

# OpenTheo

## #213 Which Bible Translation is the best one? (Replay)

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### Ask NT Wright Anything - Premier

Listeners ask questions on which Bible translations we should deem as the best ones and which ones we should use on a daily basis. What makes a good translation, why doesn't Tom capitalise 'holy spirit', and what does he make of Pope Francis 'changing' the Lords' Prayer? Tom also discusses the process and thinking behind his own translation of the New Testament in 'The Bible For Everyone'. • More shows, free eBooks & newsletter: [premierunbelievable.org](http://premierunbelievable.org) • Subscribe to the Ask NT Wright Anything podcast: <https://pod.link/1441656192> Discover More: • For live events: <http://www.unbelievable.live> • For online learning: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/courses> • Support us in the USA: <http://www.premierinsight.org/unbelievableshow> • Support us in the rest of the world: <https://www.premierunbelievable.com/donate> The Ask NT Wright Anything Podcast is a production of Premier Unbelievable? in partnership with NTWright Online and SPCK Publishing

### Transcript

Before we get into today's episode, I want to let you know about a free e-book for you to download today that you won't want to miss. It's called In Conversation with Jordan Peterson, Atheism, Christianity, and the Psychology of Belief. This special e-book was created from an unbelievable podcast with famed Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson.

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This is a limited time offer, so make sure to do it today. That's [premierinsight.org](http://premierinsight.org) forward slash resources. And now it's time for today's podcast.

Welcome to this replay of Ask NT Wright Anything where we go back into the archives to

bring you the best of the thought and theology of Tom Wright. Answering questions submitted by you, the listener. You can find more episodes as well as many more resources for exploring faith at [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com), and registering there will unlock access through the newsletter to updates, free bonus videos, and e-books.

That's [premierunbelievable.com](http://premierunbelievable.com). And now for today's replay of Ask NT Wright Anything. We're 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 thing somebody might read 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 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 will be broken like that. 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.

And 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? And the answer was I was 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 Revelation, so it was 10 years while doing a lot of other things. And what I would do was 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 this little book, which then turned into the Bible for everyone.

The New Testament version of that. Both available, of course, SBCK, publishing it here in the UK, some of them probably in the USA. It's Harper, my New Testament is Harper, but it's called the Kingdom New Testament, as usual Americans like their own titles.

Well, look, we've got one American here on a question that 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? And any kind of particular thing that sort of distinguishes or specific verses, people might be surprised at the way you've rendered them.

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 Septuagint 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, 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 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. Reese in New Zealand asks, and also so does 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, etcetera with capitals, but also any pronoun related to his, etcetera, 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 and the Holy Spirit who's floating, as though you have to say these words and 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 allergic reaction to that on good theological grounds.

But here's the second thing. In Paul's world, the word *penuma*, 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 *penuma* or the *Hagion penuma*, 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, 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, so we all know we all feel comfortable. I think that that rather is an interesting point.

I mean, I just picked up a copy of just to check for myself. But you obviously do use capitalization for God and Lord Jesus and those sorts of things. So why in that case is it valid and in the case of the Holy Spirit? I'm not sure.

I mean, I do, yes, I've just opened at random here and Lord. And that maybe if I was doing it again, I might actually want to do the same with Lord, because Kirios were in a world of many, Kirios, many Lords, as he says in 1 Corinthians 8. And interested to know what I do with that. Yes, there are 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. That's interesting. But I want to say this is not, you know, 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.

It appeared, which is a horse has a capital P, et cetera, et cetera. So this is a perception of, usually sadly, the monolingual English speaking. 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 would 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 the earth, 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, you know, again, people who only speak one language, or most too often imagine wrongly that languages simply have counters. So here is a table, and the German is Tisch, and the French is table, 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, you know, 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 what, 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. But equally, I suppose there's that question of, could God have done it a different way? This seems like a very sort of, you know, 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? 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 aviancy. And I want to say, when you hear that word must run for the hills, this is a bad way of doing theology, 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 is 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 have muddled messy lives. I did try to make that point to this person, that 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 the first century Jewish world of the time of Jesus.

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That's [premierinsight.org](http://premierinsight.org) forward slash NT right. Thank you for your support. 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't remember which way to pronounce it. We're in Washington state.

It 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 presented with 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, but 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 it's 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 not. And anything that juggles us out of familiarity, that's the thing.

So I've often said to students and people in church who've asked me this question, if you don't have the Hebrew and Greek and perhaps even if you do, you should have at least two very different translations on your desk. Now, for your own personal, private reading in your praying time, maybe just stick with one for the moment and then every year or two, change it and do a different one. Then every so often, for instance, sometimes on summer holiday, I will take a translation of the Bible that I've not used before because there are so many.

And I will simply spend some hours over the holiday reading through whole books and just seeing how they sit with me and enjoying doing so. But because I normally work in my professional life with the Hebrew and Greek, I do use the NRSV. I use the old revised version from the 1880s, which is a good, clunky, older English thing.

