

Explained: Why There Are So Many Different Bible Translations

“I rejoice at Your word, as one who finds great plunder” (Ps. 119:162).

If I had to make an educated guess, I’d have to say that most of the people reading this post aren’t fluent in Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic. Neither am I. The problem is, those are the original languages of the Bible, which means in order to understand God’s word to us, we need a translation.

Having the best possible translations of Scripture is important because it helps us to hear God most clearly and therefore know Jesus most intimately. By way of analogy, if Jesus were to call us on our cell phone, we would want to have the best possible coverage so as to hear him most clearly. In some ways, a good Bible translation is like good cell phone coverage—it offers the most effective communication.

The third step in getting the Bible from God to you is translation. Translation occurs in service to people who want to read the books of the Bible but are not familiar with the original language in which they were written (Hebrew, Greek or Aramaic). Teams of language-theory scholars carefully undertake the painstaking process of translating the original languages into the languages of other peoples. Today, the Bible has been carefully translated into nearly 3,000 languages. Though the thought of a translation may concern some people, the fact is that most of Western literature has also been translated—because we don’t use their original languages either. The first translation of the English Bible was initiated by John Wycliffe and completed by John Purvey in A.D. 1388.

The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature.

In translating the Bible into English, four general categories of translation are most common: word-for-word, thought-for-thought, paraphrases and corruptions. The same four options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

Word-for-word (also known as literal translations) make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from the original Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic into English. Word-for-word translations emphasize God, the divine author of Scripture, over the human reader of Scripture. The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows or contracts. Word-for-word translations are generally at a high-school reading level.

Word-for-word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. Among the most popular word-for-word translations are the English Standard Version (ESV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the New King James Version (NKJV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word-for-word translation, but because of its use of archaic English, it is very difficult for some people to read. The NASB was widely regarded as the most scholarly word-for-word translation until the arrival of the ESV. It did not become widely popular, however, because of its tight copyright and sometimes stiff translation of poetry that lost some of the beauty of the original writings. Thankfully, the ESV has preserved the degree of accuracy present in the NASB while also doing a better job of translating the poetic parts of Scripture in a more fluid manner. More recently, the Modern English Version (MEV) has also been released as a word-for-word translation that is easy to read. The philosophy of word-for-word translation guided virtually every English Bible

translation until the middle of the 20th century. At that time, thought-for-thought translation became popular.

Thought-for-thought (also known as dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence) translations attempt to convey the full nuance of each passage by interpreting the Scripture's entire meaning and not just the individual words. Thought-for-thought translations may include words that were not included in the original text in an effort to give the same meaning that the reader of the original languages would have had.

The best and most widely read thought-for-thought English translation is the New International Version (NIV). Other thought-for-thought translations include Today's New International Version (TNIV), New Living Translation (NLT), Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Bible (GNB). The benefit of thought-for-thought translations in general, and the NIV, my favorite thought-for-thought translation, in particular, is that they are easy to understand and make the Bible accessible to a wide number of people.

Going one step further than thought-for-thought translations are paraphrases, which combine both Scripture and interpretive commentary into the translation method.

Paraphrases pay even less attention to specific word meanings than thought-for-thought translations in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. For this reason, many paraphrased translations do not even have verse divisions in them. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message (MSG), The Living Bible (TLB) and The Amplified Bible (AMP).

Corruptions are "translations" of Scripture that clearly seek to undermine the teaching of Scripture. These "translations" are very poor and should not be used as credible translations for study. These include the Jehovah's Witness translation

called the New World Translation, which was written in large part to eliminate the deity of Jesus Christ.

Do you have a favorite Bible story, verse, or character? {eo}

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