

How to Translate the Holy Bible

by Michael Paul Johnson, senior editor of the *World English Bible*, 21 September 2018

Why?

I am sometimes asked what it would take to do a Bible translation project like the [World English Bible](#). The first question that comes to mind is “Why?” Why do you want to get involved in Bible translation? Why do you want to translate the Holy Bible into the language and dialect you are anticipating starting work on?

With me and the *World English Bible*, the process really started with a desire God put into my heart to share the Holy Bible in electronic formats that are easy to copy and share—formats that can “go viral” in the social media sense. This was before social media was a thing. This was before the Internet was a household word. I couldn’t do this with the existing modern English Bible translations because of copyright law and restrictive, profit-oriented policies of copyright owners. As I asked God about this, He clearly answered me that I was to do a Bible translation.

Your story may be different or similar, but the principle remains: Bible translation is a holy undertaking that I don’t recommend you do without God’s calling. If God has called you to Bible translation, then I strongly recommend that you keep pursuing that goal. Just do it. This document can help you get started, but it isn’t the only way to get started.

Just as a gut check, here are some good reasons to engage in Bible translation:

- The Bible translation is for people who speak a language where there is a Bible translation need, but nobody is filling it, yet.
- The Bible translation is for a language where there is a Bible translation available somewhere, but it is either technically inferior, locked up with unreasonable copyright policies, or both.
- God has called you to do this.

The following are some motivations that are bad reasons to engage in Bible translation:

- To customize the Holy Bible to fit your own personal theology. Do yourself a favor and stop right now, before you incur the wrath of God, if this is the case.
- To make money. Seriously, only the major languages are really profitable in Bible translation, and this field is already crowded with people who compete with you effectively. If money is

your main goal, do something else. You can make more money with things less hazardous to your soul than being tempted to compromise God's Word to sell more copies.

- To advance your own social agenda by altering God's Word to be more politically correct. If that is what you want to do, you may experience God's grace for a while, but there is no way I would want to trade places with you on Judgement Day.
- You want to do a more trendy or popular Bible translation. Seriously, you had better be sure this is what God is calling you to do before doing it. That is not likely, by the way. I strongly recommend sticking closely to the original Holy Bible.

Are you still interested in doing Bible translation work? Good. Read on.

God's Call and Spiritual Warfare

The single most important qualification for Bible translation is knowing that God has called you to do this. The rest can follow from that, as needed. With firm trust in God, you are empowered to do exactly what He has called you to do, regardless of spiritual opposition. There will be spiritual opposition as long as you do what God is calling you to do, but you need not fear it. God has given us the victory in Jesus Christ. We need to enforce that victory in our prayers, our words, and our actions. Please remember that the real enemies are the spiritual forces of darkness, not the people who they tend to use in the process. Once you know that it is really God who has called you to do this, you can fearlessly carry on. No weapon formed against you will prosper.

Please don't do this alone. Get some people who will stand with you in agreement in prayer. Listen to the Lord, and be quick to obey Him in whatever He says. He has some great ideas!

Copyright Considerations

Copyright law is more complicated and more troublesome to Bible translation use than you probably think. You can't just "not copyright" something, as it is legally copyrighted the instant you write it, for example. I could write a whole book on this topic as it relates to Bible translation, but I'll skip to the conclusions, here.

This is probably the second most important consideration in Bible translation. Ideally, you should get this handled and decided before you translate so much as a verse of Scripture. Why? Because you might find yourself in the uncomfortable position of having to start over because you made false assumptions. You could find yourself in conflict with other team members. Or worse yet, you could be one of those who spend a great deal of time and resources to make yet another Bible translation that is locked up in anachronistic, monetary profit-driven restrictions that war against God's intentions for the use of His Word. See mpj.cx/mmi for a more detailed explanation of what I see as a proper way to handle copyright, not for maximum monetary profit, but as a prophet or messenger of God.

