

Understanding Modern Bible Translations

When I became a Christian in 1970, choosing a Bible was fairly easy. You just drove to the local bookstore and bought a King James Version. There were still some decisions to be made: whether to get a black or burgundy cover, for example, or whether to spring for real leather. You also had the option of buying a Bible with Scofield notes.

Now the decisions are dramatically more difficult. Do I buy the KJV, NKJV, NIV, NASB, RSV, NRSV, GNT, CEV, NLT, LB, NCV, ESV, HCSB, or The Message? The assortment of Bibles raises some pressing questions. Why are there so many different translations? What are the key differences among them? And finally, which translations are best for you?

Why Are There So Many Translations?

It is important to remember that the Bible was not originally written in English. The Old Testament writers used Hebrew, a Semitic language written from right to left with no vowels. (A few passages were written in a related language called Aramaic.) The New Testament was written exclusively in Greek, though in a form that differs substantially from the modern language.

Here's the way the original languages appeared.

Åyd,a;h; taew] μyIm'V;h' tae μyhilaÔ ar;b; tyvareB] (Gen. 1:1).

Qeo;v oujdei;s e'wËraken pwËpote monogenh;s Qeo;s oi w[n eis to;n koËlapon tou' patro;s eÆkei=nox exhghsato (John 1:18).

For us to read the Bible in English, it has to be translated. Someone has to read it in the original language and determine how to express it in English. This process is more complex than it sounds, and it contributes to the plethora of Bible translations. First, scholars differ on how translation should be done. Second, the English language changes over time, leading to updates of previous versions or entirely new ones.

Different versions reflect different theories of translation. As a Greek professor, I have often been asked by earnest Christians, “Why can’t we simply develop a very literal translation that doesn’t interpret the text?” The answer is simple: if we followed the Hebrew or Greek exactly, most passages would be utterly confusing and possibly unintelligible. For example, in the NIV John 1:18 reads, “No one has ever seen God, but God the One and Only, who is at the Father’s side, has made him known.” In contrast, here is a literal, word-by-word translation: “God no one has seen ever: only-begotten God the being into the bosom of the father that one explained.” Although someone might be able to make some sense of this, it is difficult to understand and terrible English. All translations must make a number of changes and interpretive decisions to render Scripture in intelligible English. Here are some examples.

- English word order must be given priority. English is locked into subject-verb-object order, whereas a Greek writer can move these elements anywhere in the sentence. So “God no one has seen ever” becomes “No one has ever seen God.”
- Many expressions must be interpreted and expressed in a different grammatical form in English. For example, a participle may need to be expressed with a finite verb and made into a relative clause, so that “the being” becomes “who is.”
- Words that are not in the Greek text but are implied must be added: “that one explained [him].”
- Certain words need to be interpreted: “Only begotten” (KJV, NASB) is one possible way to translate the Greek word *monogene-s*; a better interpretation might be “unique,” “only” (ESV, NRSV), or “One and Only” (NIV).
- Certain words may need an English translation that is closer to what the term actually meant than to the precise term itself. Although the Greek word *kolpos* indicates a person’s chest or bosom, translating it with one of these English words may confuse today’s readers. Thus, the NIV and ESV translate it “at the Father’s side,” and the NLT uses “near to the Father’s heart.”

You can see that a lot of interpretation is needed just to get the Greek sentence into a form of English that makes sense. Therefore, a translation that does not interpret is impossible. A root issue is this: Should the translator place priority on the exact form of the original text or on the clarity of the English expression? If the emphasis is placed on exactly following the wording of the original languages, readability suffers. If the translator stresses readability, literalness is sacrificed, and much more interpretation takes place. These differing philosophies have led to a variety of different translations. See the chart on the following pages.

Different versions reflect changes in the English language. English has changed a great deal since the King James Version was published. In addition to the passing of *thees* and *thous*, a host of other expressions are no longer used or now have different meanings. Here are some examples.

