

English Translations of the Bible

People often ask – or make a declaration – about what is the best English translation of the Bible. No translation is perfect or always best. To understand why, we have to consider a few aspects of translation.

Translation Approach. Some translations try to convey the idea of a passage, without worrying about individual words or phrases; these are called a paraphrase [e.g., The Message]. These are the easiest translations to read, and might convey the biblical ideas well, but they are not trying to convey the very words of God and are weak for study purposes. In contrast, some translations translate each word carefully, while trying to stick as closely as possible to the word order and grammar of the ancient language; these use “formal equivalence” [e.g. NASB, NKJV, NRSV]. No translation always sticks with the Greek or Hebrew word order, because it would make no sense in English: word order is fairly standardized in English [subject – verb – direct object – indirect object, for example], but in ancient Greek and Hebrew words could be moved around for emphasis. Many love formal equivalence translations, because they do allow us to sometimes convey the emphasis lost in other translations [compare Ephesians 2.8 in the NASB and NLT; which shows the Greek emphasis Paul put on grace?]. The problem with these translations is they often result in stilted English or even sentences which are hard to comprehend, and they sometimes do not convey the full meaning of a word or phrase if that would require more English words.

Other translations take a middle ground, trying to translate the meaning of each phrase or sentence as clearly in English as is possible; these are called “dynamic equivalence” [e.g., NIV, NET, NLT]. Within this group, there are a variety of styles, with some being closer to formal equivalence [NIV] and others being closer to a paraphrase [NLT]. Many in this category use formal equivalence whenever it makes sense, but loosen to dynamic equivalence when clarity requires it. The ESV mostly is a direct copy of the RSV, which uses formal equivalence, but about 10% was edited using dynamic equivalence. One advantage to dynamic equivalence is that it can convey the biblical phrase both accurately and clearly, especially when a single Greek or Hebrew word requires more than one English word for complete translation. It also allows the translators to interpret hints in the original language. For example, the Greek participle [-ing verb forms in English] usually does not have helper words as they do in English, so in formal equivalence we just get the participle itself [“knowing” in 1 Peter 5.9 NASB], but in dynamic equivalence the translators use the syntax to help translate the fuller meaning of the Greek [“because you know” in NIV]. This strength can be a weakness too, because the translators make determinations on these things, rather than leaving it up to the reader [consider the NLT for 1 Peter 5.9, which starts a new sentence, thus breaking the connection between resisting Satan and knowing others are in the same boat].

Readability. Each translation is written to a target reading level. Some are at an elementary school level [CEV; NCV; NIrV], some at a middle school level [NIV; NLT], and some at a high school level [NASB; NRSV; ESV]. The NKJV usually gets ranked at a middle school level, but it uses big theological terms, which many middle school students would not know. Each translation also makes decisions about the style of English it will use. The KJV, even though it has experienced hundreds of changes over the years, still largely relies on a style and word usage that are not common today. If you did not grow up with the KJV, you could not understand it well [and many who did grow up with it and think they do understand it are making mistakes as they interpret the ancient English words!]. Most modern translations are up to date with word usage and sentence style, but there still is a great variety: the more dynamic the translation, the closer they can get to how people talk today, but perhaps the more they move away from considering the best translation of each Greek or Hebrew word. Another factor is how a translation handles idioms. Compare the literal “gird up the loins of your minds” [KJV] with “get your minds ready for action” [NET] for 1 Peter 1.13. Without study of customary usage in the first century, how are you to know what “girding up your loins” means, let alone “girding up the loins of your minds”?

Manuscript Basis. We do not have any original copies of the Hebrew [and Aramaic] Old Testament or the Greek New Testament, but we have a great deal of manuscript evidence for what they said. All the popular English translations are based on the same Hebrew/Aramaic manuscript, called the Leningrad Codex. This copy of the Old Testament dates to the year AD1008. There are over three thousand hand-written Hebrew copies of the Old Testament, but almost all of them were copied after the Leningrad Codex. Most importantly, Old Testament copies among the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date to around the time of Jesus, largely agree with the Leningrad Codex. Old Testament translators start with the Leningrad Codex, and then consider any variations in the other [especially earlier] manuscripts as they translate.

We have almost six thousand ancient Greek New Testament manuscripts, dating back to the first century. We also have thousands of early translations into other languages and thousands of quotations of Scripture in the writings of the early church. Most translators believe in analyzing this manuscript evidence and tracing any variations as they occurred through time, to determine what the earliest and most original wording must have been. This process results in a “critical” or “eclectic” Greek text, which gets translated into English. Most modern translations rely on the critical text known as the Nestle-Aland. This text gets updated from time to time, as new manuscripts are discovered. Some scholars rely on what is known as the “majority text,” which uses a different method of determining the Greek text when there are differences in the manuscripts, relying on which variant occurs the most often. The problem with this is that it is biased toward a group of writings that were “mass produced” in the Byzantine Empire and are thought by most scholars to contain the most errors. The KJV was based on a Greek text put together by Erasmus. This text was very inaccurate, relying on only a handful of manuscripts, most of them now known to be relatively inaccurate copies. Despite all the progress in manuscript evidence and analysis, the NKJV largely relies on the textual basis of the KJV. The differences in approach explains why the KJV and NKJV have some verses that other translations lack: when we trace the manuscript evidence through time, we see that scribes tended to add to the text; sometimes this was to purposefully clarify something, other times it was inadvertent copying of a margin note into the text, and at other times they would include information from two or more variants rather than choose between them. Because the KJV and NKJV are based on later manuscripts, they contain many of these additions which do not appear in earlier manuscripts.

Date of Translation. Previously lost Greek manuscripts of the New Testament are found every year. An older translation cannot consider that evidence. Also, our understanding of Greek and Hebrew continues to develop, especially the form of Greek used in Bible times, called κοινή [koy-NAY] Greek or common Greek. This is because we have only in the last few decades found and studied thousands of every-day documents which were preserved in the desert, and which help us understand word usage in this form of Greek. Older translations usually will have more mistakes in translating specific words, because they cannot take advantage of recent developments in our understanding. For example, we used to think μονογενής [mah-nah-geh-NACE] meant “only begotten,” but now we know it means “one and only.” Similarly, we now know that the plural of the word for “brother” in Greek, ἀδελφοί [uh-del-FOY], can mean “brothers and sisters”; this disturbs some traditionalists, but it should not, since we know the word also can mean “associates” or “fellow members,” which could include women as well.

The Best. There is no best Bible for all purposes, all people, or all verses. If your desire is to read a little each day, then find a modern translation which you can enjoy reading and understand easily [perhaps NLT or NIV₂₀₁₁]. You might consider one with study notes if you are new to Bible study [e.g., the NIV comes packaged as the *NIV Life Application Bible* by Tyndale or the *NIV Study Bible* by Zondervan]. If you want to study deeply, and you use other tools such as commentaries and Bible dictionaries, you should have at least two translations, preferably one that is formal equivalence [e.g. NASB; ESV] and one that is dynamic equivalence [e.g. NIV₂₀₁₁; NLT], so you can compare how they translate each phrase. NET has thousands of translation notes, if you like that. You also can compare many translations at websites such as net.bible.org, www.biblegateway.com/versions, or www.biblestudytools.com.