Forthcoming at *Sociology of Religion*

# The Bible as a Product of Cultural Power: The Case of Gender Ideology in the English Standard Version

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**Abstract**

Sociologists whose research intersects with American Christianity recognize the critical importance of the Bible to understanding many Americans' beliefs, values, and behaviors, but their operative approach to the Bible generally ignores that "the Bible" is as much *a product* of interpretive communities as it is a symbolic marker of identity or shaper of social life. I propose that rather than approaching "the Bible" through a distinctly Protestant lens, as given—specifically as uniform, static, and exogenous—sociologists should apply a critical lens to re-conceptualize the Bible more accurately. That is, sociologists should recognize that Bibles are multiform; they are dynamic; and their *contents* (not just their current interpretations) are highly contingent on temporal culture and power, being the product of manipulation by interpretive communities and actors with vested interests. Using a recent case study of how complementarian gender ideology became systematically inserted into one the most popular English Bible translations among evangelicals today, I illustrate how a more critical approach toward "the Bible" can provide richer, more sophisticated sociological analyses of power and cultural reproduction within Christian traditions.

***Key words:*** Bible, sociology of religion, evangelicals, gender ideology, complementarian

Sociologists whose empirical foci involve American Christianity recognize the vital importance of the Bible, especially to the Protestant tradition. Consequently, there is no shortage of analyses on how Americans' beliefs about the Bible's interpretation, authority, or inerrancy influence their attitudes, values, and behaviors on dozens of issues (e.g., Ammerman 1987; Chan and Ecklund 2016; Franzen 2013; Guhin 2016; Hempel and Bartkowski 2008; Jelen 1989; Kellstedt and Smidt 1993; Perry 2015, 2019a, 2019b; Sherkat and Ellison 1997; Woodberry and Smith 1998). There even exists numerous sociological "meta" articles and books that consider how best to conceptualize, predict, and model Americans' orientations toward the Bible (Ammerman 1982; Bartkowski 1996; Franzen and Griebel 2013; Friesen 2017; Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008; Hoffman et al. 2018; Jelen, Wilcox, and Smidt 1990; Markofski 2015; Smidt 2017; Smith 2011; among anthropologists, see Bielo 2009a, 2009b; Harding 2000; Malley 2004).

Yet sociologists have seldom been self-reflective of their own understandings and uses of "the Bible" as an analytic construct (see Coleman 1999), and consequently, their dominant *operative* approach to it has been problematic in several regards.[1] One problematic element is due to American sociologists' "Protestant bias" (Guhin 2014:582) that leads them to adopt a rather Protestant (indeed evangelical) conception of "the Bible." Sociological analyses, for example, often seem to proceed under the assumption that the Bible is uniform (all Bibles are basically the same), static (the Bibles people read now are essentially the Bibles they read 50 years ago), and exogenous (the Bible originated outside of the contemporary interpretive communities or actors who read it).[2]

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[1] I italicize "operative" to stress that I do not intend to suggest sociologists are cognitively unaware of how things like biblical criticism work, only that they do not take these things into consideration in their dominant approach to the Bible and thus *operate* as if these issues are not relevant.

[2] Notable exceptions to these trends such as Malley (2004) and Bielo (2009a, 2009b) have been the work of anthropologists who tend to be more aware of the contingency of cultural concepts and artifacts like "the Bible."

None of these operative assumptions are true, however. "The Bible," even the English Bible, is in fact multiform; there are differences across Christian traditions (Pelikan 2006), and even among Protestants there are literally hundreds of English translations and niche versions, many with non-trivial differences in content (Brunn 2013; Noll 2017; Schmid 2016).[3] The Bible is not static, but dynamic; its contents change across time and culture (Alter 2019; Campbell 2010; Metzger 2001; Ruden 2017). And the Bible is not merely a concrete object, exogenous to interpretive communities, but it is also quite endogenous. That is to say, its very *contents* are debated and manipulated—not just interpreted—by actors and communities with vested interests, including political and cultural commitments (Carson 1998; Ehrman 2007; Malley 2004; Metzger and Ehrman 2005; Thuesen 1999) and even economic gain (Pietsch 2017; Vaca 2017, 2019). Ignoring these facts, sociological analyses of American Christianity in particular potentially neglect key steps in the processes through which interpretive communities (re)produce dominant ideologies within their respective reference groups and even export those ideologies to the wider public.

Below, I further develop this argument, and provide an empirical case study using a contemporary example. I trace how evangelical debates over gender ideology and proposed "feminist" revisions to the New International Version in the 1990s resulted in the production and distribution of the increasingly-popular English Standard Version (ESV); and I show how the ESV's editorial team made intentional, systematic changes from the Revised Standard Version (the ESV's parent text) to publish and mass-market a text more amenable to conservative, complementarian interpretations. In so doing, the actors behind the ESV have engaged in more

[3] Determining the precise number of translations is difficult because of disagreements about what "counts" as a new translation or a revision of a previous version and whether a complete Bible is required or just certain books. Nevertheless, the American Bible Society (2009) estimates "the number of printed English translations and paraphrases of the Bible, whether complete or not, is about 900."

covert means of cultural reproduction, not only disseminating *their interpretation* of the biblical text, but manipulating the *text itself*.

In the proximal case of the ESV, understanding these intentional changes allows us to document how complementarian ideology—and thus, justification for gendered power asymmetry in Christian communities and families—is quite intentionally, though subtly and surreptitiously, structured into the very texts to which evangelical Protestants claim to submit their lives. In a more distal sense, this case elucidates how rethinking "the Bible" opens sociology up to new avenues for empirical analysis and theory regarding religion, power, and cultural reproduction.

**SOCIOLOGY AND "THE BIBLE"**

Distinct from the Orthodox and Roman Catholic branches of Christianity, the centrality of "the Bible" to faith and practice has been a defining characteristic of Protestantism, particularly in its more evangelical strains (Guhin 2016; Hoffman et al. 2018; Perry, 2019b, Smith 2011). And because the American cultural context has been so thoroughly dominated by Protestantism (Bellah 1998; Greeley and Hout 1999), sociologists of American religion have long recognized the importance of "the Bible" for understanding the religious, social, cultural, and political lives of Americans. Sociological studies that deal with "the Bible" typically focus on: (1) how Americans' interpret the Bible and thus internalize or externalize its contents personally and socially; (2) how such interpretive claims serve as a proxy for certain group identities; (3) how specific teachings within the Bible influence Americans' beliefs, values, or behaviors; or (4) how the practice of Bible reading itself potentially shapes various outcomes for Americans.

