

WHICH BIBLE SHOULD I USE?

How to Choose the *Best* Translation
for Your Needs

CSB?

RSV?

NET?

ESV?

NIV?

BSB?

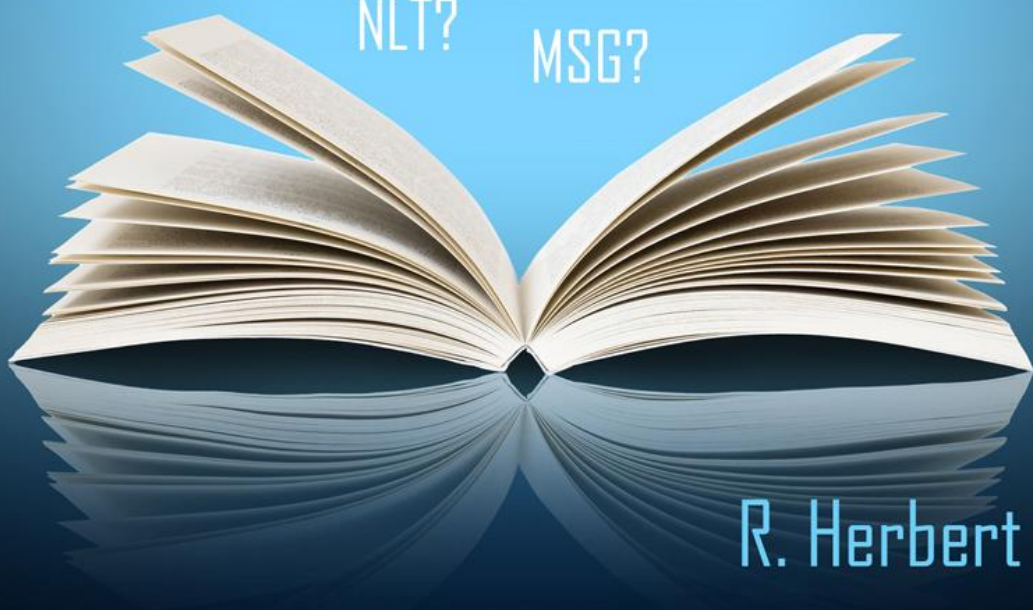
ASV?

KJV?

NKJV?

NLT?

MSG?



R. Herbert

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**How to Choose the *Best*
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Scripture quotations in this volume are taken from editions of the Bible versions available at the time of writing. Other editions may have slightly different wording.

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INTRODUCTION: ISN'T ANY BIBLE FINE?

It is often said that the best Bible is the one you will read. But given that basic truth, isn't any Bible translation or version fine to use as long as we do read it?

The answer to that question is yes indeed – it is better to read any Bible than no Bible at all! But that does not mean that all Bibles are created equal or that some Bible translations are not much better for specific tasks. Just as any working automobile may get us where we need to go, but some will get us there more comfortably, faster, and safer – so almost any Bible will contain God's truth, but some are simply better to use than others.

Some translations make studying easier and more enjoyable, some are easier to memorize, and some are more accurate and profitable to study – getting much closer to what the biblical writers originally wrote and helping us to better understand their message.

That is important. When the apostle Paul told Timothy “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who does not need to be ashamed and who correctly handles the word of truth” (2 Timothy 2:15 NIV), he obviously felt that it was important for Timothy (and all of us) to come to know what the Bible actually says rather than to just have a general idea of its teachings. That is where choosing the best Bible translation for our own personal needs comes in.

If we don't read the original languages in which the books of the Bible were written – Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek – we need a translation. Even scholars who can read those languages often don't read all of them, so ultimately almost everyone needs or can profit from a good translation. But there are literally dozens of Bible translations or “versions” in English – how can you choose the best one for your purposes? This book looks at the different types of translations available and considers some of the most widely used and recommended English versions to help you select a good one for your own situation.

Which Bible Should I Use? is specifically designed and written to help you choose and use the best translation for your needs – and that could be one you have not heard of before. On the other hand, perhaps the best Bible for you is the one you are using now. But even if it is, this book may be worth your time in helping you to assess the version you are using, to know more about its weaknesses and strengths, and to get the most from it. You may also discover other translations in the following pages that complement the Bible you are now using – for even greater understanding and engagement with the Scriptures!

PART ONE:

CHOOSING A TRANSLATION

Choosing the best Bible translation for your own needs does not require technical knowledge of biblical languages or translation principles, but it does require thought and a basic understanding of what the underlying options are. The following three chapters examine why so many translations exist, the different types of translations that are available, and how to choose the best translation for your own needs.

1. WHY SO MANY TRANSLATIONS?

There are literally dozens of different translations of the Bible available in the English language today – and more are being planned as you read this book. Why are there so many versions of the Bible – is it that no one can agree on what the Bible actually says (as some atheists claim)?

A Multitude of Reasons

The real reasons so many translations exist are actually much more positive. Primarily, there are many translations because there are many types of Bible readers. What works well for you may not work well for me, or for others. Perhaps you know English very well and you prefer a translation that always uses the perfect word (even if it is an uncommon or technical word) so you feel your Bible is as accurate as possible.

Or perhaps your knowledge of English is not as good (perhaps English is not your first, or even your second language) and you want a version that is more simply worded so that you can understand the Bible without being slowed down by unfamiliar words and expressions. Every translation of the Bible aims, to one degree or another, at both accuracy and readability, but different versions attempt to achieve this goal in different ways and for different purposes, as we will see in the next chapter.

And there are many other good reasons for the existence of multiple translations. When the venerable King James Version (KJV) was translated into English in 1611, there were only a relatively few Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible available to the translators. Since then, many more biblical manuscripts have been discovered or made available and we have a better idea of what the Bible originally said at a number of points.

Also, our knowledge of the ancient languages in which the biblical books were written has grown tremendously over the last

four hundred years. Thus, the meaning of words that the King James translators sometimes had to guess at are now better understood and we can translate them more accurately. We now know, for example, that the word translated as “unicorn” in the KJV (Numbers 23:22; etc.) was probably a wild ox, as it is translated in most modern Bible versions. This may be a small example, but our better knowledge of many ancient words can make an important difference. In Galatians 3:24 in which Paul is speaking about the law of Moses, the KJV translates the Greek word *paidagogos* as “schoolmaster,” but we now know that the word meant a “guardian” – as in the Christian Standard Bible (CSB), English Standard Version (ESV), New International Version (NIV), etc. – which can make a difference to understanding the point Paul was making.

Just as important, the English language has changed considerably over the centuries. A good example is the KJV translation of 2 Timothy 2:15: “Study to shew thyself approved.” This does not mean what most people think it means. In seventeenth-century English the word “study” did not mean to learn new things, but simply to do one’s best. That is why modern translations such as the NIV translate the same verse as “Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved.”

Another good reason for the many translations that exist is that because no translation is perfect (as we will explain in the next chapter), dedicated Bible scholars and translators continually strive to improve the translation process and the quality of translations they can make available. We also see this in the ongoing revisions and editions of many translations after they have been made.

For example, the NIV has been released in a number of successive editions. First published in 1978, revisions of the version were published in 1984, 1996, 1999, 2005, and 2011. Multiple revisions like these do not mean that the translators found many mistakes they needed to correct, but that they incorporated changes that were felt to be improvements. The desire to improve is ongoing. Sometimes published updates are even changed back again when it becomes clear that this would be best!

Gender Issues

A case in point is the gender-neutral or gender-inclusive translation style that removes male oriented nouns and pronouns such as “man” and “him” and which was employed first in the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) and then in a number of other versions such as the NIV *Inclusive Language Edition*. These editions have been warmly welcomed by some, but were rejected by many theologically conservative Christians who feel that the overuse of gender-neutral language is problematic.

There are two sides to this issue. First, it is good to remember that on occasion the apostle Paul used gender-neutral language. We see this, for example, in Paul’s use of 2 Samuel 7:14: “I will be to him a father, and he shall be to me a son” (ESV) which the apostle quotes as “I will be a father to you, and you will be my sons and daughters” (2 Corinthians 6:18 NIV). Paul was not simply following the Greek Septuagint (LXX) version of the Old Testament in making these changes, as that version follows the Hebrew text quite literally: “I will be to him for a father, and he will be to me for a son.” So Paul was clearly willing to occasionally use gender-neutral terms when these were not inappropriate.

On the other hand, while it might sometimes seem desirable from an inclusive perspective to change “he,” “him,” and “his” to gender-neutral terms like “they” and “theirs,” if this is done uncritically it can obscure important biblical verses that are talking prophetically about Jesus Christ. Consider Psalm 34:20, which John 19:36 indicates is a prophecy of the Messiah’s death. Most literal or “word for word” translations accurately render the Hebrew of this psalm to show God “protects all *his* bones, not one of them will be broken.” But in strongly gender-neutral translations such as the NRSV this same verse is translated “He keeps all *their* bones; not one of them will be broken” – effectively losing the messianic significance made explicit in the New Testament.