- “Sick of the palsy” (Mark 2:3)
- “Thou hast possessed my reins” (Ps. 139:13).
- “Decayeth and waxeth old” (Heb. 8:13)
- “Not in chambering and wantonness” (Rom. 13:13)
- “The instruments also of the churl are evil” (Isa. 32:7).
- “Isaac was sporting with Rebekah his wife” (Gen. 26:8).
- “By his neesings a light doth shine” (Job 41:18).
- “Ye have respect to him that weareth the gay clothing” (Jas. 2:3).
- “When divers were hardened, and believed not” (Acts 19:9)

Our language has changed considerably! Some of these changes are passing fads; others are here to stay. This is one of the other main reasons for so many contemporary English Bible versions: Bible translators are trying to stay current with language changes.

Characteristics of Major Bible Versions

Version	Year	Characteristics	Grade
King James Version (KJV)	1611 1861* 1932* 1962*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is the most popular and widely used English Bible ever published. • The translators utilized a “literal” (formal-equivalent) approach. • It has undergone three revisions and many changes since it was originally published in 1611. • The KJV is a revision of the Bishop’s Bible (1568), which was a revision of the Great Bible (1539). • Sentence structure, expressions, and vocabulary represent Elizabethan-era English, making it difficult for many to understand today. • The KJV uses a different manuscript basis from other modern versions. 	12
New King James Version (NKJV)	1979 NT 1982*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NKJV is an update and modernization of the KJV. • The original translators and updaters utilized a literal (formal-equivalent) approach. • The translators replaced all of the Elizabethan English with modern English. • The NKJV uses a different manuscript basis from other modern versions. 	NA
Revised Standard Version (RSV)	1952 1971*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a revision of the American Standard Version (1901) but less literal. • It became the most ecumenical version, accepted and used by Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox believers. 	NA

Version	Year	Characteristics	Grade
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	1990	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is a revision of the RSV. • As the most ecumenical version, it is accepted and used by Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Eastern Orthodox believers. 	10.4
English Standard Version (ESV)	2001	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The ESV is an evangelical revision of the RSV. • It is an “essentially literal” (formal-equivalent) translation. 	NA
New American Standard Bible (NASB)	1971 1995*	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NASB is one of the most literal (formal-equivalent) translations available. • It was produced between 1959 and 1971 by 58 evangelical scholars from a variety of denominations. • It is based on the American Standard Version (1901). 	11
New International Version (NIV)	1978	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The NIV is the most popular evangelical translation. • It attempts to find an optimal balance between exactness (formal equivalence) and readability (dynamic equivalence). • It was produced by a team of evangelical scholars, all of whom were committed “to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s Word in written form.” 	7.8

Version	Year	Characteristics	Grade
Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)	2000	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Like the NIV, this translation endeavors to maintain an optimum balance between exactness (formal equivalence) and readability (dynamic equivalence). • Commissioned by the Southern Baptist publishing house of Holman Bible Publishers, this translation was produced by a team of 90 scholars from a variety of denominations. 	NA
Good News Translation in Today's English Version (GNT)	1966 NT 1976	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This thought-for-thought (dynamic-equivalent) translation was produced by the American Bible Society. • It makes use of colloquial English. 	7.29
Living Bible (LB)	1967 NT 1971	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The LB is not a translation but a paraphrase of the American Standard Version (1901) in understandable and colloquial English. • This Bible was produced by Kenneth N. Taylor, who paraphrased the ASV to help his 10 children understand the Scriptures. 	8.3
New Century Version (NCV)	1991	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This dynamic translation was based on the International Children's Bible (1986). • It uses vocabulary at a third-grade level and avoids long sentences. 	NA
Contemporary English Version (CEV)	1995	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This dynamic modern-language translation was produced by the American Bible Society. 	5.4

Version	Year	Characteristics	Grade
New Living Translation (NLT)	1996	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • This is an actual translation, not a paraphrase, using a dynamic-equivalence approach. • The translation was completed by a team of 90 evangelical scholars from various denominations. 	6.3
The Message	1993 NT 2002	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The Message is an actual translation, not a paraphrase, into idiomatic English (“the way we actually speak and think”). • It often includes additional details to convey a thought. 	4.8

* A second or later edition

NT New Testament

Grade Assesses the readability of the translation according to grade level. These figures are based on a study conducted by Swinburne Readability Laboratory in Charlottesville, Virginia.

NA Not applicable

What Are the Key Differences Among Translations?

Several factors make the translations different from one another.

Translation philosophies. As I have already noted, translation philosophies result in significant differences among the various Bibles. These philosophies represent two different poles on a spectrum. One end of the spectrum gives priority to exactness to the original form, while the other end emphasizes clarity and readability in English.