Studies of the first kind examine the influence of various interpretive approaches to the Bible such as "biblical literalism" or "biblical inerrancy" on Americans' attitudes toward relevant social issues including morality, politics, and science (e.g., Darnell and Sherkat 1997; Hoffmann and Bartkowski 2008; Jelen, Wilcox, and Smidt 1990; Sherkat 2011; Sherkat and Ellison 1997; Smith 2011). Studies of the second kind take a more "meta" approach and examine identification with biblical literalism/inerrancy rather as markers of conservative religious identity, and thus, view interpretive orientations as a proxy for group membership (e.g., Bartkowski 1996; Franzen and Griebel 2013; Harding 2000; Malley 2004; Markofski 2015). Studies of the third kind focus more concretely on specific biblical teachings about, for instance, creationism (Perry 2015), capital punishment (Finckenauer 1988), homosexuality (Powell et al. 2010), or human sinfulness and salvation through Jesus Christ (Hempel and Bartkowski 2008), and how those potentially influence Americans' attitudes and behaviors.[4] Lastly, studies of the fourth kind approach Christian interaction with the Bible less from an interpretive standpoint and more as a collective religious practice that itself embeds actors within interpretive subcultures (e.g., Guhin 2016; Winchester 2017; see also Beilo 2009a and Malley 2004).

Being themselves largely influenced by Protestant cultural conceptions (Guhin 2014:582), I propose that American sociologists have (unwittingly) tended to approach the Bible in very Protestant terms. A common thread through the vast majority of the analyses cited above (with the exception of anthropologists like Bielo 2009a and Malley 2004) is an approach that takes "the Bible" as exogenous, uniform, and static. In other words, whether studies focus on the content of the text itself, one's interpretive orientation toward the text, the social identity of the interpretive community, or the practice of engaging with the Bible, the possibility is never

[4] A subcategory of this focus would be studies that consider how racial identity potentially moderates interpretations of the Bible to either subvert white privilege or reinforce it (e.g., Shelton and Emerson 2012).

considered that *different* actors and interpretive communities at *different* times may be reading *different* Bibles which are themselves the product of intentional efforts on the part of those communities.[5]

Panel A in Figure 1 illustrates what I have described as the dominant operative approach to "the Bible" in American sociology. The flow chart begins with "the Bible" as an object, exogenous to temporal culture, uniform, and static.[6] It is read by different interpretive communities (e.g., mainline Protestants, Catholics, mainstream evangelicals, other sectarian Protestants like Seventh Day Adventists, Latter-Day Saints, Jehovah's Witnesses) which have different subcultural commitments (e.g., different gender ideologies, political identities, ethnoracial demographics) and interpretive traditions specific to their religious subculture. When "the Bible" is read through these different subcultural commitments and interpretive traditions, the result is different practical applications, each of which serve to reconstitute the interpretive community itself.

While this model is not wholly inaccurate, it is incomplete, because it is based on a faulty operative assumption that "the Bible" is uniform, static, and exogenous. Panel B proposes an alternative approach that takes into consideration how the Bibles that actors and interpretive communities read are actually a *product* of an interpretive community, not just a static, atemporal object to be interpreted in various ways. Within a specific temporal/cultural context,

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[5] In their impressively sophisticated analysis of the semantic structure of the King James Bible and its selective use among different Protestant interpretive communities, Hoffman et al. (2018, footnote 2) acknowledge the possibility of different translations but conclude the differences were trivial and thus were ignored. Warner (1988) and Bielo's (2009a) ethnographic accounts of conservative Protestant communities acknowledge that group participants used different translations and that group opinions often differed in key ways on which translation was "best." Malley's (2004) analysis of evangelical Bible reading goes even further by providing some historical context to evangelical debates regarding Bible translation and how various subcultural commitments contribute to these debates.

[6] In his work on the "New Monasticism" among American evangelicals, Markofski (2015:276-285, and specifically Figures 7.1a and 7.1b) illustrates this view with "the Bible" existing as an exogenous factor to be interpreted by the evangelical community.

different interpretive communities engage in processes of textual criticism (deciding which original manuscripts to translate into English) and translation (with different approaches to translation philosophy, some adopting more literal or more loose translations, and all influenced by various theological commitments). This results in the publication of a variety of different Bibles. These English Bibles contain not only different nuances on key verses that interpretive communities cite to undergird their doctrinal positions, but an increasing number contain additional commentary notes that readers are encouraged to utilize. These also influence readers' interpretations.[7] These different Bibles are then marketed to specific actors/groups who then internalize and externalize those teachings, resulting in the reconstitution of the religious community itself. Thus, the practice of manipulating what goes into "the Bible" is itself a means of (1) reproducing a group's subcultural commitments and thus strengthening the group and (2) externalizing those commitments to the broader world of potential Bible readers thereby serving as a form of "worldview evangelism" (Carson 2002:384).

[FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Throughout the remainder of this article, I present an empirical case study highlighting how the dominant ideology of an interpretive community regarding gender led to the deliberative development and dissemination of one of the most popular English Bibles today—a Bible version that now serves as a tool which community leaders and organizations can use to reproduce that very gender ideology and market it to the general public.

[7] Illustrating the profound influence such commentary notes can have, the 1611 King James Bible was originally commissioned in part because of the anti-episcopal and politically inflammatory annotations published in the popular *Geneva Bible* of 1560 (Metzger 2001:65). And the explosive rise of premillennial dispensationalism in the early 1900s was largely the consequence of the *Scofield Reference Bible*, which included thousands of notes outlining the dispensational hermeneutic and premillennial, pretribulational eschatology (Marsden 2006).

