

STEPBible AGM reports, 20th August 2024

STEPBible Trustees Report 2024 – David Instone-Brewer

The charity's trustees are David Instone-Brewer, Patrick Tang, and Darcy McKinnon (treasurer).

The trustees seek to support the members in furthering the stated object of STEPBible, which is to provide cost-free education concerning the Bible, for the public benefit. They have established a set of aims to maintain the quality and integrity of the charity's offering:

1. Enable electronic access to Bibles and commentaries that do not promote non-trinitarian theology
2. Prioritise access to academically reliable translations and information
3. Avoid denominational or doctrinal bias in information accompanying Bibles and commentaries.
4. Allow cost-free access for all facilities, books and information sources that are obtained freely
5. Provide open source access to all code, data and texts created for STEPBible, excepting security details.

The trustees facilitate two-weekly online meetings of the members and developers to maintain contact between the sections of STEPBible and promote a consistent approach to the project.

It was agreed at the last AGM that the trustees should attempt to open a bank account to manage the charity's finances. Barclays Bank, which is based in the UK, was the best option because they offer free banking for registered charities. However banking will only remain free so long as the charity has no more than three trustees. At the last AGM the trustees were listed as David Instone-Brewer, Patrick Tang, Dan Bennett, Kevin Weeks, and Mark Cannon; and during the course of that meeting Darcy McKinnon was also appointed trustee. Dan Bennett, Kevin Weeks, and Mark Cannon all agreed to step down as trustees which was documented by email, leaving the three trustees as listed above. Barclays Bank required a high level of identity checking for Patrick and Darcy who are not UK residents which caused some delay in opening the account. The account is now open, plus an attached PayPal account that is managed by Darcy and overseen by the other two trustees, to enable the collection of membership subscriptions and donations.

Kevin Weeks has sadly concluded that he has not had time to spend on helping with STEPBible for many months, and this is unlikely to change. He has therefore stepped down as Head of User Interface (UI).

Daicy Hexiao Yu has been helping with regard to User Experience (UX) over the last few months, and has proved to have clear insight into problems, and good proposals for solutions. We have asked if she might head up this section of the work. Changes to the interface would remain under the Programming section, so Daicy's expertise in the concepts and imagining of UX rather than UI is ideal. We are delighted to welcome her onto the team.

2023 Financial Report – Darcy McKinnon

2023 Financial Activities

- Renewed the annual Azure grant (\$3500) with Microsoft
- Moved the EU (Europe) web server from AWS to Azure
- Retired AWS (Amazon Web Services)
- Upgraded to the Cloudflare Pro Plan
- Applied for non-profit account with Barclays bank

2023 Financial Summary

- Income: no direct income
- Cloudflare expenses paid by Trustee:

	USD	GBP
Load balancing	335	271
Annual Pro Plan (Nov '23 – Oct '24)	240	195
Total	575	466

2024 Financial Activities

- Set up a bank account with Barclays
- Set up a PayPal account and linked to the bank
- Purchased a Sectigo token (valid for 3 years)
- Renewed the Microsoft Azure grant (\$2000)
- Manage membership through nominal donations
- Review Cloudflare requirements (later in the year)

2024 Projected Income & Expenses

- Income: minimal, such as membership fees; one-time larger donations (for Sectigo and new bank account)
- Computing expenses:

	USD	GBP
Cloudflare	290	230
Sectigo	930	740
Total	1220	970

Data development - David Instone-Brewer

This last year there has been a lot of work in:

Disambiguation

Andrew is helping me finish this long project to make Strong numbers more useful. James Strong made numbers for a paper concordance, so sometimes he merged similar words together or had separate entries for common forms such as 'he was' and 'they were'. He also had a single entry for all 24 people called Azariah, but two entries for the single person called Daniel because in Hebrew he was called Daniel and in Aramaic he was called Daniel - yep, exactly the same! Some words also have two or more meanings, like Hebrew *Ish* and Greek *Aner* which are translated both 'man' and 'husband'. Modern languages have different words for these, so to help tie the translation to the text we need to disambiguate them.

Andrew is finishing the work of dividing up the lexicon entries. While doing so, he is greatly improving them by adding illustrative references.

Amalgamation

Different Bibles use different manuscripts. The biggest difference lies between traditional Bibles (like the KJV) which rely on 10th century Masoretic Hebrew and Byzantine Greek. Modern Bibles add information from ancient translations of the Hebrew Bible and a few older manuscripts, and they use NT manuscripts spanning from the 2nd to 4th century. Some modern translators continue to rely on only traditional manuscripts because some think they existed before the older ones but the copies were lost.

STEPBible wants to provide study tools for every Bible. The Amalgamated Hebrew and Greek data merges together the words and phrases from all manuscript traditions (not just the two mentioned). When you exclude spelling differences, the remaining significant differences are not too many. The Amalgamated data marks every such word which is found in only some manuscripts, or is different in others.

Jeff and others have been helping to check this data which is now the basis for our tagging work. We'll bring it out as two STEPBible modules: a Hebrew+Greek Bible and a word-by-word English translation both marked and noted with details of additions and variants. These should align with every tagged Bible, whatever manuscripts they are based on.

