

God Wrote a Book: Bible Translations

Opening Discussion

1. What is your favorite translation of the Bible?
2. What do you like about it?
3. What other translations do you use in your personal study?
4. Are there any translations you avoid? If so, why?

How many translations are there?

- Biblegateway.com, 61 English translations
- Logos, 82 English translations
- Wikipedia, over 100 English translations
- YouVersion, 2,863 versions, 1,884 languages
- Bible.com, 2,877 in 1,918 languages

Most modern versions of the Bible are trustworthy and accurate translations of the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts.

1. What is a translation?

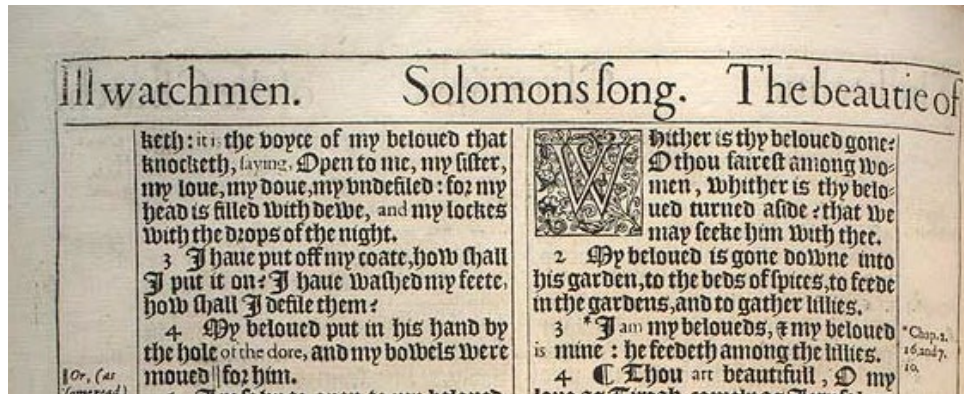
- Autographs: the original written copies of the books and letters
- Manuscripts: copies of the autographs
- Texts: manuscripts compiled into a complete New Testament or Old Testament
 - The Majority Text
 - The Erasmus Text or the Textus Receptus
 - The Critical Text
- Translations: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts translated into the lingua franca, the language of the people.

2. Why are there so many translations?

Translations don't exist because the Bible changes. Translations exist because everything else changes.

Her ys godspelles angyn Hælendes Cristes, godes suna. Mark 1:1, The Gospel of Mark in West-Saxon, (990, Old English)

1 In the bigynnyng God made of nouyt heuene and erthe. **2** Forsothe the erthe was idel and voide, and derknessis weren on the face of depthe; and the Spyrty of the Lord was borun on the wattris. **3** And God seide, Liyt be maad, and liyt was maad. **4** And God seiþ the liyt, that it was good, and he departide the liyt fro derknessis, **5** and he clepide the liyt, dai, and the derknessis, nyyt. And the euentid and morwetid was maad, o daie. Genesis 1:1-5, Tyndale Bible (1382, Middle English)



My beloved put in his hand by the hole of the dore, and my bowels were moued for him. **Solomon's Song 5:4, KJV 1611**

Mi derlyng putte his hond bi an hoole; and my wombe tremblide at the touchyng therof. *Songes of Songes 5:4, Tyndale Bible (1382, Middle English)*

My beloved put his hand to the latch, and my heart was thrilled within me. **Song of Solomon 5:4, ESV**

The reading levels for popular English versions according to Christianbook.com: KJV, 12; RSV, 12; NRSV, 11; NASB, 11; ESV, 10; HCSB, 7-8; NIV, 7-8; CEB, 7; CSB, 7; NKJV, 7; NLT, 6; GW, 5; Message, 4-5; NCV, 3; Nlrv, 3

3. What are the major differences between translations?

Group 1 (Textus Receptus)	Group 2 (Formal Equivalence)	Group 3 (Dynamic Equivalence)	Group 4 (Paraphrase)
King James Version	English Standard Version	New International Version	New Living Translation
New King James Version	New American Standard Bible	Holman Christian Standard Bible	The Living Bible
Young's Literal Translation	Mounce Reverse-Interlinear NT		The Message

4. Which translation is most accurate?

- What's a good, accurate translation for use in personal study? ESV, CSB, NASB, KJV, NKJV
- A translation to avoid: The New World Translation (Translated by the Jehovah's Witness Watch Tower)

Which Translation Should I Use?

A good translation is an important tool for studying and loving the Bible, but there are so many to choose from! If you are new to studying the Bible, then you might feel lost when trying to choose a translation. In fact, you might not even know what I'm talking about.