## THE "GENDER NEUTRAL" CONTROVERSY OF THE 1990S AND THE ORIGINATION OF THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Gender controversies have been a recurrent theme in American Christianity, particularly since the 1960s when concerns about family disintegration and sexual promiscuity helped draw an inward-looking evangelical subculture back into cultural and political engagement (Gallagher 2003; Griffith 2017; Harding 2000; Heath 2012; Jakobsen and Pellegrini 2003). And yet, while scholars of gender and religion are certainly aware of the ways conservative Christian communities cite biblical precedent to leverage traditionalist, complementarian views, little if any attention has been given to how variable and contested that "biblical precedent" has been.

Outside of the venerable King James Version (KJV), the most widely read English translation of the Bible has been, and still is, the New International Version (NIV), published in 1978 (American Bible Society 2017; Goff, Farnsley, and Thuesen 2017; Gutjahr 2017). In 1997, Susan Olasky (1997a) of *WORLD* magazine (a conservative evangelical publication generally more politically-minded than the evangelical flagship *Christianity Today*) broke a story that the NIV's publisher, Zondervan, was "quietly" planning on publishing a revision of the NIV that re-translated parts of the Bible to make it more "gender neutral." The author summarized this move as nothing less than the "feminist seduction of the evangelical church," and warned readers that "the decision of one committee to substitute an 'inclusive' NIV version for the [older NIV] is likely to transform understandings of how God views the sexes he created."

Conveyed in culture war language that pitted liberal "egalitarians" favoring "unisex language Bibles" against theologically conservative "complementarians," Olasky's article unleashed a fire-storm of controversy resulting in dozens of articles in *WORLD* and *Christianity Today*, and even entire monographs over the disagreements (Carson 1998; Grudem and

Poythress 2000). Many lay evangelicals were incensed that Zondervan would seemingly capitulate to liberal cultural influences (Carson 1998).[8] In an attempt to resolve the confusion and calm the outcry, Zondervan executives and members of the NIV translation committee agreed to a meeting in Colorado Springs with evangelical thought-leaders including Focus on the Family founder, James Dobson; R.C. Sproul of Ligonier Ministries; theologian and President of the Council on Biblical Manhood and Womanhood, Wayne Grudem; and Baptist pastor, John Piper—who all very much wanted to preserve gender distinctions in the NIV (Olasky 1997b).

Despite assurances from Zondervan executives that they would no longer distribute a more gender inclusive revision of the NIV in the United States (one had already been available in the UK for some time), Wayne Grudem was unsatisfied and believed the best course of action would be for conservative evangelicals committed to complementarian gender roles to publish their own Bible that they could protect from the threat of feminist ideology and other liberal threats to conservative Christian theology (Bayly 1999). Rather than re-translate the entire Old and New Testament, Grudem and the president of the evangelical publisher Crossway contacted the National Council of Churches who in 1952 had published the very literal (but "too liberal" for evangelicals) Revised Standard Version (RSV) about procuring their copyright. With Grudem as its general editor, the "English Standard Version" or ESV would represent a conservative evangelical revision of the RSV, with updated language and whatever changes the editorial team deemed "necessary to rid it of de-Christianing translation choices" (Bayly 1999).

[8] One conservative seminary fired a faculty member who had served on the translation committee for the new NIV one year before his retirement. And the vice president for the International Bible Society (which sponsors the NIV) received seven copies of the new NIV that a man had impaled with a power drill (Carson 1998:16).

In the 18 years since its original publication in 2001, the ESV has since become one of the most popular Bibles among conservative Christians today.[9]

In a 2016 interview with *WORLD* magazine, Grudem summarized the ESV's revisions to the RSV as follows: "We took out all the traces of liberalism and updated the RSV. We changed about 8 percent of the text or about 60,000 words. 'Wouldst' went to 'would' and 'couldst' went to 'could' and some things like that" (Smith 2016). But what of the "liberalism" they changed? In addition to re-translating some verses from the RSV to better support orthodox evangelical teaching on the deity of Christ or the virgin birth,[10] one of the most substantive revision patterns involved the original motive for the ESV's creation—the preservation of complementarian gender ideology. I now turn to documenting these revision patterns in detail.

**METHODS**

Because the ESV is based on the earlier RSV—and thus *any* differences between the two constitute *deliberate* revisions—it provides an ideal situation in which to observe how translation teams intentionally insert their theological and ideological commitments into the text itself. Sometimes editorial teams may genuinely feel that a certain translation is more accurate or literal than a previous translation and so the motive for revision may simply be a high regard for accuracy. But observing consistent changes from the RSV to the ESV on verses surrounding key

[9] While conservative Christians still use the KJV and the NIV in greater frequency, the ESV has been endorsed by a large number of evangelical celebrity pastors, seminary presidents, authors, and organizations including The Gospel Coalition (see Taylor 2010) and Gideon's International. The ESV also represents the fastest growing Bible translation among conservative Christians. While data from the 2012 GSS cited in Goff et al. (2015) suggest there is little danger the ESV will supplant the mighty KJV any time soon, more recent surveys distributed by the Christian polling firm, Barna Group, in cooperation with the American Bible Society, show that the ESV's readership has tripled from only 3 percent of adult Bible readers in 2011 to 9 percent by 2017. As of December 2018, the ESV was the third bestselling Bible translation behind the NIV and the KJV according to the Evangelical Christian Publishers Association (Christian Book Expo 2018), and is also the third most commonly searched for Bible in Google, behind the KJV and NIV (Open Bible nd).

[10] Some examples cited by Grudem include revisions of Isaiah 7:14, long-held as a key proof-text foretelling Jesus' virgin birth, where the RSV translates the Hebrew word *alma* to read "young woman," rather than "virgin" (ESV). Another example would be Psalm 45:6, thought to be a reference to Jesus himself (quoted in Hebrews 1:8), which the RSV translates "Your divine thrown endures forever," rather than "Your throne, O God, is forever" (ESV).

doctrinal issues reveals intentionality that involves more than mere accuracy (which Grudem himself admitted when providing theologically-important examples of how the ESV "took out all the traces of liberalism").