Jesus himself honored women, treated them as equals, and they held a special place in his life and ministry, but he used gender-specific language and some of his teaching is gender-specific in

audience and intent. To alter these things indiscriminately can change or obscure his teaching and message. The same is true in the rest of the New Testament; changing masculine pronouns to neutral plurals can destroy intended meaning.

In the Revised Standard Version (RSV), James 5:14–15 says “Is any among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him... and the prayer of faith will save the sick man, and the Lord will raise him up.” This could certainly have been translated “the sick person” as there is no word specifying “man” in the Greek text of this verse, but the gender-neutral NRSV goes much further in translating all the singulars as plurals, to avoid using the masculine pronoun “him.” The result is “Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up.” This changes what the text shows was a privately conducted Christian ordinance, sometimes involving confession of personal sins (vss. 15-16), to an entirely different situation that sounds more like a public event in a hospital.

Overly zealous use of gender-neutral language such as we see in examples like these can drastically change much of what we read in the Bible. For this reason we will mention the degree to which Bible versions use such inclusive language as we discuss different translations in this book. In the case of the NIV, as a result of the resistance to the degree of gender-inclusive terminology used in the 1996 and 2002 editions, an updated edition was released in 2011 which partially modified and dropped some of the version’s gender-neutral language. But many readers are still unhappy with the problems associated with the overuse of gender-neutral language. Some recent translations such as the CSB have found a reasonable balance by avoiding gender-neutral language whenever it is clear that a single gender is intended, but utilizing it where it is appropriate. For example, the CSB uses the translation “brothers and sisters” when Paul uses the Greek term *adelphoi* “brothers” to address congregations that were undoubtedly composed of males

and females (just as many churches today use the term “brethren,” meaning “brothers and sisters”).

A Rich Range of Options

So there are many reasons why new translations are continually being made and why there are successive new editions of many of the versions after they are published. This does not mean that we are unsure what the Bible says – the major English translations actually differ very little in what they say, and the differences are almost always not in what is said, but how it is said. Believing Christians can trust that having given the Bible, God has ensured that its message would not be lost and would continue to fulfill its purpose – just as he inspired the prophet Isaiah to write of the rain that falls and waters the earth: “so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it” (Isaiah 55:11).

The important thing to realize is that the many English Bibles and multiple editions that have been made show that Bible publishers take the publication of the word of God seriously and are making concerted ongoing efforts to improve the quality and usability of their translations. The winner in this situation is ultimately every Bible reader who is willing to look at what the different versions offer and to select the best one, or ones, for personal use.

According to Wycliffe Global Alliance, some 1.5 billion people in the world still need either portions or the entirety of the Bible translated into their language – so those of us who speak and read English can be grateful that we have so many translations of the Bible available to us. This allows us to select a version that best suits our level of English comprehension and the tone of translation we prefer in order to truly understand and enjoy the word of God to the greatest degree possible.

2. TYPES OF TRANSLATIONS

To understand the differences between the many English translations that are available, we need to ask several questions. The answers to these questions will help us find the Bible version best for our needs.

1) Word for Word or Thought for Thought?

The primary question we must ask in assessing Bible translations is what was the translators' goal – was it to make a version that was above all accurate, even if difficult to read? Or was the goal to provide a readable translation – even if it used words and phrases that were not exactly the same as those in the original text, but which helped convey their meaning? All translations are made somewhere along this spectrum, ranging from “word for word” (also called “literal” or “formal equivalence”) versions that strive to match every word in the original text with the closest possible word in English, to “thought for thought” (also called “dynamic” or “functional equivalence”) translations that try to convey the meaning of the original rather than exactly the same wording.

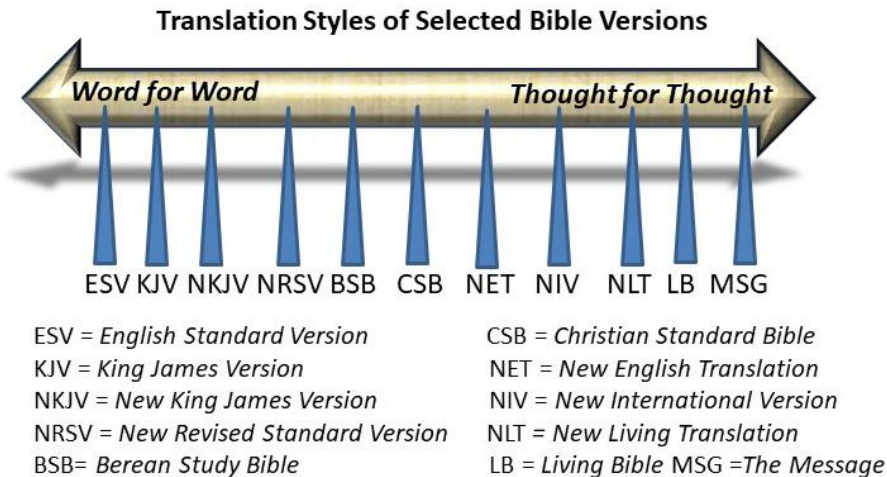
For example, the KJV – a word for word version – attempted to take the underlying Hebrew and Greek words of the biblical texts and translate them into the closest possible corresponding English words, while the New Living Translation (NLT) and similar thought for thought versions attempted to take the original ideas that were being presented in the ancient languages and then express them in clear English (thought for thought). In reality, both of these versions used both approaches – sometimes the KJV uses dynamic translation for difficult expressions, and the NLT sometimes uses literal translation when the meaning is clear. But overall, these and all other versions are characterized by a stress on one or the other of these approaches.

Translations that use a strong word for word approach, such as the New American Standard Bible (NASB), can sometimes be

difficult to read and even confusing, while versions that are almost entirely meaning-based can lose the true nature of what was said. Some of these versions, such as The Living Bible (LB) or The Message (MSG), are really paraphrases that may be used to gain a different perspective, but they are simply not accurate enough to be used as an only Bible.

That is why some Bible versions – especially newer ones – attempt to find a “middle ground” between the two methods of translation. The Christian Standard Bible is a good example of this, employing an “optimal equivalence” approach that combines the best features of formal equivalence (word for word) and dynamic equivalence (thought for thought) translations.

The diagram below shows the translation styles of some of the more popular Bible versions along the translation spectrum, and we will look at these translations and others in more detail in the following chapters.



2) Denominational or Inter-denominational?

After we have determined the translation style of a Bible version, there are some other helpful questions we can ask. Another spectrum along which translations can be arranged is one regarding which group made the translation, or to which denomination the

person doing the translating belonged if only one translator was involved.

This spectrum runs from Bible versions produced by a single Christian denomination to ones made by translators pulled from many different denominations. In this case there is almost always safety in numbers. It is not that any translation made by a single religious group is problematic, but we need to be careful to make sure that such translations do not make subtle shifts in the meaning of the Scriptures to suit their own views.

In some cases, individual denominations have translated the Bible in order to have a version their members can use that does not contradict their teachings. For example, the New World Translation (NWT), published by the Jehovah's Witnesses' Watchtower Society, translates the Greek word *parousia* as "presence" instead of "coming," because the Witnesses believe that Christ already returned in the early 1900's. Even more significantly, it translates the original Greek text of John 1:1 (which reads "the Word was God") as "the word was a god." Translations such as these are not linguistically or grammatically defensible (despite claims made to the contrary), and it is clear in such cases that the biblical text is being translated to fit doctrine rather than to simply render what the text says. This is not to unfairly single out the NWT, but to stress that translations done within the bounds of a single denomination or group can sometimes fall prey to the mistaken practice of translating what the text is desired to say.

On the other hand, versions that are done by inter-denominational teams are often very trustworthy because the different viewpoints of the individual translators cancel each other out and wordings are usually chosen that all denominations can agree on.

3) Single Translator or Translation Committee?

Another question we should ask is regarding whether the translation we are considering was made by a single person, a few people, or a large committee of many biblical scholars. This may

seem similar to the previous point, but it is different. Once again, however, there is usually safety in numbers when it comes to how many translators were involved in the making of a version.

Bible translations made by individuals can sometimes be very helpful, but they always run the risk of representing that individual's viewpoint at the expense of others. Sometimes the translation of a given verse may make sense to the translator, but may not be clear to many readers. In other cases, an individual translator may think of a word that seems to work, but a group of translators might have come up with a better choice. We will see examples of these problems when we look at some of the translations made by individuals such as the LB, the MSG, and others.