Although the Bible was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, it has been translated for us by many different people and groups over the centuries. Contrary to what some people think, this doesn't mean the Bible has lost its meaning, because modern translators do not use old translations; they use ancient manuscripts written in the original languages. In other words, each translation does not inherit the potential mistakes of previous translations because they use Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek manuscripts instead of other translations when they are doing their work. These translations go by different names and abbreviations like the King James Version (KJV), the New International Version (NIV), the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), etc. If you are not sure which translation you have, look on the cover or the title page.

Why are there so Many Translations?

They are trying to change the Bible! Not really, but that's what some people think. In short, the main reason there are so many translations is not that the Bible has changed—it's that English keeps changing. Think of all the people throughout history and throughout the modern world who use the English language. No single English translation can meet all the needs of all English speakers in all parts of the world throughout all of history.

One of my favorite examples comes from the Song of Solomon 5:4, which describes the elation of a woman when she realized her boyfriend was coming to visit her. The King James Version, one of the earliest English translations of the Bible, describes her feelings this way, "my bowels were moved for him." It gets me every time! Imagine telling your sweetie, "Honey, I love you so much you make my bowels move!" That might have sounded romantic in the 17th century, but it means something very different now. Other translations use more modern idioms that are still true to the meaning of the Hebrew expression. For instance, the English Standard Version says, "My heart was thrilled within me." The Hebrew word used in Song of Solomon 5:4 refers to all of the internal organs and can specifically refer to the seat of human emotions, wherein its context seems to indicate is its use here. So in the 17th century, "bowels" might have made more sense, but in 21st century English, "heart" is much more accurate to the meaning of the text. In short, if you are going to buy a Valentine's card that quotes Song of Solomon 5:4, make sure you check the version first!

What are the Major Differences Between Translations?

So, which translation should you use? That depends on your personal needs. While there is no perfect translation, there are some important differences. Most of this information is available in the preface of each translation or on the publisher's website.

The Manuscripts Used

The Bible was originally written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Virtually all versions of the Bible translate from these languages directly into English, Spanish, Mandarin, etc. In other words, contrary to what many people believe, scholars are not that far removed from the original writings. In most cases, they are using manuscripts (hand written copies that descended directly from the original writings), which the science of textual criticism has shown to be very close to the originals.

Translations can be separated into two categories: those translated from the Erasmus Text, also known as the Textus Receptus, and those translated from modern Greek texts, which are compiled from all of the currently

available manuscripts. All translations basically use the same text to translate the Old Testament called the Masoretic Text, so the differences are all in the New Testament.

The Erasmus Text

In the 16th century, a man named Erasmus compiled and printed a copy of the Greek New Testament using all of the Greek manuscripts he could gather, mostly dated from the 12th century (about 1,000 years after the last book of the Bible was written). During the Reformation and for many years afterwards, the Erasmus text was the most widely used version of the Greek New Testament. Even now, there are several versions that are translated from the Erasmus Text including the King James Version, the New King James Version, and the Modern English Version.

Most contemporary people who use the Erasmus Text believe that it is the only accurate Greek New Testament. If you have ever heard that the King James Bible is the only accurate translation, its translation from the Erasmus Text is the basis for that argument. Most modern scholars, including most evangelical scholars and conservative scholars, reject that argument. While recognizing the Erasmus Text as a very important historical achievement that supported translation work for over two centuries, most scholars prefer modern Greek texts.

Modern Greek Texts

Most translations use a modern Greek New Testament like the United Bible Society's Greek New Testament. These Greek texts use all available Greek manuscripts, many of which have been discovered since Erasmus compiled his Greek New Testament and are much older, with some dating to the 2nd century AD (less than 100 years after the last book of the Bible was written). Through a careful process called textual criticism, these Greek texts attempt to uncover and correct errors resulting from the copying process, and the variant readings are included as footnotes.

One of the most amazing facts that supports the trustworthiness of God's Word is the similarity of the Erasmus Text and modern Greek texts. Despite different philosophies and strategies, and despite some sections that contain significant differences (like the short ending of Mark or the absence of John 7:53-8:11), modern Greek texts and the Erasmus text agree about 98% of the time.

The Goals and Philosophy of the Translation Committees

Every team of translators has different reasons for creating a new translation. Most translators have a target audience they are trying to reach, which impacts their translation strategy. Some translations are produced for theological reasons like correcting perceived errors of earlier translators, and some are produced for more practical reasons such as avoiding copyright issues. Many translations are produced just to provide a fresh reading of Scripture or to keep up with changes in the English language. The good news is most translations include a preface, which explains their goals and strategies.

Word for Word or Thought for Thought

One major strategic decision every translations team must make is the choice between a word for word strategy (often called formal equivalence) and a thought for thought strategy (often called dynamic equivalence). In other words, the translators must decide if they will translate each Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word into the corresponding English word or if they will try to capture each complete thought expressed in Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek and translate those into corresponding complete thoughts in the English language.