I have spent years studying, praying, and meditating on the issue of Bible copyrights and the best way to handle them. As I have grown in faith in God, wisdom, and understanding, I have found better and

better ways to deal with this. There is more than one way to do this right, but most of the traditional ways have serious problems and/or unintended consequences. Copyright laws and treaties change with time. Publishing practices change with time. Technology disrupts publishing in many ways. So, for now, I recommend the following as best practices:

- Choose source texts for your translation that are not under current copyright (i.e. in the [Public Domain](#)) unless they are clearly covered by permission for you to use them, for example with a [Creative Commons Attribution](#) or [Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike](#) license. This is because if you use a copyrighted Bible translation to revise or translate, copyright ownership stays with the original copyright owner of the source text, and you must have their permission to do that. You also could be put in a position of not being able to use or publish your own work without their permission, which may involve royalty payments or may not be granted at any price. Fortunately, the best original source texts in Greek and Hebrew are firmly in the Public Domain (not copyrighted), so this is not a problem with those, but it may be if you choose almost any modern Bible translation.
- Agree *in advance* with all of your translation team that you will make the text of the translation of the Holy Bible available for free, and decide on a license. If you use a source text under the [Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike](#) license, then you must apply the same license to your translation. If not, then a [Public Domain dedication](#) or [Creative Commons Attribution](#) license are reasonable alternatives. There are more restrictive Creative Commons licenses which some people prefer, thinking that they somehow “protect” the integrity of the Bible text. They don’t, so I no longer recommend those.
- Make sure the copyright ownership, date, and license is clearly marked on drafts and published versions of the Bible translation text. This is so that people know there is authoritative permission for them to use the text in all the ways we want them to, i.e. sharing, preaching, recording, broadcasting, publishing, etc. If there is a problem with security where the exact names and identities of the translation team should not be attached to the text, then please use a proxy in a safe place who can act on your behalf as copyright steward. Leaving a work anonymous has the surprising effect of locking up the text for 95 years where it can’t be effectively used. That is why it is best to clearly mark the copyright ownership AND a very permissive license.

Training

Once God has called you to Bible translation work, the question of training is secondary. There is no single training program that is the best for all circumstances, or for all roles within a Bible translation project. I have been reading and studying the Holy Bible daily since I was a child. I also did some independent study on Biblical languages and advanced programming topics, took a correspondence Bible course, then obtained a [Certificate in Applied Linguistics](#) from the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics (now [Dallas International University](#)). I already had a Master’s degree in Electrical Engineering, among other training. Was all of that necessary? All of that (and more) has been useful for me, but many good Bible translators get by on much less formal training. The most important part is

familiarity with the Holy Bible and a good relationship with God. I dare say that, plus a good understanding of the Bible source language(s) and target language are all that is really essential. Of course, for a reasonable amount of efficiency, it is also important to be computer literate and able to learn the software used to do Bible translation.

A higher level of responsibility and ability is required to lead a translation project than to contribute to it. While it is possible for one person to do an entire Bible translation alone, that is a very slow and costly way to do it. I didn't do that, even though I'm the most visible person on the [World English Bible](#) team. Many of our contributors had very little training, indeed. Some had advanced degrees in theology and/or biblical languages. Much depends on the context of your project. You are likely to have a pool of volunteers that includes more education and greater spiritual maturity in some places than others. You will know who to work with as God guides you.

If you are leading a Bible translation project, be ready to do some training of the volunteers. (Or if you actually have money to pay them, be ready to train your employees. I wouldn't know much about that.)

Church Community Involvement and Volunteers

Getting other people involved in a Bible translation project has many advantages:

- People working in parallel on different passages can dramatically boost the speed of a project. If done well, 100 people can go at least 80 times as fast as 1 person. (It isn't quite 100 times, because it takes some effort to coordinate and cross-check, but the gain is still significant.) Speed matters. Some people die every day without having read or heard the Holy Bible.
- People working together on the same passages (at the same time or in separate passes) can improve the quality of the translation.
- Getting input from people from diverse church backgrounds is a good way to be aware of and avoid denominational bias in the translation.
- Having participation and involvement with people from a variety of churches and backgrounds helps lend legitimacy and acceptance to the finished project. It is easier for the larger community and the Church as a whole to accept the results this way.
- It is much easier to proofread someone else's writing than your own. Proofreading is more effective when done by someone who didn't do the original translation or writing.

Choice of Source Texts

The best and most authoritative source texts for the Holy Bible are the original manuscripts in biblical Hebrew (for the Old Testament) and Koine Greek (for the New Testament). It turns out that figuring out what the original source texts were based on the early manuscripts that we have access to is hard.

It isn't actually that hard for the Old Testament, due to the extreme accuracy and consistency of the scribal traditions. The [traditional Hebrew text](#) of the Old Testament is well beyond copyright expiration, legally safe to use, and trustworthy. There are a few other "critical texts" of the Hebrew Old

Testament, including one that the German Bible Society claims a copyright on, but the tiny differences in these texts are insignificant with respect to meaning and make no difference in any basic theology.

