

Church History and Evidences
Notes: Comparing the different English Bible Versions

All sources and excerpts have been slightly edited [By Michael McCleary] for the sake of cohesion.

I. Why So Many Versions?

Since 1895 many archeological and manuscript discoveries have been made which have which have pronounced judgment on some of the renderings found in the King James. The single most important discovery was that of the Egyptian papyri. In 1895, Adolf Deissmann published a volume, given the unassuming title, Bible Studies (Bibelstudien), which revolutionized NT scholarship. Deissmann discovered that ancient papyrus scraps, buried in Egyptian garbage dumps some 2,000 years ago, contained Greek which was quite similar to the Greek of the NT. He concluded that the Greek of the NT was written in the common language of the day. It was not the dialect which only the most elite could understand. Since Deissmann's discovery, translators have endeavored to put the NT into language the average person could comprehend--just as it was originally intended. Not only that but the papyri have helped us to understand many words--words which were only guessed at by King James translators.

There are two implications of what Deissmann did for the Bible translations:

- First, if the apostles wrote in easy-to-understand terms, then translations of the Bible should reflect this. We ought not to translate with big 50-cent religious-sounding words if the original was not written that way. The King James word 'propitiation,' for example, basically means 'satisfaction'--that is, God is satisfied with Christ's payment for our sins. Our Lord's final word from the cross, "It is finished," has been found on papyrus business documents--on receipts, if you will. It means "paid in full."
 - In other words, Bible translations need to be clear. One of the obvious proofs of this is that the gospel offends people. And it cannot be offensive unless it is understood!
- Second, the papyri discoveries have helped us to understand words which the King James translators merely guessed at. For example, in the King James version of John 3:16, the Greek word translated 'only begotten' really means 'one and only' or 'unique.' The Bible, then, does not say that Jesus was the begotten Son of God--which might suggest that he had a beginning--but that he is the unique Son of God. **[Editor's note: To be fair, this term is ONLY ever used in connection to children. However, the point as it pertains to Christ is valid; He is not a created being, He has always been, as the Father and the Spirit have been.]**

Finally, there have been philosophical influences. That is, the theory of translation is being revamped today. Missionaries have made a significant contribution toward this end--because they are eager to see a particular tribe read the Bible in its own language.

These differences--textual, informational, philosophical--have been the parents of a new generation of Bible translations. But are these translations any good? Are they any better than the King James?

II. The Text of Modern Translations

Where have all the verses gone? The modern translations seem to have cut out many of the most precious lines of Scripture. They end Mark's gospel at the 8th verse of chapter 16; they omit the reference of the angel of the Lord stirring the waters at the pool of Bethesda (verse 4 of John 5); and, most notably, they excise the story of the woman caught in adultery in John 8.

Besides omissions, these modern versions make significant changes in the text. For example, in I Timothy 3:16, the King James reads, "God was manifest in the flesh," but most modern translations read, "He was manifest in the flesh." In Revelation 22:19 the King James speaks of the "book of life" while virtually all modern versions speak of the "tree of life." Altogether, there are hundreds of textual changes between the King James and modern translations.

In this brief space we will make a few observations:

- First, the textual changes in the modern translations affect no major doctrine. The deity of Christ, virgin birth, salvation by grace alone **[Editor's Note: salvation by grace alone is accurate in that we have been saved by grace "through faith" (Eph. 2:8-9), and faith requires obedience]**--and all the rest--are still intact. Though certain passages are omitted or changed, the doctrines are not.
- Second, the textual changes in these modern translations are based on the most ancient MSS of the Greek NT. These MSS date from early in the second century A.D. But the Greek texts behind the King James belong to a group of MSS--called the Byzantine text--which are much more recent. On the other hand, although these MSS are more recent, they comprise at least 80% of the 5000+ MSS of the NT that we presently have. It is theoretically possible that, at times, these MSS point to an early tradition as well. **[Editor's Note: Taking into account of the critical examination we've already done regarding the Byzantine and Alexandrian Text-types, the argument can also be made that the Byzantine text-type represents the original type of the New Testament, which was written in the Byzantine region and not Alexandrian.]**

III. Which Translation Is Best?

One of the best safeguards you can follow is to stay away from the sectarian translations or those done by an individual. The **New World Translation**, by the Jehovah's Witnesses, is the best-known sectarian translation. Translations by individuals include **Moffatt's**, **Weymouth's**, **J. B. Phillips**, **The Living Bible**, **Kenneth Wuest's Expanded Translation**, and the **Berkley New Testament**.