To analyze these differences, I developed a list of sixteen relevant passages and verses in the Old and New Testament that conservative evangelical authors and thought-leaders most frequently cite to support their ideological position about traditional, complementarian gender roles in marriage or in the church (e.g., The Danvers Statement 1988; Piper and Grudem 2006) or at least debate with more progressive Bible scholars (e.g., Beck 2005; Grudem 2012). The logic for selecting these verses and passages follows Small's (2009) articulation of case study logic in which each "case" (Bible verse or passage regarding gender) is included "sequentially" according to the question at hand, toward the goal of logical inference and saturation, rather than systematically for the purposes of statistical inference.

After developing a selection of texts, I then compared the RSV and the ESV to observe the potential differences between the two. Because I have training in Hebrew and Greek, as well as resources to check my own translation, I compared the RSV and ESV to the texts in their original languages to draw observations about whether the ESV's revisions were justified lexically or syntactically. I also compared both the ESV and RSV translations for each verse or passage with other popular Bible translations (see American Bible Society 2017; Goff et al. 2015; Gutjahr 2017) in order to provide a reference for whether certain translation choices are unique to the ESV or RSV.

Table 1 lists each of the relevant gender passages along with a brief summary of their contents and whether there was any meaningful difference between the RSV and ESV. Seven out of the sixteen the passages either were unchanged from the RSV to the ESV, or their changes

were slight and did not significantly alter the meaning of the passages or key verses. However, nine of these gender passages were changed and *each* was altered in the direction of favoring a more complementarian, traditional gender interpretation.

[TABLES 1 ABOUT HERE]

Tables 2-4 present the initial RSV rendering of a key text next to the ESV revision for comparison. I also summarize the change and explain how the ESV revision significantly alters the meaning. Lastly, I also use superscript letters ([a-g]) to indicate whether the RSV reading or the ESV reading is closer to one of the popular Bible translations. These include the KJV, NIV (1984), NIV (2011 updated edition), New American Standard Bible (NASB), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), New Living Translation (NLT), or New American Bible (NAB).[11]

## HOW THE EDITORIAL TEAM OF THE ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION BAKED COMPLEMENTARIAN THEOLOGY INTO THEIR BIBLE

In terms of themes, the ESV revisions could be categorized broadly as (1) changes reflecting complementarian roles for women and men in the family; (2) changes restricting roles for women in the church; and (3) changes serving to highlight certain feminine or masculine qualities that Christian women and men are enjoined to exhibit under a complementarian interpretive framework.

### Women and Men in the Family

Table 2 presents four gender passages in which the ESV revision team altered the RSV text to favor complementarian interpretations of gender and family life. Genesis 3:16, for instance, includes God's words to Eve after she and Adam ate of the fruit in the Garden of Eden. The second half of the verse, the RSV translates, "your desire shall be *for* (Hebrew: *el*) your

[11] When a popular Bible translation has something quite different from both the RSV and the ESV, I simply do not append it to either reading.

husband, and he shall rule over you." The RSV translates the Hebrew proposition *el* as "for" as do almost all other popular Bible translations, conveying the idea that Eve will forever pine after her husband (see Macintosh 2016).[12] However, the ESV changes the translation to say, "your desire shall be *contrary to* your husband, but he shall rule over you." Following this decision in 2016, several Hebrew scholars (e.g., Lynch 2016; Mariottni 2016) took to the Internet to point out that the ESV's translation decision was lexically and grammatically unjustified (no other English translation renders the preposition *el* this way). But the ESV's revision of the RSV text conveys more clearly the idea that Eve's "curse" is that her relationship to her husband has been perverted: in her sinful state, she will wrestle with a recurrent temptation to buck against his rightful leadership, while he will be tempted to lead her in an overly-domineering fashion.

Another clear example with significant implications for how Christian men and women understand marital relationships is found in Ephesians 5, a famous passage where Paul instructs wives to "submit" or "be subject" to their husbands. In the Greek text, the word for "submit" or "be subject" is not found in verse 22 at all, but is actually in verse 21, where Paul tells the Ephesian Christians to submit "to one another out of reverence for Christ" (RSV and ESV). Both the RSV and the ESV have implied the verb "submit" or "be subject" in verse 22 in reference to the previous verse.[13] The RSV translators obviously believed the section began with verse 21 and thus inserts the heading "The Christian Household" directly before this verse. Grouping the verses in this way conveys an egalitarian thrust: the Christian marriage is to be characterized by *mutual* submission. In this reading, wives *and* husbands submit to one another in different ways. Wives submit by honoring their husbands as the church honors Christ, and husbands submit by

[12] Among the exceptions, the NLT translates the idea as "to control," which conveys the idea that Eve will want to manipulate her husband, but he will still rule over her. I classify this idea as closer to the ESV.
[13] Literally, the verses 21-22 read "…being subject to one another out of reverence for Christ, wives to your husbands as to the Lord…"

sacrificing for their wives as Christ did for his church. The ESV, however, not only revises the RSV translation but moves the heading to have verse 21 appended to the previous paragraph, and a new section entitled "Wives and Husbands" beginning with the statement "Wives submit to your husbands." The reason for this change cannot be grammatical, since verse 22 is syntactically dependent upon verse 21. Thus they should not be divided, and certainly not under different headings (see Hart 2017; Wright 2011). The more obvious reason for the revision would be that the ESV rendering more clearly favors a complementarian interpretation of marriage relationships with Christian wives being characterized by submission and husbands by loving leadership. The idea of mutual submission in marriage is nowhere in view here.

Sometimes the ESV's revisions amount to a single strategic word. In the case of 1 Timothy 5, the Apostle Paul is giving instructions about how the church should help older widows, while encouraging younger widows to get remarried and start new families. The RSV translates verse 14, "So I would have the younger women marry, bear children, *rule* their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us." The RSV translates *oikodespoteo* (compound word from *oikos* = home + *despoteo* = to rule, be master) quite literally as "rule [their] household," potentially giving the idea that young married women are exercising considerable authority in their homes, possibly even over their husbands in some regard. The ESV changes only this word to "*manage* their households," thereby softening the meaning to suggest that young wives are merely managers of the home, in which men are expected to rule.

