

WHICH BIBLE TRANSLATION IS THE BEST?

The Bible: It tops the best seller lists every year; nothing beats it or even comes close. World sales of the Bible are more than 100 million every year; from 1815 to 1975 more than 2.5 BILLION were sold! But I am asked many times, “Which version of the Bible is the best?” Some are confused as to how to choose a Bible today with literally hundreds of types, styles and versions to choose from.

You will often hear people tout one version of the Bible over another as superior, more readable, more literal or a better translation than another. In 1950, the King James, or Authorized, Version of the Bible, was considered by many to be the only reliable translation and choosing a Bible simply involved selecting the binding and color. Today, dozens of English translations are available. So, how does one decide which is best?

While there are many good translations available to us today, let it first be said that three versions account for probably 90% or more of all Bibles sold worldwide: the New International Version (NIV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the familiar King James Versions (KJV), including the New King James Version (NKJV). This is not to say other versions have no merit; there are several others I could add to this list that are commendable (the New Century Version, the English Standard Version, the International Children’s Version, etc). However, these three versions listed above have outsold all the other versions put together for a reason: they are reliable, accurate, readable, and are more than reasonably faithful to the original languages.

But which of these three versions (NIV, NASB, KJV/NKJV) is best? Which one (or ones) should you buy, read and study from? Why are there differences between them at all? To answer some of these questions and others, I will try to explain where these translations came from, their strengths and weakness and an overall summary. This is not meant to be an exhaustive or comprehensive research critique, only a brief comparison to help you decide on which translation may best meet your personal needs.

- The *New International Version* (NIV) completed in 1978, was the product of 115 evangelical scholars from such English-speaking countries as the USA, England, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. The NIV is the best-selling English language Bible today and has been since its introduction 30-plus years ago. Over 300 million have been sold since 1978. The version is trans-denominational in character; the translators came from many denominations, including Baptist, Brethren, Church of Christ, Episcopalian, Lutheran, Mennonite, Methodist, Nazarene, Presbyterian, Christian Reformed, and others. Its New Testament is based on the United Bible Society’s Greek text. Its language is easy to read, and its accuracy is well respected. This is a great Bible for family devotions as well as pulpit and study use.

Drs. Kubo and Specht, in their book So Many Versions? 20th Century English Versions of the Bible (Zondervan: 1983), summarize their findings:

“In conclusion, one must say that the NIV translation is, on the whole, accurate and clear. It is a monument of Christian scholarship at its best. . . it is dependable and straightforward....it will have wide usage, particularly by conservative Christians.”

Today’s New International Version (TNIV), published in 2005 amid much controversy, sought to be a language update of the NIV. This translation attempts to be more gender-neutral in its language than the NIV, but does not compromise the masculine nature of God the Father. However, it does violate the genders that are clearly found in the original texts in the interest of not offending. For this reason it has not been widely accepted among the academic community or the reading public. It was discontinued in 2011 for lack of sales and acceptance and is no longer available.

- The *New American Standard Bible*, orig. 1971; updated 1995 (NASB95) was produced by 54 conservative Protestant scholars sponsored by the Lockman Foundation. This version is quite literal in vocabulary and word order, although the resulting English is quite stilted. The original Greek flows like a river of honey (esp. Paul’s writings); the NASB is about as smooth as 60-grit sandpaper at times. The NASB is also known for paying close attention to tenses of words. The older *New American Standard Bible* of 1977 (originally

completed in 1971) is almost as good as the NASB95, except that it oddly reverts back to archaic English in the Psalms and in the language of prayer (unlike the original languages which make no such distinctions) and is a little harder to read. The original 1977 NASB also uses approximately *twice* as many footnotes as the NIV that begin with the words, “literally, ...” It would seem appropriate for a version that claims to be the most literal version available to have the *literal* wording in the text, not in a footnote!

- The **King James Version** (KJV), sometimes called the *Authorized Version* (AV, inasmuch as the original commissioning of the work was “*authorized*” by then King of England, James) was quite revolutionary when it came out in 1611. The KJV that is in print today differs markedly from the original in content, size, typography, spelling, punctuation, and vocabulary. In fact, the first edition even contained the Old Testament Apocrypha! Editions, revisions and corrections occurred in 1612, 1613, 1629, 1638, 1653, 1675, 1762, 1769 and 1789. This latest edition, according to Dr. Edgar Johnson Goodspeed (1871-1962) of the University of Chicago, differed from the 1611 edition in at least 75,000 details! Nonetheless, the KJV is still very popular, in spite of its archaic and difficult to understand language. Indeed, there is an almost cult-like following of this translation that claim that this is the only *true* Word of God, superior even to the original languages! While that claim is bizarre, there are a vociferous few people who still hold to that opinion.

