

Considering the King James Version of The Bible as a Transformation Rather than a Translation of the Original Greek New Testament

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Introduction

“In the Beginning was the Word”, “Christ the Saviour is born”, “Mine eyes hath seen the glory of the coming of the coming of the lord”, “Spirit of God, unseen as the wind”. These phrases are well known to modern English speakers and carry religious weight, largely thanks to their appearance in the King James Bible (KJV). Yet, just the words “Lord”, “Saviour”, “Spirit” and “Word” themselves evoke religious heft in common use. Crucially, though, these ecclesiastical words are part of the huge shadow cast by common Greek vernacular of the first few centuries CE.

The aim of this work is to contribute to the illumination of the influence of the KJV on the English language, in characterising it as a transformation, rather than a translation. While the KJV is at the centre of this work, its extensive influence is taken as a given and how and why this occurs is outside this work’s scope. The key is highlighting the transformation of these words from lay terms among ancient working-classes to lofty, religiously loaded terms used in English in vastly different ways. This work takes these four words as case studies of transformations from ancient Greek to modern English usage, highlighting the KJV as a conduit for this. The results should demonstrate this phenomenon and expose the Greek and Biblical influence on our current language and how (and how well) the gap between ancient and modern has been bridged. I have chosen these words as I believe that they are: known to all English-speakers, carry religious weight, and cover a significant scope of semantic fields and channels of transformation. This work investigates these transformations.

There have been two key scholarly discourses in such scrutiny of the Greek Testaments: firstly, the concept of using non-canonical texts (largely potsherds, inscriptions and papyri) to shed light on the true origins of Christianity (the ancient working-classes) influenced by Adolf Deissmann’s *Light from the Ancient East*¹. Secondly, there is currently a renewed interest in the philology and semantics of Biblical Greek, with such works as the ongoing *Frankfurt New Testament*² project of Stefan Alkier and Thomas Paulsen and John Lee’s *The Greek of the Pentateuch*³. Rarely as yet, however, have these two discourses been combined in order to understand how the uses of today’s English words differ from their Greek counterparts. This work should highlight the fact that these common English words did not come from nowhere, and nor did their connotations. They have been transformed from terms which predate Christianity itself and the ways there are used today, in many cases, are starkly different to those of their Greek correspondents.

Methodology

With each of the four words, I have attempted to answer four primary questions, which I have numbered in each chapter:

1. What did the word mean prior to the composition of the Bible?

¹ Adolf Deissmann, *Licht vom Osten: Das Neue Testament und die neuentdeckten Texte der hellenistisch-römischen Welt*, trans. Lionel Strachan (Hodder and Stoughton: 1910).

² Stefan Alkier and Thomas Paulsen, eds. *Frankfurter Neues Testament*, 5 vols. (Brill, 2020 - present).

³ John Lee, *The Greek of the Pentateuch*, (Oxford University Press: 2018).

2. What did the word mean to the first readers of the New Testament?
3. What did the word mean to the first translators of it into English?
4. How is that English word used today, since translation and subsequent use in the KJV?

- For question one, a complete etymological and semasiological history of each word is out of the scope of this research, but an overview of each's history is provided. For this, I have primarily used the *Thesaurus Linguae Graecae* to find definitions and examples in Classical and Hellenistic literature, as well as a selection of etymological dictionaries.
- With this established, question two is primarily answered by using non-canonical texts from the 1st to 4th centuries CE. For the most part, these are papyri available at papyri.info, examining a selection of the available evidence. Barclay Newman Jr's *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*⁴ is also used to find attestations of words in the Bible.
- Questions three and four take the *Oxford English Dictionary* (OED) as their point of departure. This reveals in which English text, written by whom, do each of the four words appear as translations of their corresponding Biblical terms. To answer question two, the OED can be used to gauge how the English word in question was used at the time of translation. The OED then helps us to see which subsequent English Bible translators, used the word in question, and how its use changed over that time. The OED similarly allows us to see the changes in frequency of the words, as well as their modern usages.

Limitations

There is a tentativeness with which the conclusions of this work should be drawn. It cannot be told exactly what a certain word meant to a certain population at a certain time; only estimates based on available evidence can be made. While it may seem clear what a certain word meant to Greek-speakers at the time of the writing of the New Testament, such a conclusion cannot be definitive. Similarly, such definitive judgements cannot be made on the usages of English words historically – we can only have the best idea of a certain word's use today, and conjecture as to how it was used historically. We can only work with the evidence we have. This leads on to a crucial point – we cannot work with what we do not have. This applies to English, but much more prominently to Greek. The methodology of this work, while in good faith, makes its conclusions highly susceptible to survivorship bias. It is extremely important to recognise that we are not dealing with a full picture of how Greek words were used by ancient peoples. For instance, however unlikely, it may be that κύριος (*kyrios*) was used in a certain way in the Fayum, but completely differently in all other regions, yet we only have papyrological attestations of the usage in the Fayum. This is exaggerated, but we do only have a relatively small amount of evidence compared to what would have been

⁴ Barclay Newman Jr., *A Concise Greek-English Dictionary of the New Testament*, (United Bible Societies: 1971).

available 2000 years ago. Furthermore, only written evidence is available to us – we cannot tell at all whether, for example, *kyrios* had a completely different meaning when used in the spoken language.