A final example is found in 1st Peter 5, where Peter is giving instructions as to how wives should conduct themselves. The grammatical structure of the passage is complex. The RSV translation communicates that the holy women in the Old Testament adorned themselves with a gentle spirit and they were submissive to their husbands, making the two ideas related but not

dependent on one another. The ESV editors, however, revised the RSV rendering in order to convey the idea that godly women in the Old Testament adorned themselves with a gentle spirit *by* (in an instrumental sense) submitting to their husbands. In other words, in the ESV's reading, Peter is teaching that submission to one's husband is *the* pathway to bring about the gentle and quiet spirit the author prescribes for godly women in the New Testament.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

**Women and Men in the Church**

The ESV editors also seemed to strategically alter verses from the RSV that had bearing on women's and men's roles within the church (see Table 3). The first two examples revolve around the possibility that women could serve as deacons or apostles, an arrangement that many complementarians reject as unbiblical if either office involves teaching or exercising authority over men (Beck 2005; Grudem 2012). In Romans 16:1, Paul is greeting individuals he knows in the Roman church. In the RSV, we read "I commend to your our sister Phoebe, a *deaconess* of the church at Cen'chre-ae," which suggests that women were apparently deacons in the earliest Christian communities. The ESV editors, however, chose to translate the Greek word *diakonos* as "servant," thus removing the possibility that readers would conclude women were serving in formal roles as deacons. Notably, however, another appropriate translation option could have been "minister," which the ESV translators use to translate *diakonos* at least 7 times throughout the Pauline epistles,[14] always in reference to someone who is aiding the church (as Phoebe is doing), and often in reference to Paul's own apostolic activity (e.g., 2 Corinthians 3:6; Ephesians 3:6; Colossians 1:23-24).[15] But because this gloss could also give the impression that women

[14] At least 6 other times in the Pauline epistles, the ESV translates the verb form of this word (*diakoneo*) as "ministering," again, suggesting this is a favored translation when speaking about men.
[15] In fact, in 2 instances (Colossians 1:7, 4:7), Paul uses the word *diakonos* along with a word that more strictly refers to a "servant" or "slave" (*doulos*). In both cases, the ESV translators choose to translate *diakonos* as

were exercising formal leadership roles as "ministers" (a word that in today's Christian lexicon is often synonymous with "clergy" or "pastors"), the translation "servant" effectively conveys the idea that Phoebe assists the church from a subordinate position.

Later in this chapter, Paul greets two Christians, Andronicus and Junia. The prevailing scholarship at the time the RSV translation of the New Testament was originally completed (1940s) held that the Greek *Junian* was referring to a man (thus Junias). The translators rendered the latter half of this verse to say that these were "men of note among the apostles." This translation leaves open the possibility that Andronicus and Junias were in fact apostles themselves and were quite prominent (Hart 2017:317). More recent scholarship has shown that Junian more likely refers to a woman, suggesting that Andronicus and Junia were husband and wife. But rather than follow the RSV which left open the interpretation that Junia was actually a prominent (female) apostle, the ESV editors revised this to say "well known to the apostles." Thus, in two highly-relevant texts where there could be disagreement regarding men's and women's roles in the early church, the ESV editors revised the RSV to eliminate readings contrary to the complementarian view.

Elsewhere the ESV editors introduced words that were non-existent in the original text in order to get their theological message across about men's ecclesiastical authority. Paul's first letter to Timothy, chapter 3, represents a key passage where the author is talking about the responsibilities of deacons and elders. Paul then discusses women/wives and their role in the church. Verse 11 is controversial in that the Greek noun *gunaikas* can refer to a woman or a wife. The RSV translates *gunaikas* as "women," and thus leaves open the possibility that Paul may have women in mind as deacons as well. The ESV translators, however, clearly want to close off

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"minister" (someone who formally administers service to a group), suggesting that this English word more accurately characterizes the thrust of *diakonos* than the subordinate "servant."

that possibility and thus change the RSV translation "women" to "their wives." While "wives" is lexically possible here, the ESV editorial team intentionally inserted a possessive pronoun to refer back to male deacons. This possessive pronoun is nowhere in the Greek text and thus the ESV translators actually inserted a word to convey their understanding that women could not be included as deacons, but rather Paul was instructing (male) deacon's wives.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

**Making Women More Feminine, Men More Masculine**

Outside of specific contexts like the family or the church, the ESV editors took advantage of opportunities to stress the god-ordained femininity of women and the masculinity of men (see Table 4). Proverbs 31:10-31 is a classic passage that describes a wife who is capable and diligent, often held up as a standard to which conservative Christian women should aspire (e.g., Ahlman 2017; Segal 2018). While the RSV and the ESV hang quite closely throughout this passage, the ESV editors intentionally modify verse 17, which in the RSV reads "She girds her loins with strength." The RSV translates this Hebrew metaphor quite literally, which refers to tucking in one's robe into one's belt and preparing to fight in battle or run quickly, a characteristically masculine behavior in the Old Testament (e.g., Exodus 12:11; 2 Samuel 20:8; 1 Kings 18:46; 2 Kings 4:29; 2 Kings 9:1; Jeremiah 1:17; Daniel 10:5; Nahum 2:1). Indeed, in the book of Job, God tells the protagonist repeatedly to "Gird up your loins *like a man*" (Job 38:3, 40:7). And while the ESV elsewhere translates this Hebrew phrase to convey its masculine connotations, here in reference to a godly woman, the editors chose to remove such undertones: "she dresses herself with strength." Thus, rather than conveying the idea of a woman who exudes readiness and rigor at her work, the ESV revision uses the imagery of a woman who merely adorns herself with strength, as if it were unnatural to her.

Elsewhere the ESV sought to emphasize the need for men to be masculine. In 1st Corinthians 16:13, the Apostle Paul is giving a concluding charge to the members of the church at Corinth—both men and women. In the RSV, Paul exhorts the Corinthians, "Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, *be courageous*, be strong." Here the RSV translates the Greek word *andrizomai* as "be courageous." This Greek word is used nowhere else in the New Testament, but is repeatedly used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament known as the Septuagint. Whenever *andrizomai* is used in the Septuagint, it is almost always used in mixed company and translates the Hebrew word for "be courageous." However, the ESV editorial team chose to revise the RSV to be more explicit "act like men." Two verses later, the ESV team includes a footnote acknowledging that Paul is likely talking to men *and* women in these verses, and thus, it makes little lexical sense to translate *andrizomai* as "act like men" (and it is highly unlikely the ESV translators wish women in the church to be more masculine). Rather, the ESV editorial team chose to put the charge "act like men" in the mouth of Paul to challenge Christian men to be more "manly."

