

Dig Deeper With the Right Bible Translation

Have you ever asked yourself if you made the right choice when you purchased your last Bible? Did you feel you were sacrificing accuracy for readability—or vice versa—when deciding on a translation?

It's no wonder. A simple online search for comparisons of different Bible translations can uncover everything from controversy to claims of conspiracy. It can be a bit overwhelming to process all the points made in a comparison, much less come to a conclusion. However, the task becomes easier when you boil it down to a few key questions that can help you evaluate which translation best meets your needs.

1. What method of translation was used? There are three basic methods of Scripture translation. The first is word-for-word (sometimes called literal translation). Translations that fall into this category include the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the King James Version (KJV) and the New King James Version (NKJV).

The second method is thought-for-thought (sometimes referred to as dynamic translation). Translations that fall into this category include the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), the New International Version (NIV), the Contemporary English Version (CEV) and the New Living Translation (NLT).

Very loose translations called paraphrases make up the third category. These include The Living Bible and The Message.

2. Who did the translating? Some translations are done by individuals, some by nonprofit organizations and others by international teams. In general, the broader the group doing the translating, the better.

Another closely related aspect to consider is whether the translation has gained widespread acceptance in the Christian community. The person or group behind the translation may have a lot to do with its popularity—or lack thereof.

3. Which manuscripts did the translators use? Many of the handwritten original copies of the Bible were lost during the time of the early church, but quite a few have been discovered during the last three or four centuries. Translations can differ depending on which manuscripts and therefore which languages—Hebrew and Aramaic for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament—are being used as a primary source.

For example, the KJV was published in 1611 before many older manuscripts had been discovered. These older manuscripts are considered by some scholars as more reliable than the ones used for the translation authorized by England's King James I in 1611. For this reason, groups such as the International Bible Society (IBS) point out that the KJV may not be as accurate as modern translations such as the NIV.

With all that in mind, let's take a look at a few of today's offerings.

1. The Amplified Bible was published in 1965 with the goal of "amplifying" the meaning of the Greek and Hebrew words used in the original texts by providing several alternate readings. Though the system of brackets used for amplification sometimes

makes for fragmented reading, it is a literal translation that is considered a great study Bible.

2. The Contemporary English Version was published in 1995 by the American Bible Society. According to IBS, the goal of the 100 international scholars on the CEV translation team was to make it reader-friendly and understandable without causing it to sound childish. IBS describes this version as being written on a fifth-grade reading level.
3. God's Word, published in 1995 by Green Key Books, is a readable, accurate version that employs natural English expressions to convey the meaning of the original languages. Translated directly from the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts, it uses a linguistic translation method similar to that used by missionary translators today.
4. The King James Version, the most well-known version of the Bible, was produced by more than 50 scholars. IBS evaluates it as being written at a 12th-grade reading level.
5. The Living Bible, determined by IBS to be written on an eighth-grade reading level, was produced by Kenneth Taylor as a paraphrase of the American Standard Version. Though it has been popular because of its readability, it has also come under criticism for being too interpretive.
6. The Message, described by the IBS as "a highly colloquial and interpretive paraphrase" of the New Testament, was published in 1993 by NavPress. Written on an eighth-grade reading level, the goal, according to its introduction, was "not to render a word-for-word conversion of Greek into English, but rather to convert the tone, the rhythm, the events, the ideas, into the way we actually think and speak."
7. The New American Standard Bible was published by The Lockman Foundation in 1971. This nonprofit group formed a team of 32

scholars with the goal of producing a literal translation as close to the actual wording of the original texts as possible. IBS rates it at an 11th-grade reading level.

8. The New International Version was written on a seventh-grade reading level by an international group of more than 100 scholars. Published in 1978 by Zondervan, it is a thought-for-thought translation written with the goal of striking the perfect midpoint between literal translation and paraphrase.
9. The New Living Translation, published by Tyndale in 1996, is the result of the work of more than 90 interdenominational scholars. The goal was to revise The Living Bible, making it more accurate and thus moving it from the category of paraphrase to that of translation. IBS ranks it at a sixth-grade reading level.
10. The New Revised Standard Version was published in 1990 by Zondervan and estimated by IBS to be written at an eighth-grade reading level. It was written as a revision of the Revised Standard Version, which itself was a revision of the American Standard Version. The goal was to create a version based on the discovery of older biblical manuscripts and changes in English language usage.

When choosing a translation that's right for you, a simple comparison of the way each version phrases the same Scripture passage will shed light on the differences between them. Web sites such as provide easy access to this type of comparison.

Don't let the task overwhelm you. Do the research and decide what you are comfortable with. As one Web site puts it, "The most important thing about picking a Bible is finding one you will read!"

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