For the New Testament, there are three credible choices of source Greek New Testament texts:

- The Greek Majority Text (based on the manuscripts that were most trusted and most copied and used by the Church),
- The Nestle/Aland UBS Critical Text (based on giving greater weight to the manuscripts found on what appears to be the oldest media, based on carbon dating), and
- The Textus Receptus (the basis of the King James Version).

I believe that the Greek Majority Text is the best choice, based on my own prayer and study. My conversation with God is subjective, and I don't expect everyone to take my word for it. That is OK. I enforce its use in the *World English Bible* and recommend that others use it.

The Nestle/Aland UBS Critical Text is the most popular among most academics "experts" and is used in most modern Bible translations. I put significant alternate readings from this text in footnotes of the *World English Bible*.

The Textus Receptus is valuable in that many people are used to the reading of the King James Version. I recommend putting significant alternate readings from this source in footnotes.

That said, there is not much difference between the above Greek New Testaments-- nothing that affects any major teaching.

So what do you do if there is nobody on your team who is good at Hebrew and Greek, but they are good at another language with a trustworthy Bible translation, or maybe there is a good but archaic version in the same language? That is OK. You can use a trusted translation of the Holy Bible as a source IF it meets the copyright requirements (i.e. is not copyrighted or is available under a license that clearly allows you to use it for this purpose, like the CC-BY or CC-BY-SA licenses). For English, this would include the [World English Bible](#) and the [Unlocked Literal Bible](#). In some other languages, this may be an older Public Domain Bible that is trusted and used, but which needs a language update to be easily understood in that language. Still, in case of questions, it is best if someone can check the translation work against the original language texts. There are some good software tools to make that easier, even with just some basic knowledge of the source languages.

Translational Philosophy

When working with a group of people on a Bible translation, it is important to come to agreement on exactly how you will do the translation work, and more importantly, what the desired outcome is. If one person is working towards a conservative, mostly literal translation, and another is working towards a free-form paraphrase, the result will likely not be acceptable to either one of them (or anyone else). As project leader(s), you should write out clearly what your translation philosophy, target dialect, and language style choices are. It is also helpful to write down why certain choices were made, but at a minimum, what these choices are. It should include such things as use of contractions (or not), handling

of God's Proper Name in the Old Testament, handling of certain key terms, the approximate size of the vocabulary or reading level of the target audience, etc.

For a first or most useful translation in a language, or at least the first one which is free to copy, share, and use without royalties, limits, and hassles, I recommend a conservative translation that aims for a middle of the road vocabulary: not too simple, not too complex, not using many words that tend to be used only in church, but not oversimplifying or contextualizing to the point where meaning is obscured or lost. Try to balance preserving the meaning, literary form, and style of the original while expressing it in natural-sounding speech in the target language. Note that strict word-for-word translation doesn't normally work well because (1) different languages have different natural word orders, and (2) the ranges of meanings of words vary between languages, such that sometimes one word maps to more than one word in the other language and vice versa. Sometimes it takes mapping a phrase to a phrase. Sometimes it is just hard to get it fully right, in which case a footnote may help clarify things.

Speaking of footnotes, I recommend using footnotes only for textual variants and translation issues. Leave the commentary, study notes, etc., for another time, possibly by other people, or put them in a separate commentary. This way you avoid having the whole Bible translation rejected on the basis of included commentary that is biased towards or against one denomination or church background.

Setting the pace for the translational philosophy need not be a big document, but it is important. I did this with the [World English Bible Frequently Asked Questions document](#). I referred people to it often as they offered to help with proofreading, etc.

Some basic good advice on Bible translation standards and consultant checking is published by the Forum of Bible Agencies International (FOBAI) at <http://www.forum-intl.org/resources>. Remember, the point is not to gain just approval of people, but the approval of God. It just happens that there is some godly wisdom in that document derived from wise counsel of those who have gone before in seeking to please God with Bible translations. Note that FOBAI standards are a little bit loose and subject to interpretation, as you might expect from a body comprised of a diverse set of Bible translation agencies, but look for the wisdom in there and ask God for specific guidance for your particular case. It is extremely likely that if you are reading this document, you are about to start (or have started) on a Bible translation project that is not within one of the FOBAI member organizations, so some items may not be exactly pertinent to your case, but the general principles hold. Innovative and unconventional Bible translation processes that result in quality of Bible translations and are pleasing to God are just as good or maybe better than those that strictly follow traditional Bible translation processes assumed by FOBAI.