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

**DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS**

While sociologists have given significant attention the ways Americans read and interpret "the Bible," their approach has failed to consider how the Bibles that American individuals and communities read are in fact products of intentional decisions on the part of interest groups who wish to reproduce their ideological and theological commitments *through* the text. Using the complementarian gender ideology in the ESV as an empirical case study, I have shown how the ESV editorial team made intentional changes to the ESV's parent text (the RSV) in order to

make various verses and passages about gender roles in the family, gender roles in the church, and masculinity and femininity more agreeable to complementarian interpretations.

While the primary goal of this article was to propose a new approach for sociologists whose work intersects with biblicist Christian traditions, analyzing the empirical case of gender ideology in the ESV also provides an important contribution. While research on gender and American religion is well aware of how "literalist" Bible interpretations have shaped debates of gender roles in families and Christian institutions (Griffith 2017; Harding 2000), I have shown the complementarian interpretive project dominant within American evangelicalism has been facilitated by the intentional manipulation of the biblical text itself. Indeed, the influence of "literalism" on Americans' gender views takes on new meanings when one considers that different Bible translations—interpreted literally—could yield completely different understandings regarding gender roles in the church or home.

Thinking beyond this specific empirical case, how does this new perspective on "the Bible" contribute to sociological analyses of religion, culture, and power? Conceptually, this requires us to take a step back and think about how the particular messages being conveyed to actors and communities through their sacred text are not merely inanimate objects, but have been strategically manipulated by interested parties in order to influence readers to embrace ideological and theological conclusions. Here I have focused on the ESV as an example of gender ideology being inserted into the biblical text, but it would also serve as an example of orthodox Christian theology that highlights the deity of Christ. Indeed, while Wayne Grudem has not admitted on record to strategically altering key gender passages in the ESV, he openly boasts about correcting the "liberal" readings of the RSV to reflect more conservative theological interpretations about Jesus' divinity. In other words, those who read the RSV or the ESV would

receive fundamentally different messages in key texts that many theologically conservative Protestants cite as foundational to their doctrines. Recognizing how these texts are manipulated in order to be more agreeable to certain interpretations gives us insight into "the Bible" as a means through which ideology/theology becomes reproduced. Moreover, because the ESV is not only marketed to evangelicals but to all persons interested in reading a Bible (the Gideons who distribute Bibles on street corners and to hotels have adopted the ESV as their translation of choice) the deliberate choices made by the ESV editorial team now have the potential to influence the religious interpretations of a broader audience outside of evangelicalism.

To be sure, one could argue that the contemporary practice of translating Bibles using more "inclusive" gender language constitutes a sort of manipulation in a different ideological direction. For instance, New Testament writers characteristically use the "generic he" to refer to people of unspecified gender—an historically common practice. While literal translations often retain this generic he under the argument that it is still commonly used in the English language and they want to be as literal as possible, external cultural influences increasingly challenge this practice as unnecessarily patriarchal. Thus, the phenomenon of modern translations rendering explicitly masculine pronouns in the Greek as neutered pronouns may also be viewed as an example of ideology influencing what messages are conveyed in the Bible. Indeed, the very impetus for the ESV was the contention that feminist ideology was being surreptitiously inserted into the popular NIV, and this would potentially "transform understandings of how God views the sexes he created" (Olasky 1997a). Uninformed readers, conservative evangelicals feared, might uncritically read and internalize messages that had been deliberately planted by the "wrong" interpretive community. While I have provided a particular case of conservative manipulation, future studies in this area could provide a more systematic appraisal of how

religious texts like the Bible become the battle ground of interpretive communities wishing to give Ultimate authority to their ideological position.

Another potential area of exploration could include how modern interpretive communities via translation teams make decisions about which manuscripts constitute "the Bible" at all. This is the practice of textual criticism (Ehrman 2007; Metzger and Ehrman 2005). Some of the textual decisions are particularly consequential for the beliefs and practices of Christian communities and are often shaped by ideological commitments. On the topic of gender ideology, for example, some scholars have questioned whether verses 34-35 of 1 Corinthians 14 (the verses where Paul says women should be silent and that it is shameful for women to speak in church) are later scribal additions since some early manuscripts actually have these verses in other sections of the book (Fee 1987:699; Payne 1998). The obvious implication of this possibility would be that one of the key texts for complementarian interpretations of women's roles in Christian congregations may not belong at all.[16]

A final opportunity for future research on this topic, one that could provide a more overt example of ideology being inserted into Bibles, is the messages that are conveyed in contemporary "Study Bible" notes and commentaries. Over the past century there have emerged hundreds of niche versions of the Bible starting with the famous *Scofield Reference Bible*, which included thousands of commentary notes and consequently popularized premillennial dispensationalism in the early 1900s (Marsden 2006). Within the past few decades, the menu of niche-versions has exploded to include titles like *The American Patriots Bible* or *The Founders*

[16] To cite a less ideologically-charged example, virtually all New Testament scholars believe the last 11 verses of Mark's Gospel (which teach about Christians handling snakes and drinking deadly poison) were added by scribes centuries after they were originally written. Consequently, virtually all modern translations include disclaimers explaining that the earliest and best manuscripts do not include Mark 16:9-20. However, the KJV and New King James Version, together read by nearly 40 percent of American Bible readers (American Bible Society 2017), still include these verses without any comment whatsoever. Thus, it should be little surprise that Appalachian snake handling communities often turn out to be unwaveringly loyal to the KJV.

*Bible* (both with commentary discussing the Christian foundations of the United States); *The Archeological Study Bible* (with commentary outlining the evidence for Creationism and other historical events described in the Old and New Testaments); the *Every Man's Bible* and the *Everyday Matters Bible for Women* (each with advice on common problems Christian men and women face); and *The Maxwell Leadership Bible* (with leadership and business insights from leadership guru, John C. Maxwell). The publisher Crossway has also published a bestselling *ESV Study Bible* edited by Wayne Grudem that includes dozens of articles explicating conservative evangelical theological positions and commentary notes interspersed throughout the text. Ignoring these differences in the content of English Bibles, sociologists neglect key data sources for understanding how ideologies are both subtly and overtly conveyed to Bible readers.