Note on Different Bibles

Before the New Testament (written in the first century CE), these words appeared in Greek in the *Septuagint* (LXX), which was a translation of the Hebrew (and some Aramaic) Old Testament. Detailed examination of the Hebrew semantics preceding the LXX is out of the scope of this work, but this naturally would improve the picture of the four case studies. How the words appeared in the LXX becomes very insightful when considering question three – whether or not the first English translators were aware of this aspect of the words’ histories. As for after the Greek New Testament, its translation began with St Jerome’s *Vulgate* in the fourth century, more commonly known simply as the Latin Bible. In English, the Wycliffite Bible is commonly attested as the first English Translation of the Bible, from the 14th Century, which was translated from the Latin Vulgate, rather than the original Greek of the New Testament (and Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old). The Bible by William Tyndale in the 16th Century was the first in English to be widely published and printed. Tyndale, unlike Wycliffe and associates, translated from the original languages. Finally, the KJV was written by a committee of scholars at the beginning of the 17th Century as a means of standardisation, rather than coming up with a new translation, as noted in the Preface to the 1611 version: “*Truly (good Christian Reader) wee never thought from the beginning, that we should need to make a new Translation, nor yet to make of a bad one a good one, [...] but to make a good one better, or out of many good ones, one principall good one*”⁵.

That the KJV was not written as a new translation, rather an adaptation of other translations, is possibly the most important thing to bear in mind when considering its influence. It is why examining the entire channels of translation from Greek, to Latin, to English, scrutinising as many translation points as possible, is *essential* to understanding where these hugely influential KJV words have come from. This is how to see the KJV as a transformation, rather than a translation, of the original Greek New Testament.

“Lord”

In modern usage, the English word “lord” denotes a member of the nobility, or someone of an otherwise superior status, as well as denoting God, or Jesus Christ. Which of those meanings is taken is highly sensitive to context, but connotations of all certainly come to mind, regardless of intention. Such multi-definition was certainly a feature of “lord”’s Greek equivalent (*kyrios*) following the writing of the New Testament, but the non-Biblical definitions do not quite line up.

⁵ Miles Smith, “The Translators to the Reader”, *King James Bible*, London, 1611.

One: Prior to the Bible

Commonly, *kyrios* referred to someone with “power or authority”⁶. Curiously, Pindar takes this definition to describe Zeus in his *Isthmian Odes*: “Ζεὺς ὁ πάντων κύριος”⁷ – “Zeus, lord of all” – however, this does not mean to suggest that *kyrios* already had a divine meaning in the 5th century. Colloquially, *kyrios* referred to the head of a classical Athenian household⁸ and this is the definition which predominantly endured into the first century.

Two: Contemporary to the New Testament

It seems that in the first century, *kyrios* had not strayed far from its ‘head of the household’ definition. This can be seen in papyri from the first century. In these documents, *kyrios* often comes towards the end as a self-description of the scribe, claiming to be the *kyrios* of a family member (almost always female), as in a 77CE documentation of the sale of a slave⁹ and a 46CE dowry receipt¹⁰, in which the signatory claims “γέγραφα ὑπὲρ αὐτῆς μὴ εἰδυείας γράμματα καὶ ἐπιγέγραμμαι αὐτῆς κύριος”¹¹ – “I have signed on her [my wife’s] behalf, for she has not learned writing and I have been appointed her guardian [*kyrios*]”¹². This distinction between signing on a wife’s behalf and being her *kyrios* suggests that *kyrios* meant more than just a signatory, but denoted a domestic authority, as its previous definition would suggest. This idea is bolstered by countless other such documents mentioning thus being a *kyrios* in proximity to, but separately to, a note that the wife of the signatory was illiterate, such as a 26CE nanny contract in which the signatory similarly claims to be the *kyrios* of his wife, as well as to state that he has signed on her behalf as she is illiterate¹³. How clear-cut the distinction was between the “guardian” and “signatory” sense of *kyrios* is unclear, but it is certainly clear that ordinary people in the first century took the word to mean a domestic authority, not a divine one.

This definition of *kyrios*, to a certain extent, continues into the writing of the New Testament, but, as will be seen, it acquires an association with God which spreads into common use, alongside this domestic definition.

⁶ LSJ, s.v. “κύριος”: 1, accessed 1st June, 2026, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljs/#eid=62972&context=search&type=meanings>.

⁷ Pindar, *Isthmian Odes*, 5.53.

⁸ D. M. Schaps, “What Was Free about a Free Athenian Woman?”, *Transactions of the American Philological Society*, (1998) 128: 164.

⁹ P.oxy.2.263.

¹⁰ P.mich.5.339.

¹¹ P.mich.5.339.

¹² P.mich.5.339, my translation.

¹³ C.pap.gr.1.14.

By the third century, once the New Testament had been written and pored over by early Christians, the *nomen sacrum*, a shorthand symbol, for *kyrios* had been established. It can famously be seen in Papyrus 46¹⁴, an early New Testament manuscript. The *nomen sacrum* was not just used in Biblical manuscripts, however – it drifted into common parlance to shorten *kyrios* in its previous definition. This is in fact seen in the earliest known Christian letter, between two brothers from Theadelphia, in the Fayum, in 239¹⁵. At the very end of this letter, the sender wishes his brother good health¹⁶ “ἐν κ̅ϰ̅”¹⁷ – “in the [name of the] lord”¹⁸, using the *nomen sacrum* form, rather than the full form of *kyrios*. As Sabine Huebner reminds us, “Recent scholarship has argued that a *nomen sacrum* should be taken as an explicit sign of Christianity”¹⁹, but more crucially, this letter demonstrates that early Christians took *nomina sacra* (include that for *kyrios*) from Biblical manuscripts into common parlance. Thus, it is clear that by the third century, *kyrios* was in circulation both in its historical definition as a domestic authority, but also in its *nomen sacrum* form as a Biblical term.