Meaning & Manuscripts

For several years volunteers have been recording translation differences between major Bibles. Those still working this year are Andy, Brandon, Dale, Charles & esp Steve. They've been checking and adding to the work of Galen who already went through the whole Bible. We are almost ready to apply the OT data.

This tool will mark places where translators disagree on the meaning, either because the Hebrew is ambiguous or because they follow different manuscript evidence. It will answer the question: why does my Bible say something different?

Encyclopaedia articles

Deborah is working with me on articles about every person, place and concept in the Bible. This apparently impossible task is achieved by feeding an AI with our accurate disambiguated data. We've used the Claude AI from Anthropic who designed it with an emphasis on accuracy. It has already created amazing entries for all the names in the Bible.

We are still preparing the data for the Concepts by linking together words with similar meanings - eg "redemption", "rescue" and "salvation". The articles will list all the Hebrew and Greek words in the group, describing their differences. So we'll not only know what the specific word in a verse means, but we'll also know what alternate words the author could have used. This helps us understand the emphasis of that particular verse.

Bespoke Versification

Different Bibles have different versification. That is, in very many places, verse numbers and even chapter numbers are different. Even different editions of the same translation can differ. This makes it difficult to align one Bible with another.

Jamie and I have created about 30,000 data lines to automatically work out which verse is which, in any translation. Sami has created code to make this work in STEPBible so that it works in the background so Users may never notice it.

This year we started applying this system to every new module, so these problems will gradually disappear.

Similar Syntactic Phrases

Chris has been working on an AI tool that identifies similar passages based on syntax and semantics rather than just vocabulary. STEP Bible already finds related words, and finds verses using similar vocabulary, but sometimes you need an AI to spot similarities. For example, if you wanted to know what Psalm 1 means by “the seat of scoffers” you could look up other places where the same Hebrew word translated “scoffers” is used - but most don’t help. Or use the “related verses” tool to find places where three or more identical words are used - there are none. Or use Chris’ tool - go to Psalm 1.1 at biblesearch.dev/contextsearch/hebrewot and click on “scoffers”. This does a word search based on the meaning of the word in the verse you are searching from - so you don’t have to wade through irrelevant results. There’s much more power behind this tool, but we aren’t sure yet how to apply it.

Software development - Patrick Tang

2023 Web servers enhancements

- Word occurrence counts for all Bibles tagged with Strong numbers
- Show Greek word occurrences in OT and NT separately
- Enhanced User Interface
 - Indented definitions, Bible picker, Search modal, Q&A ...
- ESV morphology
- Corrected numerous Strong tagging in ESV NT
- NASB and NET Bible morphology
- Sami’s standalone versification

2024 Activities

- Fix software bugs as they are identified
- Further enhancement for User Interface
- Enhancement for French lexicon –
 - We have a scan of a very good French lexicon but it is hard to OCR. The plan is to display pages as images with links which open the page to match the STEP Bible page. Francoise is working on this with a team, and when developed the technique could be applied to other language lexicons.

Other activities wish-list

- Patrick hopes to tag NIV with Strong words
- Rewrite STEP Bible to run on web and mobile (Apple) devices
 - Project can take 10+ person years
 - Requires extensive team work and commitment

User Interface/Experience - Daicy Hexiao Yu

Our team implemented several design improvements to enhance user experience across various features.

Word Analysis Panel

- Introduced collapsible folders for better space efficiency and navigation.
- Added bullet points to improve clarity and readability.

Bible Picker

- Replaced the selection interface with checkboxes for easier selection of Bible versions.
- Moved language options for better visibility, with automatic detection of the user's browser language (e.g., Spanish).
- Adjusted terminology from "Selected" to "Currently showing" to reduce ambiguity.
- Rearranged the search bar and added a click-outside confirmation feature to streamline the user experience.
- Added spacing between lines to reduce clutter.

Welcome Panel

- Utilized collapsible folders for improved space management.
- Reformulated content as a FAQ to clarify the purpose of this panel.
- Updated the video feature icon and text for better user recognition.
- Provided step-by-step instructions with text and images for enhanced clarity.
- Renamed the "Examples" button to "FAQ" for accuracy and ease of navigation.

Search Modal

- Relocated the Advanced search toggle for greater prominence and simplified the interface by removing redundant text.
- Updated the search system to allow users to press Enter to load results, aligning with natural user behavior and preventing unintended navigation.
- Introduced a visible search button to prompt action for both new and long-time users, ensuring a smooth transition to the updated search process.

Ongoing Work

We continue to refine the search modal to address usability issues identified by participants, with further discussions in progress to optimize the advanced search feature.

User Engagement – Mark Cannon

Overview

User Interaction at STEP Bible functions as the first point of contact for user inquiries and technical issues. It is the technical support arm of STEP Bible receiving feedback reports to solve basic problems immediately or forward them with reproducible steps to higher levels of support if needed. User Interaction also involves administering social media platforms, and training users through documentation, video and other means.