So what is wrong with the good old King James Version? It probably is the most beautiful, elegant, literary English translation that will ever be produced. Modern translations usually lack the poetry of the King James because modern biblical scholars are more scientists and scholars than artists.

Nevertheless, there are two major problems with the King James Version, and subsequently, the New King James Version. First of all, when it was translated in 1611, there were relatively few Hebrew and Greek manuscripts available and they tended to be recent and less accurate. The KJV New Testament (NT) is based on the Greek text known as the *Textus Receptus* (TR). The printed editions used by the famous 47 translation scholars who produced the KJV were, according to the best evidence available, Theodore de Beza’s 4th ed. of 1598, and Robert Stephanus’s 4th ed. of 1551. Both of these were revisions of the editions of Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam who edited the first Greek text to be published in Basel in 1516. In editing his New Testament, Erasmus, of course, could only use the manuscripts available to him. He used less than half a dozen, and these were from the late Middle Ages. Scholars admit “that the *Textus Receptus* is a somewhat corrupt form of the traditional type of text” (Dr. Martin). In the nearly 400 years since then literally tens of thousands more manuscripts (abbreviated MSS) have been discovered, ranging from small portions of Scripture to complete copies of the Old or New Testaments. Many of these are very early and more accurate.

Secondly, the English in the King James Version is not at all the same language spoken today. Both the vocabulary and grammar have changed considerably. As a result, a reader often must retranslate the King James into modern English in his or her mind. For many people, especially children, reading the King James Version is like reading a foreign language.

- The **New King James Version** (NKJV), which came out in 1982 as publishers saw sales slipping away to the modern translations, is good for those who are used to the KJV, but want something in Modern English. The New Testament is still based on the *Textus Receptus*, but has footnotes where the United Bible Society and Majority Text differ. This is the Bible many pastors like to preach from, especially those whose congregations were raised on the old KJV Bible. Unfortunately, from a translator’s standpoint, the NKJV winds up being a translation of a translation with no substantial reference to any of the most recent (since 1611, that is) scholarship, MSS or archaeology (like the Dead Sea Scrolls or tens of thousands of pieces of manuscript evidence discovered since 1611).

Other less well-known versions are treated briefly below:

- **The Amplified Bible** (AMP) is excellent for detailed study of a passage. It seeks to reveal the full richness of the underlying Greek and Hebrew. I find that often their “amplification” is simply a list of English synonyms instead of offering legitimate insights into the original languages. This version isn't really good for reading aloud (because of its punctuation and wordiness; e.g., their amplification of the repeated “Blessed”s in the Sermon on the Mount will drive you crazy), but I recommend that you get one for study to set along side one of the other translations.

- The *New Living Translation* (NLT), published in 1996, is the product of 90 Bible scholars from around the world, from various theological backgrounds and denominations. This version is a thought-for-thought translation that seeks to retain the readability of The Living Bible, but with greater accuracy and fidelity to the original languages. It really splits the difference nicely between a paraphrase and a literal translation, thus making it a good devotional Bible and a not-so-good study Bible.
- The *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) is another hybrid Modern/Archaic English Bible (archaic in the Psalms and in prayer, as if God only spoke Elizabethan English). It is pretty well trusted, though. Respectable, though it has fallen from favor with the buying public since the NIV came out.
- The *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) - published in 1989 by the liberal National Council of Churches revises the Revised Standard Version of 1952. While following the literal tradition of the RSV, the NRSV eliminates much of the archaic language. One distinctive is the use of gender inclusive pronouns to replace male pronouns when the original writers meant both men and women. The NRSV does not change masculine pronouns referring to God, however. In this respect, the translators have done much the same as the NIV to TNIV did.
- The *New Century Version* (NCV) is a fairly free translation that reads like a newspaper. It is targeted at the 3rd grade reading level and has an acceptable balance between literalism and paraphrase.
- The *Contemporary English Version* (CEV) is a completely new translation published by the American Bible Society in 1995. Originally intended as a children's translation, it uses a very simple, contemporary style. It is independent of traditional translations and freer of "biblical" terms. This is an especially good translation for people who speak English as a second language. It is aimed at a 3rd grade reading level, but I think it is really more like 2nd grade level. If you don't mind calling Passover "The Feast of Thin Bread," it's OK.
- The *English Standard Version* (ESV) is an "essentially new literal translation" that follows the tradition of the King James, American Standard, and Revised Standard Versions. Published in 2001 by Crossway, it was developed by a translation team of more than 100 scholars, with the goal of being very accurate (word for word), and yet very readable. Breaking into the same market as the well-established and widely accepted NIV has been difficult; so far it has been met with a lackluster response from the buying public.
- *Today's English Version* (TEV), completed in 1976, was translated by Robert G. Bratcher with six other scholars. Since 1976 over 118 million have been sold. This very free, though fairly accurate, translation avoids the use of traditional biblical vocabulary and communicates especially well with youth and the unchurched. Published by the American Bible Society.
- *New Jerusalem Bible* (NJB) of 1985 revised and updated the text and notes of the Jerusalem Bible of 1966. This version, translated by two Catholic scholars, is an elegant, literary rendering (perhaps the most poetic since the KJV). The notes reflect a modern, rather liberal (as opposed to conservative) perspective.