Now, the question is why “lord” was chosen as the English translation for *kyrios*, and whether it was an appropriate choice.

Three: Translating to English

The first English translation of the Bible to be printed and published was of William Tyndale in the early 16th Century, and he used “lord” in place of *kyrios*, for example in Matthew 22:37: “Love the lorde [Greek: κύριον] thy God”²⁰. It might seem that Tyndale forms the bridge between *kyrios* and “lord”, but examining this choice exposes a very important phenomenon.

It was in fact the Wycliffite Bible of the 14th Century (though it is suggested that this was not written by John Wycliff himself²¹) which was the first translation of the New Testament into English, and this translation uses “lord”²². While Tyndale was extremely learned – and fairly unique among English Bible translators for this quality – in Greek,

¹⁴ P. Chester Beatty II.

¹⁵ P.bas.2.43.

¹⁶ Sabine Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, (Cambridge University Press: 2019), 21.

¹⁷ P.bas.2.43.

¹⁸ Ibid., my translation

¹⁹ Malcolm Choat, *Belief and Cult in Fourth Century Papyri*, (Brepols: 2006), 119-125; Roger Bagnall, *Early Christian Books in Egypt*, (Princeton University Press: 2009), 24; Malcolm Choat and Alanna Nobbs, “Monotheistic formulae of belief in Greek letters on papyrus from the second to the fourth century”, *Journal of Greco-Roman Christianity and Judaism*, 2 (2001-2005): 26-51; cited in Sabine Huebner, *Papyri and the Social World of the New Testament*, (Cambridge University Press: 2019), 22.

²⁰ Matthew 22:37, (Tyndale).

²¹ Andrew Kraebel, *Biblical Commentary and Translation in Late Medieval England: Experiments in Interpretation*, (Cambridge University Press: 2020), cited in John Barton, *The Word: On Translation of the Bible* (Allen Lane: 2022), 17.

²² OED online, s.v. “lord”: i.6.a, accessed 1st June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lord_n?tab=meaning_and_use#38856583.

Latin and Hebrew, his ‘choice’ to translate *kyrios* and “*lord*” seems not quite his own in light of Wycliffe’s translation. This introduces what John Barton names “the difficulty of deviating from the classic translation of a text”²³. Tyndale may not have wished to stray too far from a pre-existing translation in using “*lord*”, especially as it is such a common word in the Bible. What is more important, though, is the fact that the Wycliffite Bible is not translated from the original Greek, but the Latin Vulgate. “*Lord*”, then, is a translation of *dominus*, not *kyrios*. This is pertinent to the question of what “*lord*” meant to the English translators, and whether it was appropriate at the time for *kyrios*, as the question becomes whether it was appropriate for *dominus*. While *dominus* did share with *kyrios* the domestic authority or owner²⁴, it had on top of this a sense of power achieved through conquest or subjugation²⁵. While a feature of *kyrios*, this, as we have seen, was not at all the dominant definition of *kyrios* in the first century.

So, through translation through Latin, instead of directly from Greek, “*lord*” acquired a connotation of subjugation, which *kyrios* would not have necessarily suggested. This continues into modern usage, with phrases such as ‘lording over’, but there is more to the English “*lord*” than this.

Four: Usage in English

The Old English “*hlaford*”, from which “*lord*” is derived, did have at a time the definition of the male head of a household²⁶, derived from “*hlaf*” – Old English for “*bread*” – and meaning something along the lines of *bread-keeper*²⁷. This domesticity would have been in line with the first century *kyrios*, but the time in which “*hlaford*” took this definition was around the time of the Norman conquest. By the time of Wycliffe, Tyndale and the King James committee, this meaning of “*lord*” was almost completely archaic and “*lord*” meant one who has “dominion over subjects”²⁸. This is arguably much closer to “*dominus*” than to *kyrios*.

Thus, through iterations of Barton’s “difficulty of deviating”²⁹ from Wycliffe to the KJV, perhaps it was the choice of the translators of the Wycliffite Bible to take after the Vulgate, rather than the original texts, from which the loftiness of “*lord*” has sprung, as it was aligned to Latin *dominus*. Though, when considering “*lord*” in modern English, the sentiment of the below graphs from the OED must be considered.

²³ John Barton, *The Word: On Translation of the Bible* (Allen Lane: 2022), 16.

²⁴ Lewis & Short, s.v. “dominus”: I, accessed 3rd June, 2026, <https://alatius.com/ls/index.php?met=up&ord=dominus>.

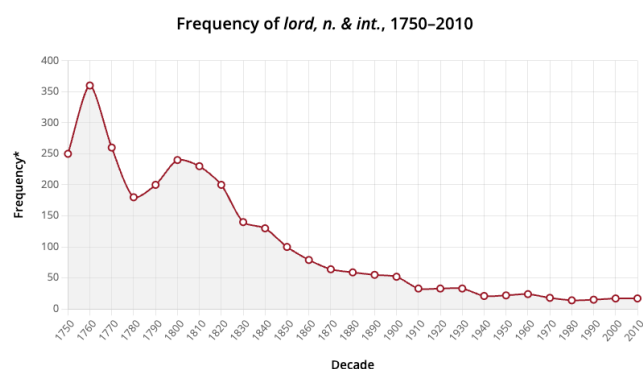
²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ OED online, s.v. “lord”: i.1, accessed 1st June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lord_n?tab=meaning_and_use#38856583.