- **King James Version**

The King James Bible has with good reason been termed, "the noblest monument of English prose" (RSV preface). Above all its rivals, the King James Version has had the greatest impact in shaping the English language. It is a literary masterpiece. But, lest anyone wishes to revere it because it was "good enough for St. Paul," or some such nonsense, we must remember that the King James Bible of today is not the King James of 1611. It has undergone three revisions, incorporating more than 100,000 changes! Further, there are over 300 words in the King James that no longer mean what they meant in 1611. If one wishes to use a Bible that follows the same Greek and Hebrew texts as the King James, I recommend the **New King James Version**.

- **Revised Standard Version**

The RSV was completed in 1952 and was intended to be, in part, a revision of the King James. Of course, it used the ancient MSS of the NT, resulting in the omission of several verses and words. But the wording was still archaic. The RSV attempts to be a word-for-word translation where possible. The **NRSV** follows the same principle of translation, though has now become more "gender-inclusive" in its approach. At times this is very helpful; at other times, it is misleading.

- **New American Standard**

The NASB is something of an evangelical counterpart to the RSV. It, too, was intended to be something of a revision of the King James. There are three major differences between the RSV and the NASB: first, the NASB is less archaic in its wording. Second, its translators were more conservative theologically than the RSV translators. Third, because of the translators' desire to adhere as closely to the wording of the original, often this translation is stilted and wooden. Still, the NASB is probably the best word-for-word translation available today.

- **New English Bible**

The NEB was completed in 1971, after a quarter of a century of labor. It marks a new milestone in translation: it is not a revision, but a brand-new translation. It is a phrase-for-phrase translation. Unfortunately, sometimes the biases of the translators creep into the text. The **REB (Revised English Bible)** follows the same pattern: excellent English, though not always faithful to the Greek and Hebrew.

- **New International Version**

The NIV was published in 1978. It may be considered a counterpart to the NEB. It is more a phrase-for-phrase translation than a word-for-word translation, and the scholars were generally more conservative than those who worked on the NEB. I personally consider it the best phrase-for-phrase translation available today. However, its major flaw is in its simplicity of language. The editors wanted to make sure it was easy to read. In achieving this goal, they often sacrificed accuracy (in particular, in the NT, sentences are shortened, subordination of thought is lost, conjunctions are deleted).

- **New World Translation**

A word should be said about the New World Translation by the Jehovah's Witnesses. Due to the sectarian bias of the group, as well as to the lack of genuine biblical scholarship, I believe that the New World Translation is by far the worst translation in English dress. It purports to be word-for-word, and in most cases is slavishly literal to the point of being terrible English. But, ironically, whenever a sacred cow is demolished by the biblical writers themselves, the Jehovah's Witnesses twist the text and resort to an interpretive type of translation. In short, it combines the cons of both worlds, with none of the pros.

- **New English Translation**

The NET Bible (or New English Translation) has all the earmarks of a great translation. It may well be more accurate than the NASB, more readable than the NIV, and more elegant than either. In addition, the notes are genuine gold mine of information, unlike those found in any other translation. **[Editor's Note: After a cursory examination the NET, there doesn't seem to be anything significantly different to that of the NKJV aside from sounding weird given its modern language. However, proceed with caution as this is a very new version and there may be something not accurately translated (given the inaccuracy of modern English) which may lead to inaccurate application. More study of the NET is needed). A major update is coming to it this year.]**

- **New Living Translation (NLT)**

Tyndale House Publishers launched the New Living Translation (NLT) in 1996, a revision of the Living Bible. Like many other translations, it took seven years to produce. The goal was to communicate the meaning of the ancient texts as accurately as possible to the modern reader. Ninety biblical scholars labored to make the text fresher and more readable, conveying whole thoughts in everyday language rather than translating word by word.

- **English Standard Version (ESV)**

The English Standard Version (ESV) was first published in 2001 and is considered an "essentially literal" translation. One hundred scholars produced it based on faithfulness to the historic orthodox text. They delved into the meanings of the Masoretic text, consulting the Dead Sea Scrolls and other sources. It's extensively footnoted to elaborate on why the text choices were made. They meet every five years to discuss revisions.

IV. Does translation philosophy really matter?

Most people believe that different Bible translations are simply a function of varying levels of readability, though all are roughly similar in accuracy. Translations are not equal in accuracy, and "readability" may come at the expense of precision to God's words and therefore His message.

Before the middle of the 20th century there was only one basic philosophy of Bible translation: “word-for-word” or “formal equivalence.” This translation philosophy placed a premium on making the original languages transparent to the reader to the extent that English grammar would allow. This translation theory is grounded in 2 essential facts.