On the other hand, we have all heard jokes about the difficulty of getting committees – especially large ones – to agree on anything, but generally speaking Bible translations made by large committees are among the best available. This is not only because specialists working on the books of the Bible they know best can often make the most accurate translations possible, but also because having numerous people working on and improving the version can help it to be as readable as possible. Committee translations include the CSB, ESV, NIV, and others.

4) A Few Sources or Many?

A final question we should ask about any Bible version is “What is this translation based upon?” There are literally thousands of complete or partial ancient manuscripts of the biblical books, and the translators of all Bible versions must choose which ones they will use. At the most basic level, translators select either a limited group of manuscripts that generally agree with each other, and that the translators feel are trustworthy, or they select manuscripts from a wider range (both geographically and chronologically, including examples of the earliest known manuscripts) and use them on a case by case basis to arrive at a text they feel is likely to be closer to that of the original biblical writings.

The KJV and other early English Bible translations were made using the first of these approaches – by translating the text of a relatively small number of late manuscripts. The KJV is the only major Bible version available today that still follows this approach, though some lesser-known translations also use it. The second approach, which utilizes a more inclusive text, is followed by almost every other major English Bible translation today – including the New King James Version (NKJV) and other updated versions of the King James Bible. Both approaches have strengths, but it is good to understand the difference between the two methods and to know which your Bible is based on – a few manuscripts or many. Generally speaking, the principle of safety in numbers applies here, too.

A final point regarding the translational basis of our Bibles is that it is important to realize that some Bible versions are made not by translating the ancient Hebrew and Greek manuscripts themselves, but by simply rewording an already existing English translation. This can sometimes be helpful in making older Bible versions clearer – as in the case of the RSV and others – but we should remember that this is also giving us a Bible that is yet another step removed from the original biblical writings. The Living Bible is an example of this kind of rewording of a prior English version.

Getting the Answers We Need

Simply asking the four questions outlined in this chapter can go a long way to helping us choose a Bible version that is trustworthy and readable. That is why the descriptions of translations given later in this book note how many translators were involved in the work as well as their denominational affiliations, what kind of translation philosophy was followed, and other details such as these.

3. THE BEST TRANSLATION FOR YOU

Now that we have looked at the different types of translations that are available today, we can begin to draw conclusions regarding the best version or versions for our own use. Six key points should be taken into account in making that choice.

1) All Translations Are the Bible

We will begin by reaffirming what we said at the beginning of this book: that *any* Bible can give us the word of God and be used to help us see the truth of the gospel if we study it with a teachable attitude. This very fact was emphasized by the translators of the KJV hundreds of years ago. In the preface to that version the translators wrote: “We do not deny, nay, we affirm and avow, that the very meanest translation of the Bible in English set forth by men of our profession ... containeth the word of God, nay, is the word of God.” True in 1611, this statement is just as true today. The important thing to remember is that the differences between translations are relatively minor. There is less difference between all currently produced English Bibles than what we can see between the Hebrew text of the Old Testament and the Greek Septuagint translation – and Jesus and the apostles quoted both.

2) There Is No Perfect Translation

On the other hand there is no such thing as a perfect Bible translation. No matter how good a word for word or thought for thought translation is, it can never perfectly reproduce the original texts in their ancient languages. The careful reader will notice that we point out problems – even if only small ones – with every translation covered in this book. The truth is that no translation is inspired in the way the original biblical books were inspired, and every translation of the Scriptures has flaws. Practically speaking, this means that we must choose which flaws we consider to be the least problematic and strive to find the best translation we can. However, this is not as difficult or as dire as it may sound, as we will see.

3) The Best Translations Show Alternatives

Those who claim that there is only one valid or pure translation simply do not understand the problems and difficulties that lay behind the making of every translation. Even the original KJV included variants in the margin when the translators were not sure which translation of a specific word or verse to choose. And the best Bible versions do this continually – they acknowledge alternative readings or disputed text by the use of italics, bracketed text, and /or notes in the margin or footnotes. If we let them, those extra notes and textual indicators can often help us better understand what we are reading. Even if we do not pay much attention to them in our daily reading, good notes and references can often serve as guides and signposts if we encounter verses that are difficult to understand.

4) Notes and Other Extras Should Always be Secondary

Although marginal notes showing other translation possibilities, as well as cross-references to related scriptures, maps, and some other features can be helpful, these additional features should nevertheless be viewed as secondary when it comes to selecting a Bible. Sometimes Bible readers choose a version based entirely on the study helps it contains, but the translation itself should always be the primary reason for choosing a Bible if it is to be our only Bible or the one we will read most of the time. Important questions can usually be researched far more thoroughly in external sources such as commentaries and other in-depth works when necessary, and these often give more viewpoints and perspectives as well as information.

5) Don't Expect Translations to Do the Impossible

Sometimes people feel they do not have a good translation if they find a verse or section that is difficult to understand. If this happens regularly it may be wise to consider a different version, but we should recognize that even the best translations are sometimes ambiguous when the original text is ambiguous, or their wording presumes some knowledge of the ancient biblical cultures. If we do not have a great deal of background in such things, a more simply

worded translation may be better for us; but it is worth remembering that the more a translation is rooted in the original texts, the more it will give glimpses into their very different cultural background. These glimpses into the biblical world are often fascinating and can help prod us into learning more about the world of the Bible and thus better understand its message.

6) The Best Version for Others May Not Be Best for You

The next thing we should realize is that just because our friends or even our churches have a favorite or approved Bible does not mean it is the best one for us. There is nothing wrong with using the version our church prefers when we are in church, of course, but for our own private study we should consider whether that Bible version is really the most spiritually profitable one we can use. Sometimes we can increase the value and effectiveness of our personal study by reading a different Bible from that which our church uses publicly or by using another translation alongside that version to make sure we are getting as clear a picture of what is being said as is possible.

We can now look at the two most effective options we have in selecting the best version or versions for our own needs.

The Multiple Bible Approach

Using more than one translation in our study is the first option we have in getting the most out of our time spent with the Bible – because using more than one Bible version almost always increases our chances of fully understanding what we read. As biblical scholar Bishop N.T. Wright has written, “When people ask me which version of the Bible they should use, I have for many years told them that I don’t much mind as long as they always have at least two open on the desk.”

This is a very effective study approach, but it does not necessarily follow that the more translations we use, the better our study will be. It may be helpful to check a given word or verse in a number of versions when we are closely studying a scripture to look at a detail of doctrine or other aspect of the text. But for normal reading, too many translations can sometimes mean that we don’t see the forest

for the trees – or in this case, the message for the words. Using too many versions at the same time can slow down our study to where we lose the immediacy and power of what is being said.

Using two translations can be a good balance, however, and can be especially helpful if they are from different parts of the word for word – thought for thought spectrum. Using multiple literal translations or multiple dynamic translations may not be a great help. As we saw in previous chapters, a literal or word for word based version can often give us great accuracy, and a thought for thought based translation can often give us maximum understanding. This means that combining a literal translation like the ESV, NASB, or Literal Standard Version (LSV) (described in Chapter 4) with a more dynamic translation like the NIV, NLT, or the Easy-to-Read Version (ERV) (described in Chapter 5) can often give a good balance – with an accuracy *and* clarity that any one of those versions alone might not have provided.

One very worthwhile option in the multiple Bible approach is to utilize two or more of the various versions of the Berean Bible. This is a fine translation (see the summary given in Chapter 6) that comes in different forms. The primary edition, with which many people are familiar, is the Berean Standard Bible (BSB). But the Berean Bible also has an interlinear version – the Berean Interlinear Bible (BIB) – and a word for word version – the Berean Literal Bible (BLB) – which are currently available for the New Testament and planned for the whole Bible. Combining these editions of the Berean Bible can be very effective in helping to better understand the text.

But whichever translations we select, utilizing two together can help us see added dimensions of the text as we look at it either through the “close-up lens” of a literal translation or the “wide-angle lens” of a thought for thought version.

The Single Bible Approach

While utilizing two or more translations can often be helpful in Bible study, there are times when using a single Bible is preferable. For example, if your best time for daily study is during a commute or a work break, trying to utilize multiple translations may not be

ideal. Also, there are times when our focus in Bible reading is devotional rather than detailed study, or when we are trying to memorize sections of Scripture, or seeking to get an overview of a book or section of the Bible. In situations like these we need a single Bible that we feel we can trust and that we enjoy reading.

As we emphasize throughout this book, there is no one perfect Bible translation. Every translation has its strengths and weaknesses, but fortunately, as we saw in Chapter 2, there are a number of excellent mediating or “middle ground” English translations that strive to be faithful to what the Bible actually says while also utilizing dynamic renderings where they are desirable, and a number of these versions fill the need for a good single Bible.

