? *Houtos exegesitor*, he's provided an exegesis of him, he's unfolded who God really is. And so the messy muddledness is part of the joy of it. Otherwise, it would only be severely rational people who would be able to be Christians.

And most of the world are have muddled messy lives and God needs us there. I did try to make that point to this person, the particular standard of evidence that you require to believe in God is rather different to many people down the ages. And as it happens, this book appears to have in a rather miraculous way spoken to generation upon generation of people.

Not only so. And that's formed the world. Exactly, but not only so.

But if you look at all the great classical texts, whether it's Plato or Sophocles or Cicero or whoever, our knowledge of those texts is almost in every case based on two or three

medieval manuscripts. Our knowledge of the New Testament is based on literally hundreds of manuscripts which go back in some cases, bits of them to the early second century, and lots and lots, dozens, hundreds from the third, fourth, fifth, sixth centuries. So the convergence on this text is truly extraordinary.

And as is the fact that it makes excellent sense within everything we know about first the first century Jewish world of the time of Jesus. The fact that you're listening to this Ask, N.T. Wright Anything podcast today shows that you want to think deeply about issues of authentic faith and modern culture. One hot topic causing heated debate right now is the continuing advance of progressive Christianity, a growing movement that questions orthodoxies around salvation, scripture and sexuality.

To help you understand the issues at stake, premiere insight has published a brand new resource titled *Is Progressive Christianity Another Gospel*. This ebook will stretch your thinking around the progressive Christianity movement so you can respond with faithfulness and integrity. This brand new ebook comes as our thanks for your financial support today, which in turn will help more Christians engage effectively with the issues of our day through premiere insight.

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And remember to get your copy of *Is Progressive Christianity Another Gospel* as Thanks for your partnership. Let's go to a couple of questions that came in specifically on translations. TK in Australia.

So if we've been blessed with different English versions and translations of the Bible, what makes a good translation for someone not in seminary and how are we supposed to discern whether newer translations such as the Passion translation or even the Bible for everyone are accurate without ourselves having prior knowledge of the original languages. And a similar question from Judson in, is it gig harbor or gig harbor? I can even remember which way to pronounce it in Washington state says for those who aren't sufficiently conversant with the original biblical Hebrew and Greek languages, what are your recommendations for English Bible translations other than your own and why? So how do we judge what's a good one? I mean, do we just have to take it on trust that this Bible we've been for lent it is a pretty good approximation of the originals. Of course, we are in a funny situation now because there are more English translations now than ever before.

And there is a rough convergence, but there are some very different ones. And some of

those translations are not actually translations, paraphrases. And as I've said, paraphrase is necessary for translation, but there's paraphrase and paraphrase.

I've tried in mind to stick as close to the text as I can, recognizing that many words don't have a one on one correspondence. But there are some and when I was growing up, there was a thing called the living Bible, which is still out there, I think is a new version now. And that was quite a cheerful paraphrase where they would sort of swallow a paragraph home and then say something rather similar.

Well, fine. I'd much rather they were doing that than the not. And anything that juggles us out of familiarity.

That's the thing. So I've often said to students and people