1. Plenary (Verbal) Inspiration -the fact that God inspired not only the “thoughts” of the biblical writers, but also the “words.” (Psalm 12:6, Proverbs 30:5, Matthew 4:4, 2 Timothy 3:16, Revelation 22:18-19) Since God inspired the words, one must be hesitant to place a disproportionate weight on ‘readability’ at the expense of accuracy. It should be noted, however, that the English language changes. Many modern readers would be extremely hard pressed to understand the English that John Wycliffe spoke in the 14th century (or the AV of the 17th century.)

“For God louede so the world, that he yaf his `oon bigetun sone, that ech man that bileueth in him perische not, but haue euerlastyng e liff.”

(John 3:16 Wycliffe 1382)

“That if thou knouechist in thi mouth the Lord Jhesu Crist, and bileuest in thin herte, that God reaside hym fro deth, thou schalt be saaf.”

(Romans 10:9 Wycliffe 1382)

Word-for-word translation theory does not suggest the preservation of archaic English. It attempts to render the original biblical languages as close as possible to their contemporary equivalents.

2. Thoughts cannot be disconnected from the words that produce them. This is true in the Bible as it is all aspects of communication. Scholar Raymond Van Leeuwen says, “It is hard to know what the Bible means when we are uncertain about what it says.” (We Really Do Need Another Bible Translation) In other words, even if one didn’t hold to the verbal inspiration of Scripture, changing words necessarily changes the resulting meaning.

An “essentially literal” translation attempts to make the original biblical languages as transparent as possible to the reader. It gives the reader the best view of the original wording of the biblical writers. The focus of the “essentially literal” translation is on word-for-word precision. On the other end of the translation spectrum, are versions which attempt to translate the ideas of the biblical authors. These are often characterized as thought-for-thought translations. Most translations fall somewhere within this continuum. It is true that less literal translations may be more “readable,” but often at the expense of accuracy and intended cross reference. The NASB, ESV, KJV and NKJV are superb choices for those who hold transparency to the original text, as a premium for an excellent translation.

Originally the Bible was written in Hebrew (and some Aramaic) for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New Testament. It is a profound challenge—and responsibility—to translate Scripture into the native tongue of the reader in such a way we can understand what God has said.

V. Dynamic Equivalence Vs. Formal Equivalence

Most laymen today think that a faithful translation of the Bible means a word-for-word translation. If the original has a noun, they expect a noun in the translation. If the original has sixteen words, they don't want to see seventeen words in the translation. We might call this translation "formal equivalence." The King James, old American Standard, and the New American Standard come closest to this ideal.

On the other end of the spectrum is a "phrase-for-phrase" translation, or a dynamic equivalence translation. It is not so concerned about the grammatical form of the original language as it is of the meaning of the original. A dynamic equivalence translation is more interpretive--but it is also easier to understand. The New International Version (in part) and the New English Bible follow this philosophy.

Anyone who has ever learned a second language knows that a word-for-word translation is impossible much or most of the time. Idioms in one language need to be paraphrased. Even the King James translators realized this. In a couple of places in the OT, the Hebrew text literally reads, "God's nostrils enlarged." But the King James has something like, "God became angry"--which is what the expression means. And in many places in Paul's letters, the King James reads, "God forbid!" But the original has neither "God" nor "forbid." Literally, it says, "May it never be!" (as most modern translations render it!)

Therefore, when we speak of faithfulness in translation, we need to clarify the question: Faithfulness to form? or faithfulness to meaning? Sometimes faithfulness to one involves lack of fidelity to the other. There are problems with each of these. The King James, with its attempted fidelity to form, in some passages makes no sense. And in 1611 they made no sense! The New American Standard, likewise, is often characterized by wooden, stilted English.

On the other hand, dynamic equivalence translations sometimes are too interpretive. The NIV, in Eph 6:6, tells slaves to "Obey (their masters) not **only** to win their favor. . .," but the word "only" is not in the Greek and Paul did not mean to imply it, either. This reveals one of the problems with dynamic equivalence translations: the translators don't always know whether their interpretation is right.