²⁷ OED online, s.v. “lord”, accessed 1st June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lord_n?tab=meaning_and_use#38856583.

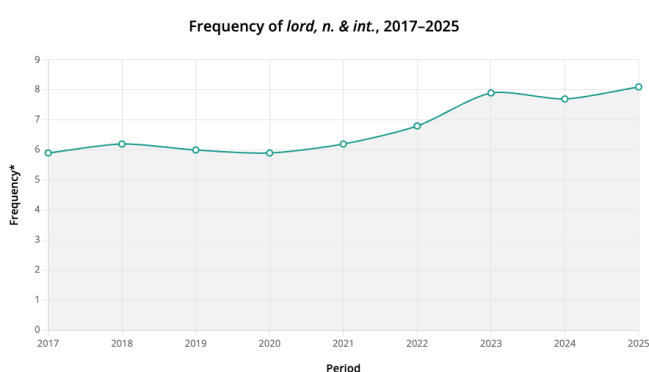
²⁸ OED online, s.v. “lord”: i.2.a, accessed 1st June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lord_n?tab=meaning_and_use#38856583.

²⁹ John Barton, *The Word: On Translation of the Bible* (Allen Lane: 2022), 16.



* Occurrences per million words in written English

30



* Occurrences per million words in written English

31

In 2025, 8.1 of every million words written in English are “*lord*”, “derived from a corpus of 20 billion words”³². This is a worthy consideration to make, as it not only appears an archaic term today, but also possibly has its religious connotations amplified when used so infrequently, largely in religious contexts. When, however infrequently, “*lord*” is used in modern English, there is a certain religious, godly loftiness, evoked, which was not present in the domestic authority of *kyrios*, as well as a violence inherited from *dominus*. This is the sort of transformation which is present in the KJV.

“Word”

What is really meant by the investigation of “word” is regarding the transformation from *Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος*³³ to *In the Beginning was the Word* [λόγος]. In English, this phrase does not make sense, or, at least, provide the explanation that it seems to suggest. Usages of “word” in English since this translation will be investigated, but it is clear that

³⁰ OED Online, s.v. “lord, noun”, frequency graph, accessed 1st June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/lord_n?tab=frequency#38856583.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ John, 1.1.

it has been used in this very translation for as long as it has existed. The crux is that *λόγος* (*logos*) has so many more meanings than *word*. It took on meanings including “account of”³⁴, “money handled”³⁴, “value”³⁵, “explanation”³⁶, “rule”³⁷, “reason”³⁸, “story”³⁹, “rumour”⁴⁰, among countless others. Clearly, there is a huge imbalance between “word” and *logos*.

One: Prior to the Bible

Importantly, *logos* did hold the ‘obvious’ translation of “word”, but played a much more important role in Classical Greek thought, with Plato using it to mean “logic”, “reason”, or “thought”, as seen in the *Phaedo*: “Καὶ γὰρ ἂν δόξειεν, ἔφη ὁ Σωκράτης, οὕτω γ’ εἶναι ἄλογον· οὐ μέντοι ἀλλ’ ἴσως γ’ ἔχει τινὰ λόγον”⁴¹ – “and it would seem illogical [*ἄλογον*], said Socrates, to put it thus. But perhaps it does have a certain logic [*λόγος*]”⁴². This clearly does not line up with modern “word”.

Two: Contemporary to the New Testament

This definition likely would have come to the minds of those contemporary to the composition of the Gospel of John, but *logos* at that time took more of an administrative role. We see this in the first word of a first century document, when *logos* seems to mean “bill”⁴³ and in the first word of a 45CE account of expenditures when *logos* translates best as [*financial*] account⁴⁴. There is an abundance of such financial papyri which feature *logos* as such, to mean *bill* or *account*, with *logos* being the first word of the document.

This opens up an idea in John’s opening that is certainly lost on the English reader. As the papyrological evidence suggests, John may have been reflecting contemporary uses of *logos* by placing it at the beginning of his gospel. This could have been quite powerful: since his opening words “Ἐν ἀρχῇ”⁴⁵ – *in the beginning* – are the same as those opening the Septuagint Genesis, John’s insertion to this of a commonly used term, yet with so many, and so varied, historical definitions, may have been an attempt to provide familiarity to the debate of divine mystery. As such, it is worth examining the background of *logos* in Greek theology at the time of John’s writing. *Logos* makes a hefty appearance in the Septuagint. It is used extremely commonly to translate Hebrew “דָּבָר”

³⁴ LSJ, s.v. “λόγος”: I.1, accessed 10th June, 2026, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=65855>.

³⁵ Ibid.: I.4.

³⁶ Ibid.: III.

³⁷ Ibid.: III.2d.

³⁸ Ibid.: III.5.

³⁹ Ibid.: V.3.

⁴⁰ Ibid.: VI.2b.

⁴¹ Plato, *Phaedro*, 62b.

⁴² Plato, *Phaedro*, 62b, my translation.

⁴³ *Analpap*.26.235.

⁴⁴ *P.Mich*.2.127.