Quality Control

There are several ways we control quality in a Bible translation:

- Make sure that everyone with final edit authority believes in Jesus Christ, knows the Holy Bible well, is fluent in the target language, and has a profound respect for God's Word.
- Make sure that typo reports, change suggestions, and new translation wording is always vetted by someone with final edit authority. (There is no need to authenticate or check credentials on

people submitting typo reports, etc., as those can be evaluated purely on the content of the suggestion, but the suggestions certainly need to be validated before acceptance.)

- Build checks into your process, such as translators cross-checking each other's work, community and church checks, and qualified consultant checks.
- Provide ways for people to give feedback to the translators and actually check this feedback. This can be both in-person readings of the Scriptures and remote comments via the Internet or other channels. This may include web contact forms, email, social media, voice contact information, and paper mailing addresses. Of the remote contact methods, I have found the web contact forms to be the most useful and least prone to automated spam.

Persistence

In the process of Bible translation, there will almost certainly be times where you need to remind yourself of God's call on your life and your ability to actually do whatever He calls you to do. Keep your full armor on (Ephesians 6:10-20). Keep doing whatever God puts on your heart to do. Don't give up, even if (when) you face opposition or trouble.

Bible Translation Format Standards

It is possible to do Bible translation with pencil and paper, using printed books for reference. I don't recommend this approach, as it is too slow and error-prone. Going high-tech has hazards, too, in that it is even easier to lose or destroy a copy of a Bible translation than it is to lose or destroy a paper document. Fortunately, it is very easy to make copies and backups of digital data, and when done properly, the digital data is actually much more robust than paper data. Bible translations differ from most documents in that:

- They retain value far longer than most software packages, many of which will become obsolete and unreadable in the next 5 to 10 years.
- There is a growing body of custom software to convert from standard formats to useful output formats. Starting with a nonstandard format usually causes a great deal of manual labor.
- Getting it to look right on paper for one edition isn't enough. There needs to be a trustworthy digital archive of each Bible translation such that it can be reused for different output formats, book sizes, etc., and updated as necessary as that language changes.

The best practice for Bible translation work, right now, is to use Unicode for character encoding and [USFM](#) for markup. (Using other formats that easily convert back and forth to USFM, such as USFX or USX, is also acceptable.) For a more detailed discussion of Bible translation file formats and some competing alternatives, you can refer to <https://ebible.org/usfx/Bible-encoding.htm>.

Bible Translation Software

There is a great deal of software available to help in the Bible translation process. See a list at <http://lingtransoft.info/apps/results>. The most important, though, is a choice of Bible translation editing software. (It is possible to edit USFM directly in a plain text editor, but I don't recommend it.) The top 4 software packages to consider are, Paratext, Bibledit, Adapt-It, and Translation Core.

Paratext is a joint project of SIL and the United Bible Societies. It is the most professional and polished of these, but it is also proprietary and some features are limited to only a select group. See <https://pt8.paratext.org/> for more information. I use this software regularly.

Bibledit is free and open source. I have used Bibledit before, and would probably be using it, now, except that I use the Digital Bible Library connection feature of Paratext (which is something not everyone involved in Bible translation needs to do). See <http://bibledit.org/> for more information about Bibledit.

Adapt It is probably the best choice if you are starting a project to adapt a Bible translation into a related language or dialect. It is free and open source. See <https://adapt-it.org/> for more information about Adapt It.

Translation Studio is a new contender that is free and open source. It also provides some nice backup, sharing, and publishing features. See <https://unfoldingword.bible/ts/> for more information about Translation Studio.

Backup, Backup, Backup

Make sure you always have multiple copies of your most important data, stored in multiple locations. It should be extremely difficult for you, a virus, a natural disaster, or a thief to destroy all of them.

Modern Bible Publishing and Sharing

This is not your grandfather's publishing environment! The days when getting a book into print was the end of the line for Bible publishing have long since gone. Printed books are great, and still useful, but digital copies in the right formats are much better for sharing, publishing in both digital and print versions, updating as languages change, and adapting into related dialects or languages. Getting a Bible into just one digital format or on one web site is not enough, either. Every year, new Bible apps and formats appear. The way to keep up is by keeping a good source text in a standard format (like USFM or one of its XML equivalents) and continually converting to updated formats as the opportunities present themselves. Many times this is as easy as letting someone else do the conversion(s).

Any Questions?

[Ask.](#)