The philosophy striving for exactness is widely referred to as formal equivalence. These translators attempt a word-for-word translation, although as we have seen, it is impossible to do this completely. Nevertheless, the goal is to remain as accurate as possible to the form of the text in the original language.

The other end of the spectrum, focusing on readability, is commonly called dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence. This could be described as a thought-for-thought translation. These scholars endeavor to create a translation that gives contemporary readers an experience similar to the way the Bible was heard and understood in its original setting. Advocates of this view also strive to be as accurate as possible, but their focus is on accuracy of meaning rather than on the precise form of the original.

The following scale depicts the major Bible versions according to their respective translation philosophies.



Neither of these philosophies should be characterized as the right way of translating. They both have merits and disadvantages, which are summarized in the chart “Two Philosophies of Translation” on the following page.

Two Philosophies of Translation

	Formal Equivalence (Word for Word)	Dynamic Equivalence (Thought for Thought)
Strengths	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greater word-for-word correspondence with original text • Less interpretation of original text; less reliance on translator for accurate interpretation • Better for in-depth biblical study • Easier to trace the same form of a word used by biblical writers • More precision by using complex vocabulary and theological terminology 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More readable • Priority on conveying meaning; thus, less ambiguity in meaning of English text • Easy for non-Christian or new Christian to read and comprehend • Good for public Scripture reading • More interpretation by trained scholars
Weaknesses	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Awkward English at times; less readable • More ambiguity in meaning of English text; relies on reader for more interpretation • More difficult for non-Christian or new Christian to read and comprehend • Not as good for public Scripture reading • May lead readers to reach wrong interpretive conclusions in casual reading 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less correspondence to the form of original text • More interpretation of original text • Not as good for careful Bible study • Impossible to trace same form of word used by biblical writers • Often more expansive by using phrase or sentence to explain technical term

It is helpful to see the outcome when these translation philosophies are applied to a complicated and technical passage. On the chart “Sample Translations from Major Bible Versions” Romans 3:24-25 was selected to illustrate how the various versions translate a crucial passage. You will notice that the formal-equivalent translations do not hesitate to use technical language. On the other hand, the dynamic-equivalent translations search for creative ways to render the theological ideas in more readily intelligible English.

Sample Translation from Major Bible Versions

Romans 3:23 says, “All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God” (NIV). Here’s how various versions continue that thought in Romans 3:24-25.

Word-by-Word translation of the Greek:

“... being justified freely by the of him grace through the redemption of the in Christ Jesus; who he put forth the God a propitiation/ mercy seat through the faith in the of him blood.”

Formal-Equivalence Translations (Word for Word)

NASB	“... being justified as a gift by His grace through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus; whom God displayed publicly as a propitiation in His blood.”
KJV	“... being justified freely by his grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus: Whom God hath set forth to be a propitiation through faith in his blood.”
NKJV	“... being justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God set forth as a propitiation by His blood.”
ESV	“... and are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a propitiation by his blood.”
RSV	“They are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as an expiation by his blood.”
NRSV	“They are now justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus, whom God put forward as a sacrifice of atonement by his blood.”

**Translations Attempting to Balance
Formal and Dynamic Equivalence**

HCSB	“They are justified freely by His grace through the redemption that is in Christ Jesus. God presented him as a propitiation in his blood.”
NIV	“... and are justified freely by his grace through the redemption that came by Christ Jesus. God presented him as a sacrifice of atonement, through faith in his blood.”

Dynamic-Equivalence Translations (Thought for Thought)

NLT	“Yet God, with undeserved kindness, declares that we are righteous. He did this through Christ Jesus when he freed us from the penalty for our sins. For God presented Jesus as the sacrifice for sin. People are made right with God when they believe that Jesus sacrificed his life, shedding his blood.”
NCV	“... and all need to be made right with God by his grace, which is a free gift. They need to be made free from sin through Jesus Christ. God sent him to die in our place to take away our sins. We receive forgiveness through faith in the blood of Jesus’ death.”
GNT	“But by the free gift of God’s grace all are put right with him through Christ Jesus, who sets them free. God offered him, so that by his blood he should become the means by which people’s sins are forgiven through their faith in him.”
CEV	“But God treats us much better than we deserve, and because of Christ Jesus, he freely accepts us and sets us free from our sins. God sent Christ to be our sacrifice. Christ offered his life’s blood, so that by faith in him we could come to God.”
LB	“... yet now God declares us ‘not guilty’ of offending him if we trust in Jesus Christ, who in his kindness freely takes away our sins. For God sent Christ Jesus to take the punishment for our sins and to end all God’s anger against us.”
Message	“Out of sheer generosity he put us in right standing with himself. A pure gift. He got us out of the mess we’re in and restored us to where he always wanted us to be. And he did it by means of Jesus Christ. God sacrificed Jesus on the altar of the world to clear that world of sin.”