⁴⁵ John 1.1.

(*davar*), which best translates as “word” or “thing”. While the Septuagint is not exactly our target for investigation, it is certainly worth noting that John’s choice of *logos* has serious gravity behind it, as it draws upon the Septuagint’s conflation of *logos* and “ἔργον” (*ergon*), which had previously been almost antitheses in Greek thought. Alex Edwards reminds us as such that in the *Republic*, Thrasymachus and Socrates “invoke *logos* to define the special power (*dynamis*) and work (*ergon*) of certain arts (*technai*)”⁴⁶. Notedly, though, Rudolf Bultmann strongly advises that *logos* in the New Testament should not be considered as one and the same as *logos* in the Septuagint, as *davar* in the Old Testament most commonly refers to the Word of God, whereas in John “ὁ λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο”⁴⁷ – “The Word became flesh” – making it “hard to understand on the basis of O.T. presuppositions”⁴⁸. Nonetheless, John’s insertion of *logos*, with its philosophical, Spetuagint and contemporary uses in the minds of his first readers, to the canonical ‘*In the beginning*’ set up so many different possibilities for his meaning of the divine origin. “Word” in English, in place of *logos*, simply does not provide room for imagination in this way.

Three: Translating to English

In moving to English translation, it is clear that “word” presents a common phenomenon in English Biblical terms - that the English translation of *logos* to “word” (in its Old English ancestors) is as old as the very word itself. It is not a case of an already existing Middle or Modern English word being chosen, as it is with “lord”.

This is seen in John 1:1 of the *Lindisfarne Gospels*, in the Northumbrian dialect: “in fruma uæs uord”⁴⁹, *in the beginning was the word*, with *uord* just a cognate of Latin *verbum*, rather than a pre-existing Old English Word chosen as a translation by the presumed author, Aldred the Scribe⁵⁰. Importantly, the *Lindisfarne Gospels* were translated from St Jerome’s Vulgate, which uses *verbum* for *logos*, which alone sheds some of the more nuanced discussed definitions of *logos*, to mean “word” more exclusively. This of course means that by the time of Wycliffe, Tyndale and the KJV, there were centuries of this translation of *logos*. When Tyndale wrote “*In the begininge was the word and the word was with God. And God was þe [the] word*”, he was not weighing up a pre-existing English word to choose for *logos*, but choosing the one which had already been in use for centuries. This laid ground the King James Committee on which

⁴⁶ Alex Edwards, “*Logos and Ergon in Book I of Plato’s Republic*”, *Pseudo-Dionysius*, XVII – 2015, 87.

⁴⁷ John 1.14.

⁴⁸ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, J. K. Riches, ed. G. R. Beasley-Murray, (The Westminster Press: 1971), 21.

⁴⁹ OED online, s.v. “word”: II.11, accessed 10th June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/word_n?tab=meaning_and_use#14312389.

⁵⁰ Christopher Scheirer, “Finding Bede in the “Lindisfarne” Gospels: Aldred the Scribe and “beda ðe broema boecere””, *JEGP, Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 122, 2 (2023): 153-166.

to follow suit, solidifying the loss of nuance in both the word itself and the phrase as a whole – there was an opportunity passed up to reintroduce the intricacy of John’s *logos*.

Four: Usage in English

As mentioned, the scope of this chapter only really entails the phrase ‘*In the beginning was the Word*’, yet this is no reason that a transformation cannot be demonstrated.

Really, this transformation is largely demonstrated by the streamlining of *logos*, to *verbum*, to “word”. The use of *logos* in John 1:1 seems to conflate two philosophical Greek concepts, *logos* and *ergon*, as well as have multiple meanings in John’s Gospel alone, as Bultmann reminds us⁵¹. All of this nuance is simply lost when translated to Latin “*verbum*” and derived into English. Thus, when our English “word” appears to us today in the famous verse (plainly meaning “an utterance”⁵²), not only are the myriad definitions of *logos* disregarded, but swathes of the debate on what the very phrase actually means. It seems to suggest that an utterance began the universe, which *logos* clearly does not suggest.

“Spirit”

The Greek equivalent of “*Spirit*” is *πνεῦμα* (*pneuma*), which had a surprising similarity in meanings to its modern English equivalent.

One: Prior to the Bible

As is seeming to be often the case, it took an almost completely secular definition prior to the composition of the New Testament. Primarily, this was “blast”⁵³ or “wind”⁵⁴, derived from “*πνέω*” – “to blow, breathe, respire”⁵⁵, and a cognate with “*πνοή*” – “breath, exhalation”⁵⁶. Interestingly, *pneuma* seems to have held a supernatural definition, which certainly adorns “*spirit*” today: Pierre Chantraine describes *pneuma* as “souffle ou les mauvais esprits”⁵⁷ – *blowing of wind or evil spirits* – as well as Robert Beekes, who attributes “ghost”⁵⁸ as a definition. This sense of *pneuma* being a sinister or magical thing endures for centuries. *Pneuma* also featured highly in Stoicism as an

⁵¹ Rudolf Bultmann, *The Gospel of John: A Commentary*, trans. G. R. Beasley-Murray, R. W. N. Hoare, J. K. Riches, ed. G. R. Beasley-Murray, (The Westminster Press: 1971), 21.

⁵² OED online, s.v. “word”: l.1.a.i, accessed 10th June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/word_n?tab=meaning_and_use#14312389.