User Feedback and Engagement

- **Feedback Volume:** From March 13, 2023, to August 16, 2024, generally the time span since the last AGM meeting, STEP Bible received approximately 449 feedback requests. This represents a 37.25% increase compared to the previous period, highlighting a growing user interaction. This does not count emails sent directly to feedback@stepbible.org, but those tend to be minimal. In April of 2024 we started receiving Android mobile app feedback reports and have received approximately 50 since that time.
- **Feedback Process:** Feedback requests are managed via email and tracked with Jira, a support issue tracking. Feedback requests are generally answered by myself, David Instone-Brewer, Patrick Tang, Darcy McKinnon and Dan Bennett. User Engagement seeks to ensure that every feedback request is addressed, and responses are tracked to maintain an organized record. From May 2023-July 2024 our response times were very poor with some users not receiving responses to feedback requests for nearly a year. Some issues had been addressed, but not marked as so in Jira. This summer we have made significant progress on closing the backlog and have

Social Media and Community Interaction

- **Facebook:** The STEP Bible Users group saw an increase of 55 members, totalling 531 members, while the STEP Bible Developers Group maintained 18 members. Social media engagement remains modest, with minimal posts from the team.
- **Google Groups:** The STEP Bible Forum on Google Groups has 259 members, with 10 posts since the last AGM.
- These forums continue to serve as a platform for user interaction and updates, though they are not highly utilized as a communication tool.

Recording Fruits of User Interaction: Known Issues and Improvements

- **Known Issues:** Currently, there are 9 known issues, with 2 new ones added this year. One issue was successfully resolved.
- **Requested Improvements:** 30 requested improvements are being tracked, with two new requests added this year. A separate mobile improvements folder was created, currently listing three items.
- **Database Errors:** The team continues to document and fix database errors, with significant progress made in reducing the backlog.

User Interaction: Outside Email and Social Media

- **Connections made at International Meetings of Bible Scholars:** Secured rights to NET Bible 2 with full notes update. Seeking requested Bible licensing. Connecting with teachers who use STEP Bible.
- **Interaction with Online Platforms:** Daily Dose of Greek instructional video, DiscipleDojo and GlossaHouse ProveText.
- **In Person Workshop:** The team continues to document and fix database errors, with significant progress made in reducing the backlog.

Goals for the Coming Year

- **Timely Feedback Response:** The team aims to improve the response time to user feedback, despite the challenges of volunteer-based management.
- **FAQ Development:** Efforts will be focused on developing a comprehensive FAQ page to assist users more effectively.¹
- **Beta Testers Google Group:** A group has been created and user interaction will comb through past offers/requests to become beta testers and issue invitations to the group.
- **Promotional and Teaching Resources:** I've started developing content for Grasping God's Word chapter summaries as sidebar studies, promotional videos as needed, 2 videos in the hopper on new features and additional training videos for our YouTube page as needed.
- **Resource Enhancements:** Further development of the Biblical Chronology Resource,² links to existing online Bible atlas,³ and fulfill requested Hebrew and Greek word audio files.⁴

¹ Develop a Resource, FAQ or Guide page on how to cite STEP Bible in a paper.

² Complete Gospels section.

³ including Bible Mapper Atlas Maps links to Chronology, Verse Vocabulary opens Atlas to chapter, Date opens to Bible Mapper Timeglider, Atlas links for Bible Mapper cities in Map tab from Locations in STEP Bible Places in the Bible Resource, free Tutku links to Levant city maps.

⁴ Permission secured for Hebrew audio files, Greek are in production.

Mobile app report - Dan Bennett

In 2024, on the native mobile side, Troy Honegger and I focused on updating the app to support Android 14, which is the latest version of Android.

On April 11, 2024, we updated the Expo SDK to version 49, which unlocked support for Android 14.

Unfortunately, this update introduced sporadic, hard-to-reproduce issues for some Android users:

- Does not show quick lexicon
- Does not show the complete chapter in a book of the Bible (sometimes this is fixed by advancing a chapter and then returning to the original chapter)
- Defaults to Matthew chapter 1 each time it is opened and does not save one's place

Thank you Mark Cannon for responding to the large influx of customer support emails around this!

What's Next

The STEP Bible.org website has come a long way since 2018, the year we published the mobile app. It's now very mobile friendly and easier to use.

Currently, the main advantage of the mobile app is that it operates 100% offline, which is important for our mission of reaching underserved communities with free Bible software.

Maintaining a separate native mobile app is time consuming, and the architecture is hard to scale to accommodate more Bible versions than the 3 we have now (ESV, CUV, and Reina Valera), so our focus is to keep the app running while we search for alternatives.

We are exploring ways to offer Bible modules offline from mobile web by compiling our Java backend code to WebAssembly. The tooling is not quite ready, but the Google Chrome team rolled out WebAssembly Garbage Collection (WasmGC) on October 2023, which is important since Java as a language requires garbage collection.

2024 Module Activity – Darcy McKinnon

Approx 140 modules (Bibles and commentaries) uploaded, including new and updated modules:

- 38 from Biblica
- 42 from Seed Company (new to STEP Bible)
- 56 from CrossWire (new to STEP Bible)

There are 650 modules on STEP Bible as of 20th August 2024

We will make public modules available to others via FTP site