In February, NewSouth Editions will release a new version of Mark Twain’s classic book “The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn.” In it, the editor Alan Gribben changed the word “nigger” to the term “slave” every time it appeared (more than 200 occurrences). As someone who regularly teaches this book, he was tired have having the presence of this objectionable word interfere with students’ trying to understand the book’s literary character and social critiques.

Not surprisingly, this bowdlerized edition has already angered literature teachers, alarmed historians, and even excited legislators who treasure the book. Professor Gribben has been accused of changing the past and of altering the words of a master writer like Twain. It is true that the N-word has resulted in the banning of “Huckleberry Finn” from many school and town libraries, and that the word’s removal comprises an attempt to get this important work back into those public collections, but changing words has struck many as violating the integrity of Twain’s literary creation.

Sanitizing books is nothing new; people have done it for centuries. In fact, the term “bowdlerize” comes from Thomas Bowdler who took out the racy bits from Shakespeare more than 200 years ago.

The Bible has not escaped such tampering. Nearly every translation over the centuries—from the earliest Greek, Latin and Aramaic renderings to the most recent translations—have altered something their translators’ found offensive.

In light of the changes to “Huckleberry Finn,” it is interesting to note that one word that English Bible translations have always had trouble with is “slave.” Since the King James translation appeared in 1611, it has been common practice to replace “slave” with “servant.” Nearly every occurrence of “servant” in Old Testament translations and most appearances of it in the New Testament are rendering the Hebrew or Greek word for “slave.”

The defense of this approach is like that just mentioned, namely, the use of “slave” jars with our modern sensibilities. Here are some examples:

Abraham, Isaac and Jacob are all called “slaves of God.” For Moses, it becomes a common epithet, “Moses, the slave of God.” The same applies to King David, who both refers to himself as a slave before the Lord and after his death is referred to as “David, the slave of God.” In the New Testament, both the Apostle Paul and Titus both refer to themselves as a “slave of God.”

To be sure, the word “slave” in these expressions is jarring. That is why English translations render all of these as “servant of God.” Rather than being God’s slave, then, the notion is more like being God’s “butler.”

When the underlying Hebrew or Greek is not the actual word for slave, it is usually a related term, “boy!” Language that infantilizes slaves is common in most slave-holding societies. Masters think nothing of using it to address a 60-year-old male slave.

Even before Jesus’ birth, the ancient Greek translation known as the Septuagint was already uncomfortable with the Bible’s frequent use of “slave.” Rather than call David and Moses slaves, it drew upon the child terminology. This resulted in phrases like, “David, boy of God” and “Moses, God’s boy.”

Of course, these biblical passages use slave language in a metaphorical sense. The aim is to show Abraham’s or Jacob’s close relationship with God, not to say that they are property. For Moses and David in particular, the phrase “slave of God” forms an honorific, a title that signifies their special relationship to God; it was a relationship that few other people could claim.

So what do you think? Have the English translators of the Bible done modern Christianity a favor by rendering “slave” as “servant” Or should they have translated the word exactly? Is it easier to explain Moses as a servant of God, or to first explain what it means to be a slave and then to explain how the metaphor of being God’s slave is actually an honorable position?