⁵³ LSJ, s.v. “πνεῦμα” 1, accessed 22nd June, 2026, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=86569>.

⁵⁴ Ibid.

⁵⁵ Robert Beekes and Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. ii, (Brill: 2010), s.v. “πνέω”.

⁵⁶ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque : histoire des mots / par Pierre Chantraine*, (Klincksieck: 1968), s.v. “πνεῦμα”.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Robert Beekes and Lucien van Beek, *Etymological Dictionary of Greek*, vol. ii, (Brill: 2010), s.v. “πνέω”.

imagined life-force, as noted by Christelle Veillard that “we can [...] distinguish between a physical *pneuma*, present in embryos and plants, and a psychic *pneuma*, present in living beings like animals and men. The former is responsible for nutrition and growth, the latter for sensation and movement.”⁵⁹

Whatever bearing this had on the use of *pneuma* by the time of the composition of the New Testament, it is important to recognise this lineage of the word, which would have been at the very least known to well-read Greek-speakers at the time, likely many of those who wrote the New Testament.

Two: Contemporary to the New Testament

In the Pentateuch, *pneuma* is most commonly the translation of “רוח” (*ruach*), seemingly fittingly meaning “spirit, wind, breath”⁶⁰. Whether or not this had influence on the use of *pneuma* in the New Testament cannot be certain, but it gives an indication as to how the word was considered by scholars in the first century.

How *pneuma* was considered by ordinary people in that time period is intriguing, as this really seems to be echoed in the New Testament. The available papyrological evidence from the first century largely presents one sense of *pneuma*: a medical term. For example, a letter from 50-75CE shows the author appeal to the recipient that he “might see [his] face and ... breath [*pneuma*]”⁶¹. It would seem evident from this that *pneuma* was considered an anatomical attribute, if not quite a physical one. The Stoic life-blood meaning of the word could stand in here, as could “*breath*”, in the sense of being alive, or even “*soul*”.

As it seems an abstract medical term, it appears eerie when personified, which is well attested in the New Testament itself. This is seen in the Gospel of Luke, after Jesus is resurrected. Luke tells us the disciples “πτοηθέντες δὲ καὶ ἔμφοβοι γενόμενοι ἐδόκουν πνεῦμα θεωρεῖν”⁶² – “were terrified and in fear, thinking that they were seeing a πνεῦμα”⁶³. This very strongly suggests that to Greek-speakers, a *pneuma* was not something one would want to see personified, for fear. In this passage, *pneuma* is commonly translated as “ghost”, and it is quite clear why. This idea that a *pneuma* could also have meant “ghost” is immediately bolstered by Luke two verses later, when he has Jesus invite the disciples to “ἴδετε τὰς χεῖράς μου καὶ τοὺς πόδας μου ὅτι ἐγὼ εἰμι αὐτός· ψηλαφήσατέ με καὶ ἴδετε, ὅτι πνεῦμα σάρκα καὶ ὀστέα οὐκ ἔχει καθὼς ἐμὲ θεωρεῖτε

⁵⁹ Hierocles 1.5–33, 4.38–53 (LS 53B); Galen *Adv. Jul.* 5. XVIII A, p. 266 K (SVF 2.718); cited in Christelle Veillard, “Soul, Pneuma, and Blood: The Stoic Conception of the Soul.” Chapter In *Body and Soul in Hellenistic Philosophy*, edited by Brad Inwood and James Warren, 145–70. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020).

⁶⁰ Miles Van Pelt and Gary Pratico, *The Vocabulary Guide to Biblical Hebrew*, (Zondervan: 2003) s.v. “רוח”.

⁶¹ O.ber.2.129.

⁶² Luke 24:37.

⁶³ Ibid., my translation.

ἔχοντα”⁶⁴ – “Look you at my hands and my feet that I am me. Touch me and see that, as a *pneuma* has not flesh and bones, like you see I that I do”⁶⁵. This ostensibly harks to Chantraine’s sense of *pneuma* as a “*souffle ou les mauvais esprits*”⁶⁶, but conflating this supernatural, but secular, sense with Jesus himself.

Over the subsequent couple of centuries, papyri allow us to see clearly the adoption of *pneuma* among ‘magical’ circles, as well as Christian ones, in some cases overlapping. An example of this comes in the form of a Christian amulet from Egypt in the 4th Century, containing a binding spell to ward off evil spirits from a house, in the name of Christ and the Holy Spirit.⁶⁷ We see at the beginning of the spell an appeal to “διαφύλαξον τὸν οἶκον τοῦτον”⁶⁸ – “protect this house”⁶⁹ from a variety of things, among them: “ἀερίνων πνευμάτων”⁷⁰ – “spirits [*πνεῦμα*] in the air”⁷¹. The ending appeals to “κύριε, υἱὲ τοῦ Δαυὶδ κατὰ σάρκα”⁷² – ““lord”, son of David in flesh”⁷³- “ἐξ ἁγίου πνεύματος”⁷⁴ – “of the Holy Spirit [*pneuma*]”⁷⁵. This is significant as it demonstrates how *pneuma*, and indeed the Holy Spirit, was considered by the earliest Christians. Clearly, the author of this spell saw a *pneuma* as something to fear and cast away, perhaps similarly to the disciples in Luke 24, but crucially that that casting away could be achieved by the Holy *pneuma*. This demonstrates a proximity between the religious, benevolent and evil sense of *pneuma* among the earliest Christians which seems lost today: “*spirit*”, in the religious sense, arguably is very separate from an evil spirit in modern popular culture.