For some time now the NIV has held the throne in this area, but it is now challenged by newer and often better translations. For those who prefer a more “formal” Bible, the BSB is an excellent choice and one which is available for free download. For those who prefer a slightly more “natural” wording in their Bible, the CSB is an equally good choice. Chapter 6 of this book describes a number of mediating versions in detail, but it is hard to find a better choice than the two mentioned here – the BSB or CSB. Both these versions take into account recent discoveries and textual evidence, and both present the biblical message with precision, care, and readability. In the eyes of many Bible scholars and teachers, these are among the finest translations currently available and are suitable for use as reading or study Bibles.

Whichever Bible or Bibles you decide to make your own or you think you might like to try (see the Afterword at the end of this book), remember that online Bible sites such as BibleHub.com and BibleGateway.com allow you to freely read and compare a great number of versions so you can find one or more with which you feel comfortable. A number of the Bibles mentioned in this book can also be freely downloaded for personal use in various electronic formats (to read on a computer, e-book-reader, or smartphone) from the FreeChristianEBooks.org website, and some other versions are available for free download from their publishers’ websites.

PART TWO: CURRENT TRANSLATIONS

There are too many English Bible translations and editions available today (more than one hundred) to describe them all in this book, but in the following three chapters we survey the most widely used versions, in alphabetical order – looking first at word for word translations, then thought for thought translations, and finally the mediating or middle ground translations aiming to utilize both approaches. Not all of the included versions are recommended, but the discussion of each translation includes a short opening section summarizing where it falls on each of the four spectrums discussed in Chapter 2. These brief summaries also sketch the most important positive and negative points of each version to help you to assess the different versions and draw conclusions regarding which ones may be best suited to your own needs.

4. WORD FOR WORD TRANSLATIONS

There is a common misunderstanding among readers of the Bible who try to carefully select a good translation for personal study. That misunderstanding is simply the idea that a word for word translation, as defined in the previous chapter, is the “closest” to what was written in the original Hebrew and Greek manuscripts of the Bible. We will look more at why that is not always the case when we review thought for thought translations, but for now we will look at the tremendous importance of good literal or word for word Bible versions.

To use an example from everyday speech, it often really does not matter whether we greet each other with “How are you?” “Hey, what’s up?” or “Yo, brother, what’s happening?” But in some cases it does matter. If we really want to know how a person’s health is, or specifically how they are feeling, “What’s happening” or some similar expression may not convey exactly what is being asked by “How are you?” That is why although thought for thought translations can be helpful, they often do not tell us exactly what is being said – and that is where word for word translations shine.

Amplified Bible (AMP) 1965, 1987, 2015

Key Facts:

Produced by: The Lockman Foundation (non-denominational).

Translated by: Frances Siewert, and an editorial committee with scholarly consultants.

Translation base: *American Standard Version* of 1901.

Translation style: Word for word with additional synonyms and explanations. Gender specific.

Sample Verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was formless and void or a waste and emptiness, and darkness was upon the face of the deep [primeval

ocean that covered the unformed earth]. The Spirit of God was moving (hovering, brooding) over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word (Christ) became flesh, and lived among us; and we [actually] saw His glory, glory as belongs to the [One and] only begotten *Son* of the Father, [the Son who is truly unique, the only One of His kind, who is] full of grace and truth (absolutely free of deception)” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The fact that many words have multiple meanings is one of the challenges of biblical translation. For example, the Hebrew word *nefesh*, often translated “soul,” can mean “breath,” “life,” “throat,” “neck,” “blood,” “appetite,” or even a “living person” or a “dead person.” The Amplified Bible addresses this situation uniquely by giving alternate meanings for key words in parentheses () and additional interpretation in brackets [] within the text (as in the sample verses above).

The AMP can be a useful study tool, as the alternate renderings of key words can give additional insight into the meaning of a verse. However, it does not tell the reader which of multiple possibilities is most likely the intended one, and some of its interpretive additions are overly narrow or wide (for example, “absolutely free of deception” as an interpretation of “grace and truth” in the example above).

Overall, this is not a version to choose as a primary Bible – both because of its style and the fact that it was based on a 1901 English translation – but used with care it is often helpful.

English Standard Version (ESV) 2001, 2007, 2011, 2016

Key Facts:

Produced by: Crossway, an Evangelical publishing house.

Translated by: Over 100 theologically conservative scholars. Inter-denominational.

Translation base: The Revised Standard Version (1971) augmented with recent scholarship.

Translation style: Word for word. Mainly gender specific.

Sample Verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was without form and void, and darkness was over the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The English Standard Version is one of the most literal word for word current translations, and is even more so than the KJV. The ESV is not as literal as the NASB, however, and is frequently easier to read than that version. In fact, the ESV can be quite readable compared to other word for word translations, though it is not as consistently easy to read as most mediating or more dynamic versions.

The ESV also has a literary quality that many other translations lack, though its style can sometimes be a little archaic – as in Matthew 1:18 “she was found to be with child,” which is understandable but would have been better translated as simply “found to be expecting a child.” Similarly, Matthew 5:2 in the ESV “And he opened his mouth and taught them, saying” seems needlessly archaic.

Unfortunately, italics are not used to show inserted words in the ESV and there are relatively few notes explaining translation decisions or giving important textual variants. These factors can often limit the usefulness of the version. Overall, however, this is a good choice for a word for word Bible and more readable than many others. The ESV’s accuracy and relative readability has made it very popular, and the version is widely used in many Protestant churches.

King James Version (KJV) 1611, 1769

Key Facts:

Produced by: The Church of England at the request of King James I.

Translated by: 48 scholars and clergymen in three committees.

Translation base: The Bishops' Bible of 1568 and other translations.

Translation style: Word for word. Gender specific.

Sample Verses:

Old Testament: “And the earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The King James Version (or “Authorized Version” as it is sometimes called) is the oldest Bible version generally available today in English. Because the original KJV used Elizabethan (and even earlier) English, however, it has been frequently updated to make its spellings and some of its vocabulary more understandable, and most copies today are adapted from the 1769 edition. Due to its official background and other factors, the KJV has had enormous influence and is the most widespread Bible version in the world.

Unfortunately, some Christians have developed an almost cult-like devotion to the KJV – even going as far as saying that it is the only “real” Bible – perhaps because they do not realize that the KJV was itself simply a revision of earlier English Bible versions. The preface to the first edition of the KJV actually says that the translators did not attempt to make a totally new translation, but to make a new one “out of many good ones.”

The KJV is a quite literal word for word translation (though not as literal as the NASB or ESV) and because it was produced in an age of high literary standards, it often provides a majestic and

dignified presentation of Scripture. But this great strength is also a weakness today as its vocabulary and style can be difficult for some people and especially those using English as a second language. For example, the KJV translates Job 36:33 as “The noise thereof sheweth concerning it, the cattle also concerning the vapour” and to pretend that this is understandable to most people today is simply mistaken.

For many people one of the more modern revisions of the KJV such as the NKJV is preferable, and these also take into account many of the advances that have been made since 1611 in our understanding of Greek and Hebrew as well as utilizing earlier biblical manuscripts that were not available to the original KJV translators. The KJV is still a very worthwhile translation, but even for those who feel comfortable with its archaic English, it is often helpful to read it alongside another more recent translation.

Literal Standard Version (LSV) 2020

Key Facts:

Produced by: Covenant Christian Coalition (CCC), a conservative Christian ministry.

Translated by: A CCC translation team.

Translation base: Young’s Literal Translation (1862), revised and augmented.

Translation style: Word for word. Gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “and the earth was formless and void, and darkness [was] on the face of the deep, and the Spirit of God [was] fluttering on the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, glory as of [the] only begotten of [the] Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Claiming to be the most literal Bible translation in the English language, the LSV is primarily based on traditional manuscripts of the Old and New Testaments, but this translation base is expanded by utilizing other text-types when their evidence is deemed helpful. For example, in Genesis 11 the time spans found in the ancient Greek Septuagint version (LXX) are used in the text alongside those found in the Hebrew text.

Despite its dedication to word for word rendition, the LSV is more readable than some other strongly literal versions. This is accomplished by using English word order when necessary for readability. The LSV also uses several helpful typological features in the text. First, single brackets [] are used to signify words supplied to make the meaning clear. Double brackets [[]] are placed around text that is considered by many scholars to be a later addition (although John 7:53–8:11, the account of the woman taken in adultery, is not bracketed despite the fact that many versions – CSB, ESV, etc. – consider it to be late). Poetic breaks are indicated with a double bar || in the poetic, wisdom, and prophetic books. Another noticeable aspect of the LSV is that the name of God in the Old Testament, translated as LORD or Jehovah or Yahweh in most English translations, is rendered as YHWH – the consonants actually used in the Hebrew Bible.