At first, it seems like a word for word translation is best, but anyone fluent in multiple languages knows that literal, word for word translations are sometimes inaccurate. Then again, at certain times, a terse accuracy comes from a word to word translation that gets lost with thought for thought translations. Furthermore, a

thought for thought strategy assumes the translators accurately know the thoughts expressed in the original languages.

A Spectrum of Strategies

Most translations are neither completely formal equivalence translations nor dynamic equivalence translations, but instead fall somewhere on a spectrum between the two extremes. A quick Internet search will produce a myriad of charts and diagrams that place translations on a scale, and most translations discuss their approach in the preface. Generally speaking, the more easy to read and modern a Bible sounds, the more its translators used a thought for thought strategy, and the more terse and formal a Bible sounds, the more its translators used a word for word strategy.

Which Translation is Most Accurate?

If one translation was clearly more accurate than all the others, this entire section on translations could be one sentence long—“The most accurate translation is the _____.” But, of course, it’s just not that simple. There are so many factors contributing to accuracy that it’s impossible to name one single translation as “most accurate.” Finding a very accurate translation, however, is not a hopeless task. If you ask scholars, professors, and pastors what they consider the most accurate translation, you will likely hear three or four answers over and over again— the English Standard Version, the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New King James Version, and some obscure version none of us has ever heard of! If you use one of those translations as your primary Bible, you are in good shape.

What Factors Other than Accuracy Should I Consider?

This section could really be titled, “What does accuracy mean anyway?” Every translation has some level of inaccuracy because it changes the original Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic words and syntax into words and syntax that are not Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic! In other words, the only way to read a completely accurate version of the Bible is to read the Bible in its original languages. Since most Christians cannot do that, we need translations, which put the Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic words and syntax into English words and syntax we can understand. So, I suggest that your translation is only accurate if you can understand it. Otherwise, if you read English words you don’t understand, you might as well read Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic words you don’t understand.

Here are four rules to follow when choosing a translation for reading and studying:

- Choose more than one translation. The translation you read might not be the translation you study. Or, if you read through the Bible each year, you might choose a different translation each year. Certainly when you are studying, you should reference several translations. By using a variety of translations, you will get the benefit of all of them and understand passages in a new light.
- If you are not a great reader, choose a translation that you can understand, but that also challenges your reading skills. In other words, it needs to be readable but challenging. This helps ensure accuracy, while also developing your skills as a reader.
- Use translations recommended or used by conservative, Bible teaching pastors whose sermons reveal a high view of Scripture. Such translations include, but are not limited to, the English Standard Version, the Holman Christian Standard Bible, the King James Version, the New American Standard Bible, the New International Version, and the New King James Version.
- Use the Internet to test drive a translation before purchasing a new Bible, and ask trusted pastors if they recommend the translation.

What is a Paraphrase?

According to etomonline.com, paraphrase means, “to tell in other words.” It comes from two Greek words that mean to tell beside or alongside. Think of parallel lines. They are not the same, but they are in the same

plane and are heading in the same direction. In the same way, a paraphrase tells the same story and heads in the same direction as a translation of Scripture, but it moves a little closer to the culture than a translation can while maintaining the accuracy of a translation. To understand the difference, compare Psalm 23:1-3 in the KJV, the ESV, and the Message (a paraphrase).

KJV

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

ESV

The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul. He leads me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The Message

God, my shepherd! I don't need a thing. You have bedded me down in lush meadows, you find me quiet pools to drink from. True to your word, you let me catch my breath and send me in the right direction.

The Message, a paraphrase, is similar to the KJV and ESV translations, but it is on a slightly different track.

Paraphrases can be very helpful devotional and even study tools, because they often give fresh perspective and breath to passages which have lost their impact due to familiarity or because they are difficult passages. In fact, the Message translation would have been helpful to me as a child who often read and even memorized Psalm 23. The first phrase, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want," always confused me because I was too young to even notice the semicolon. I could not understand, 1) why I should not want Jesus to be my shepherd, and 2) why it was ok to say that at church!

A good paraphrase, like the Message or the Living Bible, is like butter. It adds flavor and fun to a good meal, but too much of it causes problems. Just as it would be absurd to have butter as the main course of a meal, it is not a good idea to use a paraphrase as a main translation for devotional reading, study, or teaching.

A good translation is an important tool for studying the Bible. Invest the time to find an accurate translation you can understand, and learn about the strengths and weaknesses of your primary translation and other translations you reference. Use other translations to strengthen your study and understanding of Scripture, and even consider using a paraphrase occasionally.