Three: Translating to English

As was the case with “*word*”, the English word “*spirit*” (in Latin, then Old English form) predates the language itself, so the word “*spirit*” has never existed without being a translation of *pneuma*. This is because, predictably, St Jerome chose “*spiritus*” as his translation for *pneuma* in the Vulgate, before first appearing in English in an anonymous 13th Century poem *Genesis and Exodus*, describing Adam as a “spirit ful of wit and sckil”⁷⁶. This means that when the word entered the English-speaking world, it directly

⁶⁴ Luke 24:39.

⁶⁵ Ibid., my translation.

⁶⁶ Pierre Chantraine, *Dictionnaire étymologique de la langue grecque : histoire des mots* / par Pierre Chantraine, (Klincksieck: 1968), s.v. “πνεῦμα”.

⁶⁷ P.oslo.1.5.

⁶⁸ P.oslo.1.5.

⁶⁹ Ibid., my translation.

⁷⁰ P.oslo.1.5.

⁷¹ Ibid., my translation.

⁷² P.oslo.1.5.

⁷³ Ibid., my translation.

⁷⁴ P.oslo.1.5.

⁷⁵ Ibid., my translation.

⁷⁶ OED online, s.v. “*Spirit*”: I.i.1.a, accessed 22nd June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spirit_n?tab=meaning_and_use#21464538.

inherited *spiritus*' definitions of "a breathing [...] the air [...] a breath"⁷⁷. Again, possibly according to Barton's "difficulty of deviating from the classical translation of a text"⁷⁸, "*spirit*" appears in the Wycliffite Bible, Tyndale's, and the KJV.

Four: Usage in English

Clearly, the religious sense of *pneuma* has followed through to English "*Spirit*". What is lost, however, in modern English certainly, is the sense of a secular "*wind*". The most recent example the Oxford English dictionary can list of "*Spirit*" being used in such a way is in 1880, in FWH Myers' *Stanzas on Shelley*⁷⁹: "A Spirit in the west-wind sighs"⁸⁰. Since then, the OED labels this definition as obsolete.

So, we are left with the religious and supernatural definitions of "*spirit*", both derived from *pneuma*. Where there is an ostensible transformation is in that the religious sense of "*spirit*" is no longer linked to the supernatural one, as was the case with *pneuma*. The *Holy Spirit* is hardly considered the same sort of "*spirit*" as a ghost in popular culture. Thus, it seems that "*spirit*" only adopts religious weight when used in the sense of the *Holy Spirit*, which is a transformation from *pneuma*, which was ostensibly the same 'kind of being', whether holy or malevolent.

"Saviour"

One: Prior to the Bible

Before the composition of the New Testament, σωτήρ (*soter*) took three key definitions. Firstly, as "saviour, deliverer ... preserver from disease, ills, hurt"⁸¹, secondly, as a divine epithet for a god "to whom persons after a safe voyage offered sacrifice"⁸² and thirdly, as an epithet for rulers, notably of Ptolemy I of Egypt, yet this tradition of attributing *soter* to political leaders continued into the second century.

Two: Contemporary to the New Testament

As with the previous words, these definitions, especially the third, will have been known to the writers of the New Testament. Contemporary papyri can reveal an idea as to what *soter* meant to the ordinary Greek-speaking population who made up early Christians and Bible readers.

The available papyri reveal that in ordinary correspondence, the word had not much diverted from its established meanings. For instance, a petition from Oxyrhynchus from

⁷⁷ Lewis & Short, s.v. "spiritus": 1 accessed 24th June, 2026, <https://alatius.com/ls/index.php?met=up&ord=spiritus>.

⁷⁸ John Barton, *The Word: On Translation of the Bible* (Allen Lane: 2022), 16.

⁷⁹ OED online, s.v. Spirit: III.12.b, accessed 22nd June, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/spirit_n?tab=meaning_and_use#21464538.

⁸⁰ F. W. H. Myers, "Stanzas on Shelley", in *Macmillan's Magazine* No. 245, 392.

⁸¹ LSJ, s.v. "σωτήρ", accessed 1st July, 2026, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=104997>.

⁸² Ibid.

49-50AD to the then governor of Egypt, Gnaeus Vergilius Capito, the writer appeals for his infant son to be brought back from slavery, in so doing addressing the governor as *soter*⁸³. This certainly seems to suggest a flavour of the “saviour, deliverer”⁸⁴ definition, perhaps also with reference to Ptolemy I, a Hellenistic King of Egypt whose regal epithet was *soter*, in order to win over the governor.

An extremely common usage of *soter* in the available papyri, however, is largely administrative. Two financial documents from 40-41AD from the Arsinoites⁸⁵ use the word to refer to the date in which they are written. Only during the reign of Caligula, during which these documents are both written, he named a month of the year *soter* and made it official in the Egyptian calendar, so these very common usages of *soter* are not particularly remarkable. It is more fruitful to look elsewhere for the background of *soter* in the Greek New Testament.