Outside of scholars interested in studying the actual *contents* of divergent Bibles, how might other sociologists of religion take these various Bible differences into account methodologically? One possibility is that quantitative religion surveys should inquire not only about how often Americans' read their Bible, or whether they view it as God's inerrant word, but *which Bible* they actually use. The 2012 General Social Survey included such a module about the Bibles Americans read (see Goff et al. 2017 for an analysis of those findings), and Barna Group in cooperation with the American Bible Society has annually surveyed Americans about their choices in Bible reading since 2011. Looking worship communities more broadly, the 2012 National Congregations Study inquired which Bible translations congregations used in their Sunday readings or as pew Bibles. The findings of such surveys not only give us a picture of Americans' Scriptural tastes, but how those tastes may be changing, and what this reflects about dominant ideological currents within American Christianity.

Another methodological possibility would be for qualitative researchers to pay closer attention to the specific versions of Bibles being either quoted in casual conversation or within specific religious communities. In their respective ethnographic accounts, Warner (1988), Malley (2004), and Bielo (2009a) each note the specific translation of the Bible that was being used by the religious community and how this was often a point of contestation on the basis of certain beliefs regarding "liberal" translations vs. "literal" translations. Researchers conducting qualitative interviews with Bible-reading Christians could also inquire as to the specific translations or versions being used and whether there was a particular rationale for that choice. Insights from such data could help researchers interpret more precisely how specific biblical texts (as well as commentary contained in certain niche versions) are combining with interpretive traditions to shape actors' and communities' theological views and, ultimately, their behaviors (Malley 2004; Markofski 2015).

While American sociologists are well-aware of the Bible's importance to understanding Americans' beliefs, values, and behavior, I have advocated a more critical approach to the Bible's content, one that understands it as a *product* of ideology and not merely a producer or platform. Reconsidering our approach to the Bible in these terms will thus help us unpack different steps in the processes through which interpretive communities not only reproduce dominant theological and ideological commitments within their own subculture, but mass-market those messages to the broader public.

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**Table 1:** Relevant Gender Passages/Verses Examined in the RSV and ESV

| Passage/Verse | Summary | Meaningful Change? |
|---|---|---|
| Genesis 2:18-25 | The creation of man and woman in the garden. | No |
| Genesis 3:16-19 | The consequences of sin for men and women. | Yes |
| Proverbs 31:10-31 | Passage describing the capable and godly wife. | Yes |
| Romans 16:1 | Paul's greeting to Phoebe (possibly a deacon). | Yes |
| Romans 16:7 | Paul's greeting to Junia (possibly an apostle). | Yes |
| 1st Corinthians 11:2-16 | Paul's teaching about head coverings in the church. | No |
| 1st Corinthians 14:34-35 | Paul's teaching about women speaking in church. | No |
| 1st Corinthians 16:13 | Paul's concluding remarks to the Corinthians. | Yes |
| Galatians 3:28 | Paul's statement about "no male and female" in Christ. | No |
| 1st Timothy 2:8-15 | Paul's restrictions on women's authority over men. | No |
| 1st Timothy 3:1-13 | Paul's requirements for elders and deacons. | Yes |
| 1st Timothy 5:1-2 | Paul's instructions for men and women by age group. | No |
| 1st Timothy 5:3-15 | Paul's instructions concerning widows. | Yes |
| Titus 2:1-6 | Paul's instructions for men and women by age group. | No |
| Ephesians 5:21-33 | Paul's instructions for the Christian household. | Yes |
| 1st Peter 3:1-7 | Peter's instructions for Christian wives. | Yes |

**Table 2:** Complementarian Changes from the 1971 Revised Standard Version in the 2016 English Standard Version Involving Women and Men's Roles in the Family.

| Text | Revised Standard Version | English Standard Version | Specific Change | Interpretive Impact of Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Genesis 3:16 | To the woman he said, "I will greatly multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children, yet your desire shall be for your husband, and he shall rule over you."[abcdeg] | To the woman he said, "I will surely multiply your pain in childbearing; in pain you shall bring forth children. Your desire shall be contrary to your husband, but he shall rule over you."[f] | The ESV (2016) translates the Hebrew preposition *el* to be "contrary to" rather than "for" as in the RSV (and previous versions of the ESV). | The ESV identifies the permanent curse on Eve as her wanting to rebel against her husband's authority, and him ruling over her. This meaning is nowhere in view in the RSV translation. |
| Ephesians 5:21-22 | **The Christian Household**<br>**21** Be subject to one another out of reverence for Christ. **22** Wives, be subject to your husbands, as to the Lord.[cfg] | **21** submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.<br>**Wives and Husbands**<br>**22** Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord.[abde] | The ESV inserts the section heading in between verses 21 and 22, which are grammatically linked together, as shown in the RSV. | The RSV's organization conveys the idea that Christian households are characterized by mutual submission, wives and husbands submitting in different ways. The ESV's rendering conveys the idea that marriage is characterized by wives submitting (husbands leading). |
| 1 Timothy 5:14 | So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, rule their households, and give the enemy no occasion to revile us.[a] | So I would have younger widows marry, bear children, manage their households, and give the adversary no occasion for slander.[bcdeg] | The ESV translates the Greek verb *oikodespoteo* to mean "manage [their] household" rather than "rule [their] household" as in the RSV. | The ESV avoids the implication that married women are "ruling" their household as complementarians argue *men alone* are authorized to do by conveying that they are instead to "manage their households." |
| 1 Peter 3:4-6 | **4** but let [your adorning] be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable jewel of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. **5** So once the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves and were submissive to their husbands, **6** as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord.[abcdefg] | **4** but let your adorning be the hidden person of the heart with the imperishable beauty of a gentle and quiet spirit, which in God's sight is very precious. **5** For this is how the holy women who hoped in God used to adorn themselves, by submitting to their own husbands, **6** as Sarah obeyed Abraham, calling him lord. | ESV translates the plural participial form of *hupotassomenoi* instrumentally rather than contemporaneously as in the RSV. | Verse 5 in the RSV looks back at the previous verse and conveys that holy women in the past adorned themselves with gentle and quiet spirits while being submissive to their husbands. Verse 5 in the ESV, however, conveys that holy women adorned themselves *by* the very practice of being submissive to their husbands. The ESV thus makes submission to husbands more central to wives' holy character. |

Reading is closer to the [a]KJV; [b]NIV (1984); [c]NIV (2011 update); [d]NASB; [e]HCSV; [f]NLT; [g]NAB. No superscript is provided when a translation does not closely match either the RSV or ESV.