The LSV is available in several editions, and this Bible has also been generously made available for free download by the publisher. It is a helpful translation for in-depth study.

New American Standard Bible (NASB) 1971, 1977, 1995, 2020

Key Facts:

Produced by: The Lockman Foundation (nondenominational).

Translated by: Over 100 theologically conservative scholars.

Translation base: The American Standard Bible (1901) augmented with recent scholarship.

Translation style: Word for word. Gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “And the earth was a formless and desolate emptiness, and darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters.” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word became flesh, and dwelt among us; and we saw His glory, glory as of the only *Son* from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The NASB is an excellent example of a formal, word for word translation of the Bible. In fact, it is one of the most literal English translations available today. Because of this, the NASB is a good version to use in Bible study when a person is concerned to get as close as possible to what is said in the original Hebrew and Greek. This does come at a price, however, and the NASB is often not as smooth a translation as the ESV, for example. Also, the NASB can very occasionally give translations that slant the perception of what is being said. For example, in Matthew 3:7 while a literal rendering would be “coming to his baptism” – without indication of why the individuals came – the NASB translates this “coming for baptism.” But the Greek text does not necessarily imply the Pharisees and Sadducees came with the intent to be baptized – it may only mean that they came *to* his baptism to observe John baptizing.

Despite the fact that the NASB sometimes renders words and phrases in a more common English idiom than in the same passage in the NKJV or ESV, generally the NASB is not as smoothly flowing or readable as either of those versions. However, the NASB uses italics in the text to alert the reader to words and ideas added to make the translation clear – for example “to those who are without the Law, *I became as one without the Law*” (1 Corinthians 9:21). Overall, this is an excellent Bible for serious study.

The New King James Version (NKJV) 1982, 1984

Key Facts:

Produced by: Thomas Nelson (now HarperCollins) Publishers.

Translated by: 130 scholars, pastors, and others.

Translation base: The King James Version augmented by modern textual research.

Translation style: “Complete equivalence” – essentially word for word. Mainly gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was without form, and void; and darkness *was* on the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we beheld His glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The NKJV is very popular as it maintains the beauty of the KJV, on which it was based, while updating much of that version’s archaic language. The NKJV uses essentially the same Hebrew and Greek texts as the KJV, but usually indicates where other manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls differ – especially when these are more likely readings. It does not always indicate when its text differs from others, however.

The NKJV sometimes gives better translations than the KJV. For example, in Matthew 20:20 the KJV has “Then came to him the mother of Zebedee’s children with her sons, worshipping him, and desiring a certain thing of him,” while the NKJV translates this “Then the mother of Zebedee’s sons came to Him with her sons, kneeling down and asking something from Him.” KJV-only advocates claim this is watering down the Scriptures (“kneeling” instead of “worshipping”), but the Greek word *proskuneo* literally means to kiss or bow before – so the NKJV translation is actually more literally accurate.

This is a reasonably readable version – for comparison, the NKJV reads at a 9th-grade reading level, while the KJV reads at a 12th-grade level and the NIV reads at a 7th-grade level. However, despite its many changes from the KJV wording, the NKJV can still

be a little archaic at times – as in verses such as Amos 4:6 “I gave you cleanness of teeth” which is a literal translation, but not as clear as “I gave you absolutely nothing to eat” (CSB) or “I gave you empty stomachs” (NIV). Unlike the KJV, the NKJV uses a few gender-neutral translations (but only about 15 compared to the NIV’s 214). Like the NASB, added words are helpfully set in italics in the NKJV. Overall, the NKJV is a good study Bible for those who do not prefer a wider manuscript base.

World English Bible (WEB) 2000

Key Facts:

Produced by: The nonprofit Rainbow Missions Inc.

Translated by: A large team of volunteer translators and editors.

Translation base: American Standard Version (1901).

Translation style: Word for Word. Mainly gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was formless and empty. Darkness was on the surface of the deep, and God's Spirit was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh, and lived among us. We saw his glory, such glory as of the one and only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The WEB was produced to provide a translation of the Bible in modern English that could be made available for unrestricted free posting on the internet and that could also be freely copied without written permission from the publisher or the payment of royalties. This makes the WEB a useful tool for missionary work and other uses, though the lack of a printed edition has limited the use of the version among many readers.

The WEB is also unusual in that it uses the Hebrew “Yahweh” when rendering the name of God in the Old Testament, and the

version also has a Messianic Edition that substitutes traditional Hebrew names and phrases for the equivalent English words and phrases used in most translations.

In most cases the WEB version is a good literal translation of the Scriptures. Very occasionally, however, it follows older translations of words that are no longer seen as valid. For example, biblical Hebrew has a distinct form for the feminine plural when women are exclusively the subjects. However, since the time of the KJV the feminine plural *mebasarot* (“[women] proclaim good news”) in Psalm 68:11 has often been translated in a way that obscures the gender of the ones proclaiming the news. Unfortunately, the WEB continues this misreading by translating the verse “The Lord announced the word. The ones who proclaim it are a great company,” while most newer versions translate this along the lines of “a great company of women brought the good news” (Psalm 68:11 CSB). Overall, the WEB is a worthwhile version to consult if a literal translation is needed.

Some Other Word for Word Translations:

Berean Literal Bible (BLB) 2016 [New Testament]

New American Bible (NAB) 1970, 1986, 2011

New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) 1985

Revised Standard Version (RSV) 1952, 1977

5. THOUGHT FOR THOUGHT TRANSLATIONS

Despite any preference we may have for a word for word translation of the Bible, there are situations in which we sometimes need the flexibility of a thought for thought version. Some Hebrew and Greek words simply do not have an exact equivalent in English, and translating the thought exactly can be far better than simply choosing the closest possible individual words.

At other times the literal translation of a whole phrase is not what we need. A literal translation of the French “*pommes de terre*” would be the unhelpful “apples of the earth,” and only a thought for thought translation would tell us that the expression means “potatoes.” Word order and sentence structure also often do not match between languages, so word for word translations can sometimes make stiff and unnatural reading.

Finally, we best understand the written word of God when we read it in our own language and in the vernacular of the time in which we live. The cultural and historical differences between our own civilization and those of biblical times are often great enough without adding unfamiliar vocabulary and strange-seeming sentence structure to the task of reading and understanding.

For all these reasons, a thought for thought translation is often helpful for better understanding complex or obscure biblical passages and for simply reading the Bible at a broader level – trying to find the underlying message of chapters and books rather than the exact meaning of specific words in individual verses.

Nevertheless, thought for thought translations always run the risk of adding to the original message by introducing the ideas and interpretations of the translator/s, and this is a factor we must consider very carefully when assessing Bibles of this type – especially versions such as The Living Bible (LB) or The Message (MSG) that are not actually translations, but are paraphrases at the extreme end of the thought for thought spectrum.

Contemporary English Version (CEV) 1995

Key Facts:

Produced by: The American Bible Society (British and Foreign Bible Society in the UK).

Translated by: Barclay Newman and a team of translators.

Translation base: Not specified.

Translation style: Thought for thought. Modified gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was barren, with no form of life; it was under a roaring ocean covered with darkness. But the Spirit of God was moving over the water” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became a human being and lived here with us. We saw his true glory, the glory of the only Son of the Father. From him the complete gifts of undeserved grace and truth have come down to us” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The CEV (also known as The Bible for Today's Family) was designed for a lower reading level than the Good News Bible (GNB), which is also published by the American Bible Society. The CEV utilizes simple language and has made a conscious effort to avoid the use of biblical terms that might be unfamiliar to many people. While this can be a good thing for the target audience, like many thought for thought versions the CEV's style can sometimes be a little distracting to readers who are more familiar with the Bible. Yet the version does often boil down the message of the text into short, easily grasped ideas. For example, in the NIV Psalm 127:1 is translated “Unless the LORD builds the house, the builders labor in vain. Unless the LORD watches over the city, the guards stand watch in vain,” and in the CEV this becomes the much shorter

“Without the help of the LORD it is useless to build a home or to guard a city.”

However, the CEV can sometimes significantly change the text beyond simply translating it. While the ESV translates Acts 9:22 as “But Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who lived in Damascus by proving that Jesus was the Christ,” this verse is mis-rendered in the CEV: “Saul preached with such power that he completely confused the Jewish people in Damascus, as he tried to show them that Jesus is the Messiah.” Even more substantially, Job 36:33 – which the NIV translates as “His thunder announces the coming storm; even the cattle make known its approach” – is rendered in the CEV as “and the thunder tells of his anger against sin,” which is clearly very different.

The CEV uses gender-inclusive language for humanity but not for God. Because of its highly dynamic translation style and changes to the text, the version is not very suitable for in-depth Bible study, although it is popular among many who want a simplified Bible.