As seems to be the pattern, the usage of *soter* in the New Testament is likely influenced, by its use in the Septuagint. This usage seems to take the form of “saviour” or “deliverer” and it is most commonly used to translate “מֹשִׁיחַ” (*moshia, messiah*). For example, in 2 Samuel 22.3, “ὁ θεός μου φύλαξ ἔσται μου πεποιθώς ἔσομαι ἐπ’ αὐτῷ ὑπερασπιστής μου καὶ κέρασ σωτηρίας μου ἀντιλήμπτωρ μου καὶ καταφυγή μου σωτηρίας μου ἐξ ἀδίκου σώσεις με”⁸⁷ – “The God of my rock; in him will I trust: He is my shield, and the horn of my salvation, my high tower, and my refuge, My saviour; thou savest me from violence”⁸⁸ – God is described as a *soter*.

With this in mind, it may appear that *soter* has not undergone a very dramatic transformation to today’s “saviour”, but it is crucial that, as seen, the term was primarily used administratively at the time of the writing of the New Testament, and has since in English been adorned with lofty connotations.

Three: Translating to English

“Saviour” follows a now familiar pattern in English. The first English use “Saviour” into the Bible is by Wycliffe, but “Saviour” is attested by the OED to refer to God contemporaneously to the Wycliffite Bible, in the *Arthur and Merlin* stories, one of which refers to a “signe of our Saueour”⁸⁹, as well as *Piers Plowman*, a 14th century Middle English poem by William Langland, which features “God vr saueour”⁹⁰. How much

⁸³ P.oxy.1.38.

⁸⁴ LSJ, s.v. “σωτήρ”, accessed 1st July, 2026, <https://stephanus.tlg.uci.edu/ljsj/#eid=104997>.

⁸⁵ Bgu.3.787.

⁸⁶ P.mich.5.329.

⁸⁷ 2 Samuel 22.3 (LXX).

⁸⁸ 2 Samuel 22.3 (King James Version).

⁸⁹ OED online, s.v. “Saviour”: I.1.a, accessed 1st July, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/saviour_n?tab=meaning_and_use#24333625.

⁹⁰ OED online, s.v. “Saviour”: I.1.a, accessed 1st July, 2026, https://www.oed.com/dictionary/saviour_n?tab=meaning_and_use#24333625.

influence these had on Wycliffe is clearly not easily discernible, but it does demonstrate that “*saviour*” was certainly taken to mean something like “*deliverer*” and was already being attributed to God in English literature at the time of the Wycliffe Bible. Tyndale, though learned in Greek, matched Wycliffe’s translation of “*saviour*”, which was also taken in on by the KJV committee. Barton’s “difficulty of deviating from the classic translation of a text” appears once more to be relevant in the case of “*saviour*”.

Four: Usage in English

The modern usage of “*saviour*” is particularly interesting, as it actually seems to map better than “*spirit*”, “*lord*”, or “*word*” to its Greek correspondent. This is seen largely in political spheres.



This AI-generated image from Donald Trump clearly seems to present himself as God in the sense of the *soter*. It is impossible to look at this image without considering the word “*saviour*”. Although this ‘regal’ use of *soter* dates back centuries, the weight of it today is certainly a result of the influence of the KJV.



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⁹¹ Morten Morland, “Kier Starmer being suffocated by Andy Burnham”, 17th May, 2026, in *The Sunday Times*.

More satirically, in May 2026, Morten Morland of *The Sunday Times* published this cartoon. Clearly, this evokes Trump's AI image, but subsequently, in June 2026, Laura Kuenssberg of the BBC asked "Is Andy Burnham Labour's saviour [...]?"⁹². This demonstrates that politicians are alleged, or allege themselves, to be "*saviours*", and, most crucially, that the brilliance of this idea is bolted in the English Bible. Politics is not the only sphere in which "*saviour*" is used in modern English, but it serves as an example of how our use of the word has largely retained only the loftiest of its Greek correspondent's definitions – as a regal epithet.

Conclusion

Rounding up: "*lord*", "*word*", "*spirit*" and "*saviour*" have all undergone transformations from lay Greek terms to the KJV-influenced English ones we know and use today.

Before going too much further, the tentativeness with which these conclusions *must* be made should be reiterated. This work covers only four case studies, all consulting limited evidence available from ancient sources. That said, conclusions should still be drawn, provided done so in awareness of the limitations of their authority.

While it has dwindled in frequency, "*lord*" has inherited a sense of dominion from Latin, not from the Greek *kyrios*, and its religious grandeur is owed to the KJV, not the domestic authority *kyrios* represented. "*Word*" appears grossly simplistic in light of its transformation: it has shed all the nuance of *logos*, and room for debate on the divine origin which would have come with a closer translation. The religious and popular culture, ghostly senses of "*spirit*" seem to the modern speaker different terms, when it could hardly be more clearly the case that with *pneuma*, these senses were inextricably linked. Finally, "*saviour*" seems most heavily used today to evoke a desperate political power, though lightly evoking the regal use of *soter*, losing its common secular, even administrative, connotations.

These four case studies represent the extent to which not just the KJV, but the English language we use today, is dappled with transformed Greek terms, a far cry from their lay usages. Where deviations from their original meanings have been made by translators (commonly, as has been seen, St Jerome), these deviations have been made to stick by (iterations of) Barton's "difficulty of deviating from the classic translation"⁹³.

Thus, the KJV is highlighted as a transformation, rather than a translation, of the original Greek New Testament.

⁹² Laura Kuenssberg, "Is Andy Burnham Labour's saviour, or just its best bet?", *BBC News*, 27th June, 2026, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/c621e13n2dvo>.

⁹³ John Barton, *The Word: On Translation of the Bible* (Allen Lane: 2022), 16.

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