In addition to these two translation philosophies, we also have Bible versions that result from *paraphrasing*. A paraphrase is a rewording of an existing English translation rather than a fresh translation from the original languages. This is what Kenneth Taylor did when he created the Living Bible by rewording the American Standard Version (1901) into a form of English that his children could understand.

Manuscript base. One final difference among versions is the manuscript base for the translation. The King James Version of 1611 (as well as its various revisions and the NKJV) was based on Erasmus's edition of the Greek text, which was itself based on about six Greek manuscripts. These were part of a grouping of manuscripts known as the Byzantine form of the text.

However, many new manuscripts have been discovered since the publication of the King James Version. All other modern versions use an extensive manuscript collection of more than 5,000 Greek manuscripts and 10,000 Latin manuscripts, as well as numerous manuscripts in ancient versions, such as Syriac, Coptic, Gothic, Armenian, Georgian, Ethiopic, and others.

Although the majority of differences between these two manuscript bases are exceedingly minor and do not result in variations in the meaning of the text, some are significant. One such example is John 1:18. Here the most reliable manuscripts refer to Jesus as God, whereas the Byzantine manuscripts refer to him as Son. This results in the following difference in translation: "No man hath seen God at any time; the only begotten Son, which is in the bosom of the Father, he hath declared him" (KJV). "No one has seen God at any time; the only begotten God, who is in the bosom of the Father, He has explained Him" (NASB). There are complex reasons the revisers of the KJV and the creators of the NKJV did not expand their textual basis. It is important to know, however, that these Bibles are based on different collections of manuscripts from other English versions.

Which Translations Are Best for You?

I intentionally worded this question in the plural rather than asking, Which is the best Bible for you? It is OK, and actually advisable, to have more than one Bible. The better question would be, Which Bible for which purpose?

Personal Bible reading. If you use a Bible-reading plan that takes you through two or more chapters a day, a dynamic-equivalent (thought-for-thought) translation might be in order. The increased readability of these translations makes reading large amounts of material easier. Try using the NLT, CEV, NCV, or The Message. Another advantage of using the dynamic versions is that they can shake you out of familiarity with the text, allowing it to speak to you in a fresh and challenging way.

Careful Bible study. When you do in-depth Bible study—whether for personal study or preparation to teach—I recommend a formal-equivalent (word-for-word) translation as your principal text. The NASB is an excellent resource for this purpose; the ESV is another translation you might also consider.

I also recommend using two or more other translations for serious study. Because all translations must interpret, the use of other versions will call your attention to alternative readings of the text.

Public Scripture reading. For reading Scripture in a public venue, you will want to consider a number of factors.

- Which translation do most members of your audience use? Normally you will want to stick with that version, even if it is different from the one you typically use.
- Is the language of the translation understandable to the group you will be reading to? For instance, a group of junior-high students might benefit from a dynamic-equivalent translation.
- Do you want to stimulate the thinking of your audience by giving them a less familiar reading? This is where the use of a newer version or a dynamic-equivalent translation (such as *The Message*) can be beneficial.

All-around Bibles. Most of us have a version we memorize from, take with us everywhere, and use for most of our reading and study. If you consider a change, it might be best to choose a version that tries to balance exactness with readability. This is what the NIV and the HCSB try to do. Although the ESV is a more formal-equivalent translation, it is also very readable.

Don't let the proliferation of Bible versions bewilder or discourage you. We are blessed to have such accurate and readable translations. Check out some of them and enjoy the Word of God.

Adapted from Clinton Arnold, "It's All Greek to Me! Clearing Up the Confusion About Bible Translations," *Discipleship Journal* 132 (November–December 2002): 28–36.

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