One of the biggest changes in the late 20th century was the appearance of Bibles that were much less literal in their translation style, a translation technique known as dynamic equivalence. This was led by the introduction of The Living Bible, published by its author, Kenneth Taylor in 1971. Taylor had begun quite simply because of the trouble his children had in understanding the literal (and sometimes archaic) text of the King James Version of the Bible. His work was at first intended for children, but then he wondered if he could also make it easier for adults to understand the whole Bible. He took as his basis the literal American Standard Version of 1901, and what he produced was a dramatic departure from the King James Version. It proved to be a watershed in Bible translations, awaking the world to the advantages of dynamic equivalence.

- *The Living Bible* (TLB), completed in 1971, is Kenneth N. Taylor's paraphrase of the ASV that sacrifices accuracy for readability. Easy to read and once immensely popular, it is often criticized for adding too much commentary to the biblical text. Sometimes it makes a point pretty well, though. The "flashlight" (versus "a lamp unto my feet") in Psalms 119:105 seems a bit too colloquial, though.
- *The Message* is a paraphrase that claims to be a translation; it is not. Eugene Peterson completed this paraphrase of the entire Bible in 2002. The author takes great liberties with words in his attempt to effectively communicate both the original thoughts and tone of the Scripture, as he sees it. It is very earthy

(some would say gritty, or even coarse), and is a sometimes helpful commentary, but not very accurate in the sense of a word-for-word translation.

- The *New Testament Picture Bible* is currently the number one selling children's picture Bible. *The Beginner's Bible* is aimed at 3-8 year olds and the *Teen Study Bible* is currently the best selling Bible for kids 12-15 years of age. All of these necessarily sacrifice literal translation for readability and should serve as primers for a more literal translation as the children mature.
- Actually, there are so many good translations that it is easier to list the ones to avoid: the *New World Translation*, the official "Bible" of the Jehovah's Witnesses, is notoriously inaccurate, and systematically seeks to rob Jesus of His Deity. See John 1:1 for an example, where the NWT renders "a god" instead of "God". Their adulteration of the original languages is horrific and is laughable as well as spurious to scholars. *The New Testament and Psalms, an Inclusive Version* is politically correct to the point of heresy. Avoid those.

So which is for ME?

Which brings us to the numerous modern translations. Most of these have been produced by fine scholars using the many thousands of manuscripts available today. Different translations are better for different purposes.

If you are interested in serious *study* of the Bible, including grammar and vocabulary, you will want a more literal translation, such as the New International Version, the King James Version, the English Standard Version, or New American Standard. However, it is always good to compare several translations, especially for passages that are difficult to understand. If you are interested in *reading* the Bible in large blocks, you may prefer one of the freer translations (not necessarily less accurate), such as the New Living Translation, or Contemporary English Version. If you are most accustomed to the KJV of the Bible, but want a more modern rendition, the New King James Bible (NKJV) is probably for you.

May I just say a word about the Bible itself? Those who claim the Bible is full of contradictions generally only find them because they don't really read what the Bible actually says in its own context or in comparison to other passages in cross reference. To really read the Bible to find out what it means, you need to read with the following questions in mind:

1. What does the text say? (observation): the text had a specific writer writing to a specific audience in a particular situation; acknowledge the history, culture, and background.
2. What does it mean? (interpretation): for all Scripture there is but ONE interpretation; many applications, but don't confuse the two! A right interpretation must precede a proper application.
3. How does it apply to me? (application); what lessons can I learn; how can I benefit from their mistakes? Are there positive examples I can follow? Negative examples I should avoid? Are there broad principles I can apply to my life or my situation? What is God trying to say to me?

The following guidelines are helpful in proper Bible reading:

1. Scripture interprets Scripture. If an idea you get from one verse is out of line with the rest of what the Bible says, you need to re-evaluate what you *thought* that verse said. "*Let everything be established by two or three witnesses*" before you make a doctrine of something.
2. Be literal where possible -- what it says, it means.
3. Consider the form of the writing in each section (i. e. historical, narrative, parable, poetry, teaching, prediction of the future, etc.).
4. Consider grammar and history. This means understanding how natural languages work in general, and at least something of how the original languages of the Bible work. It also means that it is helpful to understand something of the history, culture, customs, geography, etc., of the original audience and writer.

Finally, the version of the Bible that is best for you is the one that you will read, understand and apply to your life. Which of the best three translations do you feel most comfortable with? Use that one! And may God bless you RICHLY for it!