Easy-to-Read Version (ERV) 1989, 1991, 2004, 2015

Key Facts:

Produced by: Churches of Christ World Bible Translation Center.
Translated by: Ervin Bishop, with input from numerous scholars.
Translation base: A broad base of Old and New Testament texts.
Translation style: Thought for thought. Gender inclusive.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “the earth was completely empty. There was nothing on the earth. Darkness covered the ocean, and God’s Spirit moved over the water” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became a man and lived among us. We saw his divine greatness –the greatness that belongs to the only Son of the Father. The Word was full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Beginning as the English Version for the Deaf, the ERV has also undergone major revision to better meet the needs of a wider target audience and for use in evangelistic outreach to those with limited English. Aptly named, the ERV is one of the easiest to read English versions in print. The main weakness of the version is that its renderings are sometimes so simplified that they do not fully communicate the message of the text.

For example, compare Romans 1:5, which is translated by the ESV “Through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith for the sake of his name among all the nations” with the ERV “Through Christ, God gave me the special work of an apostle – to lead people of all nations to believe and obey him. I do all this to honor Christ.” Notice that in the ERV the receiving of grace is left out of this verse entirely. The translation also changed “we” – which would include others as well as Paul – to “me” or just Paul. Finally, what Christ did for his name's sake is changed to something Paul personally did to honor Christ. Generally, however, the ERV is a little closer to traditional translations than the CEV, with which it is comparable.

Like any other dynamic version, by moving beyond word for word translation the ERV makes it possible for changes to enter the text, so it should be compared with other versions for serious study.

Good News Translation (GNT) 1976, 1979, 1992

Key Facts:

Produced by: American Bible Society.

Translated by: An inter-denominational translation team.

Translation base: A broad base of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

Translation style: Thought for thought. Gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “the earth was formless and desolate. The raging ocean that covered everything was engulfed in total darkness, and the Spirit of God was moving over the water” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became a human being and, full of grace and truth, lived among us. We saw his glory, the glory which he received as the Father's only Son” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Originally called the Good News Bible (GNB) and also called the Today's English Version (TEV), the GNT was created as a translation that would be simple enough for anyone to read and understand – including individuals learning the English language and children. The simplicity of the wording used in this version also made it a popular choice for missionary and evangelistic work with adults and it was used, for example, at Billy Graham crusades.

However, despite its simple style and readability, the GNT has been criticized for some of its renderings which are significantly different from what is said in the original languages. For example, compare Romans 8:3 which the ESV translates as “By sending his own Son in the likeness of sinful flesh and for sin, he condemned sin in the flesh” with the GNT translation: “He condemned sin in human nature by sending his own Son, who came with a nature like our sinful nature, to do away with sin.” Here, the GNT essentially says that Jesus had a sinful nature, which is contrary to the clear teaching of the whole New Testament.

Overall this is generally a good version, but its occasional poor translation choices limit its usefulness and, like so many thought for thought versions, it is best to compare it with a more trustworthy word for word or middle ground version for any serious study of the Bible.

Living Bible (LB) 1971, 2013

Key Facts:

Produced by: Tyndale House Christian Publishers.
Translated by: Kenneth N. Taylor.
Translation base: American Standard Version of 1901.
Translation style: Paraphrase. Gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “the earth was a shapeless, chaotic mass, with the Spirit of God brooding over the dark vapors” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And Christ became a human being and lived here on earth among us and was full of loving forgiveness and truth. And some of us have seen his glory – the glory of the only Son of the heavenly Father!” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The Living Bible became very popular and tens of millions of copies of this version have been sold. As a result, although it is an older version, it is still frequently found and utilized by many who find it an easy to read Bible. There is also the Catholic Living Bible (CLB), which was endorsed by the Catholic Church and contains the Deuterocanonical books as well as an introduction by Pope John Paul II. The LB has also been translated into over 100 different languages. This widespread acceptance was based on the fact that LB was one of the earlier freely rendered versions of the Bible – rewriting verses such as 1 Samuel 24:3, which says that Saul entered a cave to “cover his feet” with the more understandable “Saul went into a cave to go to the bathroom.”

However, despite its popularity, a major problem with the LB – as with many paraphrases – is that it frequently changes what the biblical text says. For example: In 2 Samuel 16:4 the NIV translates “‘I humbly bow,’ Ziba said. ‘May I find favor in your eyes, my lord the king.’” The LB changes this completely to “‘Thank you, thank you, sir,’ Ziba replied.” In John 12:15, which the ESV translates “Fear not, daughter of Zion; behold, your king is coming, sitting on a donkey’s colt!” the LB has “Don’t be afraid of your King, people of

Israel...” which is very different. Verses such as these show why it is best never to use the LB for serious study, as the exact nature of what the biblical text says is frequently lost.

The Message (MSG) 2013

Key Facts:

Produced by: NavPress.

Translated by: Eugene Peterson.

Translation base: Not specified.

Translation style: Extreme paraphrase. Gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “First this: God created the Heavens and Earth—all you see, all you don’t see. Earth was a soup of nothingness, a bottomless emptiness, an inky blackness. God’s Spirit brooded like a bird above the watery abyss” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh and blood, and moved into the neighborhood. We saw the glory with our own eyes, the one-of-a-kind glory, like Father, like Son, Generous inside and out, true from start to finish” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Eugene Peterson’s MSG is widely used, especially among newer Christians, and has been embraced by several celebrity figures in popular Christian culture. Adding to its widespread use, a Catholic Edition was published in 2013. The MSG is certainly easy to read, but as a paraphrase it frequently changes what is said in the biblical text – sometimes beyond recognition. For example, Mark 8:38 “this adulterous and sinful generation” (ESV) becomes “your fickle and unfocused friends” in the MSG. And Ephesians 2:2 “you followed the ways of this world and of the ruler of the kingdom of the air, the spirit who is now at work in those who are disobedient”

(NIV) is twisted to “You let the world, which doesn’t know the first thing about living, tell you how to live. You filled your lungs with polluted unbelief, and exhaled disobedience” in the MSG.

The MSG frequently adds to the biblical text. For example, John 3:16 in the ESV is seventeen words long. In the MSG this same verse is almost a hundred words longer! Extreme paraphrases such as MSG also frequently lose many of the details found in the biblical text and may change it to where the original message is, in fact, lost. This makes them completely undesirable for serious Bible study, and this type of paraphrase should never be relied upon for understanding doctrine or other important aspects of the Bible.

New Living Translation (NLT) 1996, 2004, 2007

Key Facts:

Produced by: Tyndale House Publishers.

Translated by: A team of some ninety biblical scholars.

Translation base: A wide base of Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

Translation style: Thought for thought. Gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “The earth was formless and empty, and darkness covered the deep waters. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “So the Word became human and made his home among us. He was full of unfailing love and faithfulness. And we have seen his glory, the glory of the Father’s one and only Son” (John 1:14).

Comments:

In the late 1980s, Tyndale House Publishers organized a team of biblical scholars to revise the text of the LB. After several years of work, the revision was abandoned in favor of doing an entirely new

translation which was eventually published in 1996 as the NLT. The version is published in a number of formats and is available free online. It has become very popular, and in 2008 the NLT briefly supplanted the NIV as the highest selling modern Bible version.

The clarity of the NLT is often excellent, as can be seen by comparing Romans 3:25 in the NIV, “He did this to demonstrate his justice, because in his forbearance he had left the sins committed beforehand unpunished” with the same verse in the NLT: “This sacrifice shows that God was being fair when he held back and did not punish those who sinned in times past.”

On the other hand, like all thought for thought versions, the NLT sometimes changes the meaning of the original text. For example, it has been criticized for unnecessarily watering down unpleasant language. In Matthew 7:23, when Jesus says “Then I will tell them plainly, ‘I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!’” (NIV), the NLT has “go away - the things you did were unauthorized.”

Overall, the NLT is a readable translation and one of the more moderate thought for thought versions – though like all of them it should be used with care, comparing it with a more literal version for serious study.

Some Other Thought for Thought Translations

New Century Version (NCV) 1986

New English Bible (NEB) 1970

Revised English Bible (REB) 1989

The Voice Bible (VOICE) 2012

6. MEDIATING TRANSLATIONS

Mediating translations fall in the “middle ground” between word for word and thought for thought. The publishers of these Bibles use terms such as “literal-idiomatic” or “optimal equivalence” to describe them, but they are all positioned mid-way along the translation spectrum. Many utilize word for word renditions when possible and switch to thought for thought translation when more literal would be difficult to understand. To a certain extent all translations do this, but there is a vast difference between using the principle occasionally – as even the KJV did – compared to its ongoing use, as in the translations we cover in this chapter.

