

Nothing But the Best Bible Translations

When you become a Christian, everyone suggests three immediate steps: prayer, Bible study and a Bible-believing church. As part of the Bible interpretation series we are answering the question, “What is the best Bible translation?” There are many translations in English. Let’s take a look at some of these factors.

Three Types of Bible Versions

Word for Word (Formal Equivalence FE) – These are the best for studying, word studies and original meaning. Translators give the closest meaning of words and phrases. Many FE translations are choppy and wooden. Some examples include KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV, RSV.

Concept for Concept (Dynamic Equivalence DE) – A more readable possibility focuses on concepts in the Bible. Instead of using a pronoun (he, she, it) these translations may put a name or noun being referenced. The text flows for quicker reading. The goal is understanding concepts rather than deep study. For example, the KJV translates John 3:16 “for God so loved the world that he gave his **only begotten** son” while the NIV translates “for God so loved the world that he gave his **one and only** son.” Each translation will try to help you understand different facets of the word. The KJV translates the term literally as “only begotten,” but the NIV translates the concept as meaning unique, or “one and only.” A word study will help observe the differences in translation. Examples include NIV, TNIV, NCV, and NLT, etc.

Paraphrase – A paraphrase is less tied to the text than a DE, and not a translation but a version. It may completely change the word or concept in favor of a more culturally understood meaning. For instance, the Promised Land flowed with milk and honey, two sweet commodities in the ancient world. A paraphrase might say the Promised Land flowed with soda and chocolates. A paraphrase helps readers experience the text in a culturally-sensitive way. Paraphrases do not require the reader to understand historical and cultural contexts. Paraphrases may not be understood by other cultures or generations. Examples include The Message, the Word on the Street Bible and others.

A Note about Translating

Most people are unaware of the translation process. Any translation between languages creates several issues, such as different approaches of languages. Each language has its goal of one pages own sentence structures and nuances. Each culture focuses on its own method of communication. For instance, Hebrew conveys stories and poetry excellently, words creating concrete word pictures. Greek excels in details. There are four words for “love,” each with slight nuances.

English uses a word order for sentences (subject, verb, predicate). However, there is no word order in Greek and Hebrew uses a verb, subject, predicate sentence model. If the translator

translated literally in Greek, we would not even know the subject in English. A translator must slightly interpret to make sense in English. When translators translate live on TV, they take breaks while the person is still talking, arranging the words into a meaningful English sentence.

Another issue is that the English reader is at the translator's mercy. If the translator uses uncommon English words, the reader will not understand. Moreover, an English reader cannot examine the original text. They rely on the translator to select its most accurate meaning.

The English reader unknowledgeable of biblical cultural background and history will struggle with the Bible. No translation is "perfect," meaning the reader will completely understand the original author. Translation is only the first step in helping the reader understand the text.

Three Types of Reading

Devotional Reading – During devotional reading a reader is focused on driving the Bible's surface meaning and application. Usually no further steps are taken other than to find meaning according to the reader's situation.

Topical/Textual Reading – Usually through devotional reading, a word or concept sparks interest. Research of a word or concept requires closer attention, referencing details and collecting uses of that concept or word in other passages. More intensive study yields closer meaning and application.

Focused/Detailed Reading – studying a paragraph or two, the reader searches the meaning of the passage by deeply studying every word, phrase, sentence, concept and idea. The reader then studies his culture, history, theological meaning, idioms, sentence structure and thought flow.

Three Concerns for Translations

Committee Versus Individual – Every translation is either composed by a person or committee. Committees and individuals use translational methods governing translations. Committees are a better option because they check one another's work, providing a text with less mistakes.

Doctrinal Leanings – Even a committee translation will have a doctrinal leaning. Most scholars chosen for the committee will have a doctrinal position. Some translations are purposefully translated for denominations. The preface or introductory remarks should explain the translational purpose and method. Be aware of doctrinal stances as you study.

Reading Level – Also found in the introductory remarks or preface, reading levels will help you choose a translation you can best understand. For instance, illustrated Bibles help children understand better. Many translations are aimed at 6th–8th grade reading levels, others at collegiate levels. A sixth grader may not understand the word "propitiation" but "sacrifice" is clearer. Illiteracy has been the biggest challenge to communicating God's word. Choosing a reading level has little to do with intelligence but much to do with understanding God's word.

The Best Fits You

Having access to God's word is the point of Bible translation. The best translation is the one that works for you. Consider your situation. Are you reading the Bible devotionally or are you studying it for the author's original meaning? Perhaps you wish to have two Bibles, one for reading during church services and another at home for study.

Many will tout a certain translation as better than others. Everything depends on your purpose and understanding of the Bible. Along with reading the Bible, a great method for understanding is studying in groups and asking questions of one another and the text, especially with an experienced group leader.