But which is actually quite helpful in some respects. I like the New Jerusalem Bible, not because it's always getting it right, but because, again, from quite a different angle and with lots of quite insightful ways of going at things. Henry Wandsboro, was it? Largely it was Henry Wandsboro.

I only know that because my wife did a trip around Israel with him as a student from Oxford. Interesting. And he is quite a remarkable character himself.

All of this reminds me of the fact that perhaps it's even helpful, the fact that we have so many different translations, to remind us that ultimately it's about the person this is leading us towards rather than investing the words themselves necessarily with. Because we're not treating the Bible like, say, the Quran, where it's seen very much as though there is only one way of understanding this. The text is set out by God and that's it.

That's right. I mean, the Quran in Islam is as it were the equivalent of Jesus in Christianity. And when people talk loosely about people of the book, actually the sort of thing that the book is in the Jewish world and the Muslim world and the Christian world is very subtly different.

And one should never forget that. But I say that to somebody who has a very high theology of scripture. That is to say, I really do believe that the Bible is the book God wanted us to have.

But that means that it's the Bible, what's an all loose ends of texts and all, you know, what happened to the lost ending of Mark and all that. This is the Bible that somehow



God wanted us to have. And back to your previous question, it's to do with the fact of the incarnation that this is God getting his boots muddy and his hands messy with the reality of our world.

And if you've got this pure undistilled or pure distilled thing, I'm not sure that everyone would be able to get hold of it. Whereas these stories, precisely with their oddities, et cetera, they do all sorts of things in our world, which actually from the ground up, we can see as being speaking the word of God to people of all sorts. Let's come to one of those issues with specific texts and when they are and aren't included and that sort of thing.

Seth in Pretoria, South Africa, asks this question, says, thanks for the podcast, who's prunedly helpful on a regular basis in my life and those with whom I share my life. But my question is in regards to the story of the woman caught in adultery. That's in John's gospel.

My question to Tom relates to his role as translator and interpreter and his understanding of inspiration in regards to this text. Now, many Christians don't really care, know or understand the note within their Bibles stating that the story is exempt from the earliest and best manuscripts. So, Tom, what do you do with this passage? Why is it still in our Bibles? Why do leaders and Bible teachers avoid telling their congregations about its textual nature? And are we to consider it canonical and thus inspired when it comes down to it? If it wasn't in the original manuscripts, how can we keep it in ours and at the same time maintain integrity? Yeah, the phrase the original manuscripts is misleading because there is no, you know, we don't have the manuscripts that John himself writes.

The earliest manuscripts we have, as I said before, are fragmentary from the early 2nd century. Some think we've got odd fragments from the late 1st century, but that's controversial. But actually, to have anything at all from the 2nd century is quite remarkable considering, as I said before, about all other classical texts.

So, when we say the earliest manuscripts, that doesn't necessarily mean the best. And what scholars have done, who've worked on the textual critical problems, as they're called, is to look at all the manuscripts, and this is a vast undertaking. And to compare them and to see, and in some cases you can see that, yes, what looks to us like a mistake was introduced in this point.

We've got a 4th century manuscript, and then this family of manuscripts have all copied that mistake. It's like Stephen Neal, in his introduction to the New Testament, uses the example of when he was teaching in a school in India, and he was teaching maths, and the boys had got an elaborate cheating system, where one of two really good mathematicians would give their work to others who had handed on. And he would be able to construct a flowchart of who'd used, so I mean, there you could tell who the originals were, but the art of textual criticism of the New Testament is that we can't

easily just say, okay, it all goes back like that, and that was the original.

So, it's the same with the so-called last ending of Mark. It's the same with that odd bit at the end of 1st Corinthians 14 about women keeping silence in churches, where that's missing from many early manuscripts, and so on. So, it isn't unique to this question of John 8. The question of whether a preacher should tell the congregation this kind of thing depends entirely on who the congregation are, and what stage of their development they're at.

There are some things which will just confuse people, and I would rather myself tell them that in the context of, let's have a Wednesday night Bible study, and let's really go at this stuff, and now here's a couple of books, and you might want to look at this. And wean people off a sort of idea that the Bible fell down from heaven in the King James Version, complete with maps, and say, no, no, it's okay. This doesn't mean that the whole thing is falling apart.

It means it's a real ancient book. When it comes to John 8, actually I think the passage starts in 7:53, which is the last phrase of chapter 7, through to verse 11. It is an odd passage in the sense that it doesn't seem to flow directly out of chapter 7, and it doesn't seem to flow directly into chapter 8. But it does look as though it belongs somewhere, and the early manuscripts, some of them have it attached to Luke, for instance.