**Table 3:** Complementarian Changes from the 1971 Revised Standard Version in the 2016 English Standard Version Involving Women and Men's Roles in the Church.

| Text | Revised Standard Version | English Standard Version | Specific Change | Interpretive Impact of Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Romans 16:1 | I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a deaconess of the church at Cen′chre-ae[cf] | I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant of the church at Cenchreae[abde] | The ESV translates Greek noun *diakonos* to mean "servant" rather than "deacon" as in the RSV, or "minister" as they use elsewhere. | The ESV renders the woman as a "servant," not holding the formal office of "deacon." They also avoid the word "minister," which would also convey the idea of leadership. |
| Romans 16:7 | Greet Androni'cus and Ju'nias, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners; they are men of note among the apostles.[abcdfg] | Greet Andronicus and Junia, my kinsmen and my fellow prisoners. They are well known to the apostles.[e] | The ESV translates the Greek phrase *oitines eisin epistemoi en* (literally "who are of note among") to "are well known to" | In the RSV, the translation leaves open the possibility that Andronicus and Junias (or a woman named Junia) are actually apostles. The ESV removes that possibility and conveys they are well known *to* the apostles, not apostles themselves. |
| 1 Timothy 3:11 | The women likewise must be serious, no slanderers, but temperate, faithful in all things.[cdg] | Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.[abf] | The ESV translates Greek noun *gune* to mean "wives" rather than "women" and inserts a possessive pronoun "their" not present in the original Greek. | The ESV introduces a possessive pronoun "their" (non-existent in the Greek text) to convey that the passage is talking about male deacons' wives, not women who were also deacons. |

Reading is closer to the [a]KJV; [b]NIV (1984); [c]NIV (2011 update); [d]NASB; [e]HCSV; [f]NLT; [g]NAB. No superscript is provided when a translation does not closely match either the RSV or ESV.

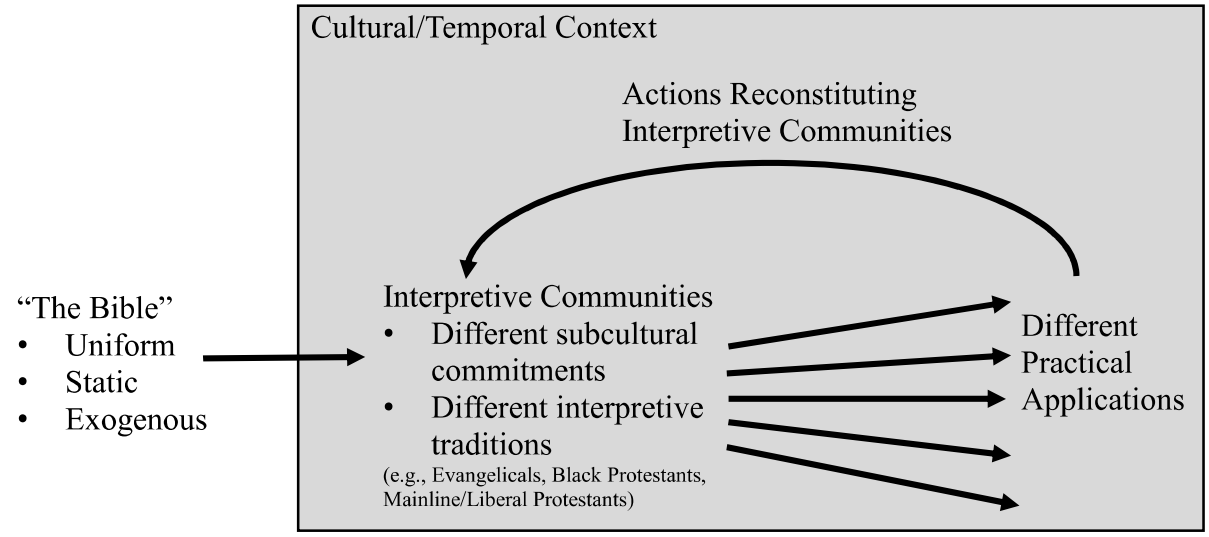
**Table 4:** Complementarian Changes from the 1971 Revised Standard Version in the 2016 English Standard Version Involving Making Women More Feminine, Men More Masculine

| Text | Revised Standard Version | English Standard Version | Specific Change | Interpretive Impact of Change |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Proverbs 31:17 | She girds her loins with strength and makes her arms strong.[adefg] | She dresses herself with strength and makes her arms strong. | The ESV changes the more literal Hebrew translation of *hagar* (gird) and *mothen* (loins) found in the RSV, with "dresses herself." | The ESV feminizes the phrase often suggestive of gathering oneself for work and battle to mean that the "wife of noble character" adorns herself with strength. |
| 1 Corinthians 16:13 | Be watchful, stand firm in your faith, be courageous, be strong.[cfg] | Be watchful, stand firm in the faith, act like men, be strong.[abde] | The ESV translates imperative form of the Greek verb *andrizomai* to mean "act like men" rather than "be courageous" as in the RSV. | The ESV conveys the message that Paul is encouraging (men in) the church to behave as *men* should behave rather than instructing all Christians to be courageous, regardless of gender. |

Reading is closer to the [a]KJV; [b]NIV (1984); [c]NIV (2011 update); [d]NASB; [e]HCSV; [f]NLT; [g]NAB. No superscript is provided when a translation does not closely match either the RSV or ESV.

**Figure 1:** Paradigms of Bible's Relationship to Culture

**Panel A:** Dominant Operative Sociological Paradigm of Bible's Relationship to Culture




**Panel B:** Proposed Sociological Paradigm of Bible's Relationship to Culture