The balanced use of word for word and thought for thought translation produces what are probably the best Bible versions for regular use and for when only a single version is available (see Chapter 3). The success of this mediating approach can be seen in the fact that a majority of recent Bible versions fall into this category – and versions of this type are becoming widely recognized as some of the best translations available today.

Berean Study Bible (BSB) 2016, 2020

Key Facts:

Produced by: Bible Hub.

Translated by: Bible Hub scholars and external advisory committee.

Translation base: A wide range of Hebrew and Greek biblical manuscripts.

Translation style: Mediating. Gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “Now the earth was formless and void, and darkness was over the surface of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh and made His dwelling among us. We have seen His glory, the glory of the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Although not as widely known and used as it deserves to be, the Berean Study Bible is one of the best mediating versions available. Its name can be somewhat confusing as it is a Bible for study rather than a “Study Bible” in the usual sense of an edition with extra notes, maps, etc. The BSB is comparable to the CSB (see next entry) and the two are similar translations, but the BSB has some useful advantages of its own.

This is especially true as a Bible for detailed study because the BSB is published in different editions or “tiers”– for example: the Greek text of the New Testament, and an interlinear Greek and English version, as well as the whole Bible in a Literal Version, Readers’ Version, and Study Bible. Because these editions are all built on the same translational base, they can be compared for study purposes and this can be very helpful.

Another advantage of this version is that in addition to the printed editions that may be purchased, electronic editions and various study materials such as a concordance and topical Bible based on the BSB are available for free download from the publisher’s BibleHub.com website.

Compared to word for word translations, some may feel that words are occasionally added to the BSB unnecessarily, but the version usually achieves a good balance of literal and dynamic rendering. An example is found in Acts 5:42 which the BSB translates “Every day, in the temple courts ...” Here, the word “courts” is added to “temple.” This is probably the area of the temple being spoken of, however, and the Berean Interlinear New Testament, if it is used in conjunction with the Study Bible, will show that the word is added. Like all translations, the BSB version may be questioned at some points, but overall it makes an excellent study or reading Bible.

Christian Standard Bible (CSB) 2017, 2020

Key Facts:

Produced By: Holman Christian publishers.

Translated By: A large inter-denominational scholarly translation team.

Translation Base: A wide range of Hebrew and Greek biblical manuscripts.

Translation Style: Mediating. Modified gender neutral.

Sample Verses:

Old Testament: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness covered the surface of the watery depths, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. We observed his glory, the glory as the one and only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The CSB grew out of the earlier Holman Christian Standard Bible (2004), which was an original translation from Greek and Hebrew manuscripts. The CSB is a successful mediating version that is more readable than more literal translations like the ESV, but often more accurate than more dynamic translations like the NIV. For example, compare Matthew 23:32 in each of those versions:

ESV: “Fill up, then, the measure of your fathers.”

CSB: “Fill up, then, the measure of your ancestors’ sins!”

NIV: “Go ahead, then, and complete what your ancestors started!”

While the ESV is literal, it does not tell us what the “measure” is, and while the NIV conveys the idea, it also does not tell us what the

ancestors started. The CSB follows the literal wording of the text but adds a word to make the meaning clear. This attention to detail is characteristic of the CSB. In 1 Peter 1:22 where the NIV has “sincere love” and “from the heart,” the CSB translates the same words “sincere brotherly love” and “from a pure heart” – which is what the text actually says. Another important aspect of the CSB is that, when possible, it tries to translate theological passages more literally and non-theological passages somewhat more dynamically.

The CSB is similar to the BSB – though a little less formal and literal than that version. A good example would be Matthew 1:18 which the BSB translates “Mary was pledged in marriage to Joseph, but before they came together, she was found to be with child through the Holy Spirit,” while the CSB translates the same verse “After his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, it was discovered before they came together that she was pregnant from the Holy Spirit.” Unlike the BSB, the CSB is not available in free electronic versions, however.

There are some verses in the CSB where an arguably better translation might have been used, but this is infrequent. Overall, the CSB is one of the best versions available for use as a single Bible or for serious study.

International Standard Version (ISV) 2011

Key Facts:

Produced by: The ISV Foundation.

Translated by: A scholarly translation committee.

Translation base: A range of biblical texts, including the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Translation style: Mediating. Gender specific.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “When the earth was as yet unformed and desolate, with the surface of the ocean depths shrouded in darkness, and

while the Spirit of God was hovering over the surface of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh and lived among us. We gazed on his glory, the kind of glory that belongs to the Father’s unique Son, who is full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

The ISV is a readable and often very accurate modern mediating translation. For example, many Bible versions render John 3:16 along the lines of “For God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son,” but the ISV is one of the few that translate this verse more accurately as “For this is how God loved the world...” (in other words “It is in this manner that God loved the world”). A distinctive and sometimes helpful feature of the ISV is that biblical poetry is translated into English metrical form. The ISV has also accomplished pioneering work in making variants of the Hebrew text found in the Dead Sea Scrolls available in the version notes. Rather than stressing printed editions, the ISV has helpfully been made available in a number of electronic formats and may be freely used without royalty payments for mission work, etc.

On the other hand, the ISV sometimes contains inconsistencies of translation. In Genesis 1:4 – which most versions give as “God saw that the light was good” – the ISV has “God saw that the light was beautiful.” “Beautiful” is an acceptable translation of the Hebrew word *tov*, but in every other verse in Genesis 1 where the same word is repeated, the ISV translates it as “good.” This kind of inconsistency is unwarranted in the text and is unnecessary.

More importantly, the ISV can be somewhat idiosyncratic in its translation. For example, Genesis 3:1 – which is normally translated as “Now the serpent was more crafty than any of the wild animals” – is translated in the ISV as “Now the Shining One was more clever than any animal.” The Hebrew *ha nachash* may possibly have the meaning of “shiny one,” but its normal use in Genesis and elsewhere is simply “serpent” or “snake.” There is little reason to place the possible alternative reading “Shining One” in

the text instead of in the notes. In the same way, the ISV translates Romans 5:20 as “Now the Law crept in so that the offense would increase” and while “crept in” is a possible translation, it is one that carries a negative connotation that is not implicit in the original text. In scattered instances like these the ISV diminishes its value as a study Bible, but it can still be a helpful version and is also very usable for general reading.

New English Translation (NET) 2005

Key Facts:

Produced by: Biblical Studies Foundation (Bible.org). Inter-denominational.

Translated by: A team of twenty biblical scholars.

Translation base: A broad base of Hebrew and Greek biblical manuscripts.

Translation style: Mediating. Moderately gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “Now the earth was without shape and empty, and darkness was over the surface of the watery deep, but the Spirit of God was moving over the surface of the water” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “Now the Word became flesh and took up residence among us. We saw his glory – the glory of the one and only, full of grace and truth, who came from the Father” (John 1:14).

Comments:

In addition to normal printed editions, the NET Bible is notable for both its status as a freely distributed electronic version available for individual, ministerial or missionary use without cost, and the immense number (over 60,000) of extensive footnotes included in the full edition. These notes contain a wealth of information that

even some other translation committees have stated they found helpful in the production of their own versions. Additionally, the NET Bible was beta tested on the internet, with comments and suggestions regarding readability incorporated from many users of different backgrounds and levels of proficiency in English. As a result, the NET Bible is thought to have been checked and improved by more individuals than any other Bible translation in history.

In its mediating translation style, the NET version is generally reliable, though on occasion it can be a little too dynamic in its renderings, losing details of the text that are worth preserving. For example, Psalm 8:5-6 in the Hebrew states “with glory and honor you have crowned him, you cause him to rule over the works of your hands, all things you have put under his feet.” The NET version translates this as “you grant mankind honor and majesty, you appoint them to rule over your creation; you have placed everything under their authority.” This conveys most of the thought, but loses the image-sequence of “head-hands-feet” in the original as well as losing the possible messianic significance of the verses by substituting “them” and “their” for “him” and “his.”

The NET Bible’s gender neutrality is often noticeable, though important cases are usually explained in the notes. For example, 1 Timothy 2:5 is literally, “For there is one God and one mediator between God and men (Greek *andropoi*), the man (Greek *andropos*) Christ Jesus.” Believing that in this particular passage the redemption of humanity is the point, not Jesus’ gender, the NET renders this verse “For there is one God and one intermediary between God and humanity, Christ Jesus, himself human.”

While this particular example is certainly defensible, the NET frequently departs from other translations’ treatment of messianic references in the Old Testament. In other words, verses in the Old Testament that are quoted in the New Testament as being of messianic significance are not translated in such a manner to show this because of the gender neutrality of the NET. The NET is not alone in doing this, but it is a factor to consider when evaluating this version.

