

Survey: Most Bible Readers Want Accurate Word-for-Word Translation

Most American Bible readers prefer word-for-word translations of the original Greek and Hebrew over thought-for-thought translations and value accuracy over readability.

That is the finding of a new study by LifeWay Research. A total of 2,000 Bible readers participated in the study through a demographically representative online panel. To qualify, participants had to read the Bible in a typical month either by themselves or as part of a family activity and not merely in a corporate setting.

When asked whether they prefer “word-for-word translations, where the original words are translated as exactly as possible” or “thought-for-thought translations, where the translators attempt to reproduce the intent of the original thought rather than translating the exact words,” 61 percent chose word-for-word.

That includes 33 percent who strongly prefer word-for-word translation and 28 percent who somewhat prefer it. In contrast, 20 percent prefer thought-for-thought, including 6 percent with a strong preference and 14 percent who somewhat prefer it. Fourteen percent say both translation philosophies are equally fine, and 5 percent are not sure.

Regarding accuracy, respondents were asked, “In general, what is more important to you in a Bible: total accuracy to the original words, or easy readability?” Three out of four (75 percent) opt for total accuracy, with 43 percent saying accuracy is much more important and 32 percent saying it is somewhat more important.

Fourteen percent say easy readability is somewhat more important, and 8 percent say it is much more important. Three percent are not sure.

“It is interesting to note that Bible sales do not necessarily follow these preferences,” said Scott McConnell, director of LifeWay Research. “Those reading the Bible each month represent only a portion of all Bible purchasers.

“Bible readers can share their preferences for different translation principles but may not be aware of which characteristics are present in specific translations—even the ones that they own. Without specific instruction most readers will not notice when a translation moves away from a literal or word-for-word translation.”

Respondents hold a variety of opinions regarding the style of language they prefer in a Bible translation for personal reading. Among them:

- 68 percent want language to be simpler to understand while 7 percent want it to be more difficult to understand.
- 81 percent say it should be more enjoyable to read while 4 percent prefer it to be more of a chore to read.
- 27 percent favor contemporary language while 46 percent want traditional language.
- 36 percent want more modern language while 37 percent favor more old-fashioned language.
- 19 percent feel understanding the language should require a higher level of education while 49 percent say it should not require a higher level of education.
- 63 percent believe it should be simple for anyone to understand while 14 percent say the language should be meant more for people who have a lot of experience with the Bible.
- 40 percent prefer more formal language while 26 percent say should be more informal.

- 22 percent want language more for casual reading while 44 percent say it should be designed more for in-depth study.

“In the same way drivers want big, powerful, fuel-efficient vehicles, Bible readers want word-for-word translations that are easy to understand,” said McConnell. “As translators try to cross the globe and two millennia, fully accomplishing both is not always possible.”

The survey also asked about translation of God’s name. Though many Bible versions translate God’s name in the Old Testament as “the LORD,” others prefer using what is believed to be the original pronunciation, “Yahweh.”

Nearly eight in 10 Bible readers (79 percent) prefer the traditional translation “the LORD” over the original pronunciation “Yahweh.”

That includes 51 percent who strongly prefer “the LORD” and 27 percent who somewhat prefer it. Seven percent somewhat prefer “Yahweh” while 6 percent strongly prefer it. Eight percent are not sure which they favor.

Bible readers are overwhelmingly opposed to gender-neutral translations of Scripture. A full 82 percent prefer a literal translation of masculine words that describe people in general rather than a more inclusive translation like “humankind” or “person.”

Study participants were told: “Bible translators have to make choices regarding gender issues. For example, the original Greek and Hebrew versions of the Bible often uses masculine words such as those literally meaning ‘man’ to describe people in general. Some translators think these should be translated literally as ‘man’ while others think they should be translated into gender-inclusive terms such as ‘humankind,’ ‘human being,’ ‘person’ or ‘one.’ Which do you prefer?”

A majority (53 percent) strongly prefer literal translation while 29 percent somewhat prefer the literal rendering. Only 9 percent somewhat prefer gender-inclusive translation, and 3 percent strongly prefer it. Six percent are not sure.

Bible readers are even more adamant about not making references to God gender-inclusive.

They were told, "Another issue Bible translators face relates to references to God as 'father' in the Greek and Hebrew. Some translators think these should be translated literally as 'father' while others think they should be translated into gender-inclusive terms such as 'parent.' Do you prefer the literal or more gender-inclusive?"

In response, 89 percent want a literal translation of gender-specific references to God, including 68 percent who strongly prefer literal translation and 21 percent who somewhat prefer literal translation. Five percent somewhat prefer gender-inclusive translation, and 2 percent strongly prefer gender-inclusive translation. Four percent are not sure.

"The places in the Bible in which the inspired writers used masculine words for God, a large majority of Bible readers want translators to use masculine words as well," noted McConnell. "This is true regardless of whether the reader describes their own spiritual beliefs as liberal or conservative."