And it's as though somebody knew that this was a Jesus story, which belongs somewhere, and whether John had it as a Jesus story, which he wanted to put there, or whether somebody else has put it into a manuscript. You know, I lose no sleep over this at all, but I do notice this. The way that John 8 works, and it's a long and quite difficult chapter, is that it starts with a group of people who want to stone a woman.

Jesus comes alongside this woman and says, I'm not condemning you, but go away and don't sin again. The chapter ends with them picking up stones to stone Jesus. The chapter has a sort of circular quality, where Jesus comes and takes the woman's part, as it were, and ends up being threatened with stoning himself.

And that to me is a kind of a microcosm of what's going on in John's Gospel, that the word becomes flesh and dwells among us, and at the end, or in chapter 19, it's the living word who then gets crucified on our behalf. And that makes me think that whoever puts it here actually had quite a subtle theological mind here, and we do know that John seems to have had a subtle theological mind. So it's perfectly possible that it is a genuine Johannine passage.

And in that sense, when this first set asks, you know, should we regard it as inspired or not, what's your answer to that? I would say yes, but I would then want to say, let's sit down and talk about what you mean by inspired, because the same with the lost ending of Mark. I'm happy to read the extra ending of Mark in church, even though I don't think

that's actually what Mark wrote, but somebody in the very early church wrote it because I think they found Mark with a truncated ending and thought we can't just leave it at that. And that's okay.

Editors can also be inspired. The problem then is with the doctrine of inspiration that says inspiration is one person being zapped by the Spirit and writing almost by dictation. That's not what Paul looks like.

That's not what Luke tells us. He's a historian. He's used all of the written sources.

What's the big deal about that? Can God not work through the ordinary historians' methods? Of course, God can. Sometimes God will give people direct revelations as in the Old Testament prophecies, but so let's get our theory of inspiration sorted out and it's got to be big enough and robust enough to cope with textual variance. I'll just get one final one squeezed in at the end.

This is Brody in Lynchburg, Virginia, who says in 2018 Pope Francis claimed that the sixth petition of the Lord's Prayer and lead us not into temptation is mistranslated. He said that a better translation would be something akin to do not let us enter into temptation. How do you render the passage in your own New Testament translation? And what's the theological significance of adopting the Pope's recommended translation? I remember there were a lot of headlines around this.

When it happened, lots of people saying the Pope wants to change the Lord's Prayer. Most of us know it in the King James Version. Lead us not into temptation.

Deliver us through evil. In a sense, I think it's our familiarity with that which makes us think, well, anything else sounds wrong somehow. I can't remember exactly what the way the Pope wanted to suggest it should be translated.

Yes. Here in Matthew 6, what I've got is don't bring us into the great trial. That's because the word pyrazmos, temptation or trial, in that world, as Jesus says it in Gethsemane, watch and pray that you may not enter into temptation.

That seems there to have referred to the fact that Jesus knew there was a great trial coming upon the world at the time. We can still pray that because we are promised that we may well go through a terrible time before the final end. And the prayer is that we will not have to bear the full brunt of that ourselves.

In fact, for Jesus followers, it's that they wouldn't bear it at all, that Jesus would take it on their behalf. But it's temptation the wrong word then, really. That's the problem.

That's the problem. And I think that's what the Pope was reacting against. And actually, of course, as with a lot of things that the newspapers get hold of, this was not new.

People have talked about that phrase forever. And he was simply talking good sense that if you think God can lead us into temptation in order to make life difficult, he said, what's the view of God with that? And James, in the letter to James, letter of James, says, God doesn't do that. It's very explicit.

God is not tempted by evil himself and does not tempt people. We are tempted when we're led astray by our own desires and so on. So I think that the Pope was quite right that if the faithful were thinking, oh, dear God, might be leading me into temptation, no, please don't do that.

Then that's a wrong view of God. It's sort of slightly sad in a way that one of the best-known bits of the Bible for most people who perhaps learnt it in school and church growing up is actually not brilliantly worded in that particular moment. And can make people confused.

But it's partly a thing we've discussed on another podcast that this is actually a bit where the very specific first-century Jewish thing shows through and where you have to wrestle with that to see how we make sense of it ourselves. And that's where I would go to first- The problem is people are, you know, I was listening to another podcast by someone who's a sort of occasional churchgoer, I think. And they said, I just can't stand it when they put modern versions of the Lord's prayer into services.

I want my good old today. And we have rather wedded very often to those familiar, isn't it? I totally get that. If I go to a church where they've changed the words of one of the hymns, I've known a lot of great hymns from the days of my boyhood.

And if you're singing along and suddenly find that some idiot has switched it around. And I think, oh, okay. I can see why you didn't like that, but actually that was a dumb thing to do.

But this is a typical 70-year-old talking with me. Well, look, it's been great fun to talk for the last half an hour on Bible translations. I hope it's been of some help to those whose questions we got to today.

And thank you very much for joining me. Thank you. Thank you.

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