Overall, the NET version is often a very good translation. Its notes and free distribution are great strengths, but its lean toward a thought for thought style means that careful Bible readers may wish to sometimes use this version in combination with another more literal one.

New International Version (NIV) 1978, 1996, 2005, 2011

Key Facts:

Produced by: Biblica (formerly the International Bible Society).

Translated by: An interdenominational, team of biblical scholars.

Translation base: A wide base of Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts.

Translation style: Mediating/thought for thought. Gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “Now the earth was formless and empty, darkness was over the surface of the deep, and the Spirit of God was hovering over the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Since its publication the NIV has become one of the most popular English Bible translations and is the highest selling version, worldwide, after the KJV. This is primarily because the NIV is well rendered in smoothly flowing and easy-to-read English. But despite its great popularity and readability, the NIV is not without issues that should be considered.

For some, the NIV’s gender-inclusive translation style (see “Gender Issues” in Chapter 1 of this book) is problematic. Some of the more extreme inclusive renditions of the version’s 1996 and

2005 editions have been modified in the latest 2011 edition, but the NIV is still more gender-inclusive than some feel is appropriate.

Although it is self-described as a mediating version, the NIV frequently leans to the thought for thought side of the translation spectrum – sometimes to a surprising degree. For example, while the BSB version translates Ecclesiastes 11:1-2 “Cast your bread upon the waters, for after many days you will find it again. Divide your portion among seven, or even eight, for you do not know what disaster may befall the land,” the NIV rewrites this to be about shipping and investment: “*Ship your grain across the sea; after many days you may receive a return. Invest* in seven ventures, yes, in eight.” In this example we have italicized the added or changed words in the NIV to show the thought for thought treatment of these verses.

Many theologically conservative scholars also feel that the NIV can be unnecessarily interpretive at times. For example, because the Hebrew of Genesis 2:8 reads literally that “the Lord God planted a garden in Eden” and this might seem to contradict the order of creation given in Genesis 1, the NIV alters the verb tense to read “had planted” without indication that “had” has been added. Unfortunately, this kind of unmarked adjustment of small details is common in the NIV text.

Some also feel that the NIV occasionally makes unfortunate textual choices. For example, while most versions translate Mark 1:41 to say something like “Moved with compassion, Jesus reached out his hand and touched the man” (BSB), the NIV translates this “Jesus was indignant ...” and the New International Reader’s Version (NIRV) has “Jesus became angry...” These renderings are not only based on an arguable translation choice (only a single ancient manuscript has this wording), but it also implies a cause-and-effect that has no basis in the text.

Because of its excellent readability, the NIV will doubtless remain one of the most popular modern English translations for the foreseeable future, but because of the issues mentioned above it is best to compare the version with others for any serious study.

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) 1989

Key Facts:

Produced by: The National Council of Churches, an ecumenical Christian group.

Translated by: Protestant, Orthodox, and Catholic scholars.

Translation base: The *Revised Standard Version* (1952) augmented by modern textual research.

Translation style: Mediating. Moderately gender neutral.

Sample verses:

Old Testament: “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep, while a wind from God swept over the face of the waters” (Genesis 1:2).

New Testament: “And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father’s only son, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14).

Comments:

Although often described as a word for word version, the NRSV is closer to the middle of the translation spectrum in that it aims at readability while also trying to use many familiar words and phrases from the KJV. The NRSV has three variant editions: the original NRSV; the NRSV Common Bible, which includes the Apocryphal or Deuterocanonical books; and the NRSV Catholic Edition which arranges the Old Testament books in the order of the Latin Vulgate. An “Anglicized edition” employs British English spelling and grammar. These alternative editions have created some confusion regarding the nature of the version, and many dislike some of its translations – such as “mortal” for “son of man” (Ezekiel 2:1, etc.). As a result, the NRSV has not been as popular among theologically conservative Christians as some other versions, though it is well regarded and used in many churches.

Although less formal (word for word) than the RSV, the NRSV is sometimes not as free-flowing and natural-sounding as it could be, and this does not always make it an ideal reading Bible. The version is also not as perfect for study as many presume. Sometimes it is unnecessarily interpretive. In 1 Timothy 3:2, for example, the ESV and most other word for word versions translate that a church leader must be “the husband of one wife,” while the NRSV translates this as “married only once.” This is neither a literal nor a good translation of the verse. In addition to deleting the gender reference (which is important in the context), the NRSV also makes the text say that elders should not marry more than once when this is not implicit in the original. The Greek *mias gunaikos andra* (literally “[a] one woman man”) is better translated in almost all other versions. Renderings such as this mean that despite its strengths it is often good to compare the NRSV with other versions, though overall it remains a useful and often very good translation.

Some Other Mediating Translations:

Common English Bible (CEB) 2011

God’s Word Translation (GW) 1995

Open English Bible (OEB) 2010

The Readable Bible (RB) 2022

AFTERWORD:

WHY YOU SHOULD TRY A NEW TRANSLATION

Whatever Bible translation we choose, we should not get “glued” to that one translation forever. It is fine to become deeply acquainted with any good version, but it is also easy to become overly comfortable with a version we have used for any length of time. This is simply because when we become very familiar with any text our mind tends to fill in the words as, or even before we read them, and we lose the analytical aspect of looking at the words from the perspective of “What else could these words mean?”

C. S. Lewis touched on this truth in his work “God in the Dock” when he wrote: “Though it may seem a ... paradox, we must sometimes get away from the authorized version, if for no other reason, simply because it is so beautiful and so solemn. Beauty exalts, but beauty also lulls.” Lewis was speaking about the majestic old KJV, but what he said applies to any translation with which we might become familiar. We may feel comfortable with the translation we have used for years, but the familiarity does mean that we become less likely to see new things in it or to understand the text in fuller ways.

In fact, an irony of faithful regular Bible study is that the more we read the Scriptures, the more familiar they become - and sometimes we may feel we are just not seeing as much as we did when we first, excitedly, came to the word of God. We should always pray to grow in understanding each time we continue our journey in the Book, but we also need to study with a purpose – not just to be reminded of things we know, but to learn more of the mind of God, and to learn how we might take on that mind in the small things of which everyday life is composed. That is where using a new translation, at least occasionally, comes in.

Familiarity Is Good, but Change Is Good, Too

Many of us stay with the same translation simply because we like to stay with the same physical Bible. It's "the Bible" to us, and may have our markings and notes built up through years of reading. But we don't have to end our relationship with that Bible in order to try a new translation. I have my own favorite version and it is the one to which I most frequently turn, but when I feel that I am not seeing anything beyond what I saw the last time I read a biblical book or chapter, I turn to another translation. It's not that my regular version is not accurate enough, but that I want to hear the words with different stresses, from a different perspective, as it were. But we are not talking about comparing lines or verses in different translations. That is fine for detailed study of exactly which words are "best" in translating a given passage. What we are talking about here is taking a different version and immersing oneself in it – getting used to its speech patterns and style in the same way we would if we were listening to a new friend speak.

Using a translation that is new to us in this way invariably gives us new insights, new ways of looking at the same material, and inevitably a deeper understanding of what the text says. It is somewhat like having different teachers successively explaining something to us – their combined insights will probably be greater than we would receive with only one explanation.

So there are very real advantages to changing one's translation occasionally, even if we plan to go back to our regular Bible after reading one or more books in a different version. The wonderful thing is just how simple it is to try another translation. If you like reading on a screen, many Bible versions are available online, and many can now be obtained free for reading on a computer, e-book reader, or smart phone. So, if you ever feel that Bible study is not as exciting for you as it was, or if you would like to maximize what you learn in a given study session and hear the Bible speak to you in new and fuller ways – try a new translation.

ALPHABETICAL LIST OF MAJOR TRANSLATIONS

This is not a full index of every translation mentioned in this book, but a list of those translations discussed in detail in Chapters 4–6.

Amplified Bible (AMP)	Chapter 4
Berean Study Bible (BSB)	Chapter 6
Christian Standard Bible (CSB)	Chapter 6
Contemporary English Version (CEV)	Chapter 5
Easy-to-Read Version (ERV)	Chapter 5
English Standard Version (ESV)	Chapter 4
Good News Translation (GNT)	Chapter 5
International Standard Version (ISV)	Chapter 6
King James Version (KJV)	Chapter 4
Literal Standard Bible (LSV)	Chapter 4
The Living Bible (LB)	Chapter 5
The Message (MSG)	Chapter 5
New American Standard Bible (NASB)	Chapter 4
New English Bible (NEB)	Chapter 5
New International Version (NIV)	Chapter 6
New King James Version (NKJV)	Chapter 4
New Living Translation (NLT)	Chapter 5
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	Chapter 6
World English Bible (WEB)	Chapter 4

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