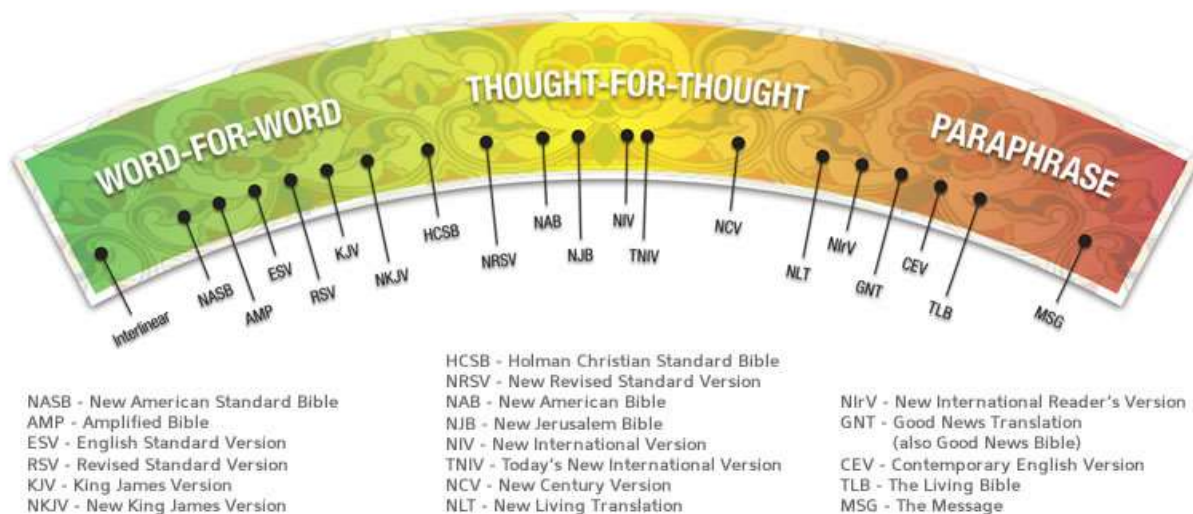
But some versions don't interpret--they distort. Some are notorious for omitting references to Christ's blood, or for attempting to deny his deity. In these instances, the translators are neither faithful to the form or the meaning. They have perverted the Word of God.

Yet, dynamic equivalence translators who are honest with the text often make things very clear. In Phil 2:6, for example, the NIV tells us that Jesus was "in (his) very nature God." But most formal equivalence translations state that he was in the form of God. The problem with these formally correct translations is that they are misleading: the Greek word for 'form' here means essence or nature.

Dynamic equivalence versus formal equivalence: two different philosophies of translation. A formal equivalence translation lets the reader interpret for himself. But too often, the average reader doesn't have the background or the tools to interpret accurately. The net result is that he often badly misunderstands the text. On the other hand, a dynamic equivalence translation is usually clear and quite understandable. But if the translators missed the point of the original--either intentionally or unintentionally--they will be communicating an idea foreign to the biblical text.

VI. How Literal?

Types of Bible Translations



At one end of the spectrum is the word-for-word translation (also referred to as a formal equivalent or literal translation). This approach seeks to represent the original Greek and Hebrew in a more word-for-word manner and preserve—as far as possible—original word order, grammar, and syntax. Many prefer this method because each Greek or Hebrew word is generally represented by the same English word in all occurrences. Some of the more literal translations include: the **King James Version (KJV)**, the **New King James Version (NKJV)**, the **English Standard Version (ESV)**, and the **New American Standard Bible (NASB)**. The most literal translation is the **interlinear** which contains the text in its original language with the English equivalent under the text.

On the other end of the spectrum we find the thought-for-thought translation (also referred to as a paraphrase or functional equivalent). This approach is more concerned with putting meaning of the passage in a colloquial language familiar to the reader. This type of translation seeks to render the ideas of the original text as accurately as possible in the target language (like English). Many find this translation more readable, especially for new readers. A translation's premium is on the thoughts and ideas expressed in passages, rather than translating each phrase word-for-word. This

philosophy is necessarily interpretive. Translations that follow this general philosophy: **(NLT, CEV, NJB, The Philips New Testament in Modern English, The Living Bible, and The Message.**

The middle of the spectrum is occupied by the dynamic equivalent, or mediating translation. These translations seek to strike a balance between the two translation approaches. They are sometimes more literal, sometimes more colloquial or conversational depending on the subject and text. Some examples in this category are the **New International Version (NIV), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB),** and the **New American Bible (NAB).**

A **Parallel Bible** contains two or more translations for easy comparison.

We believe A. the Holy Spirit not only inspired the thoughts of the Bible writers, but the words themselves. B. Thoughts cannot be disconnected from the words that produce them. C. Intended Biblical cross-references will get obscured when word-for-word translation philosophy is not employed. All **[Editor's Note: No, not all. Most, maybe.]** translations in fairness employ both ideas in their philosophy – translating is always to some degree a trade-off between “accuracy” and “clarity.” Anyone who is bilingual knows that the ‘best’ translation is not always the most ‘literal.’

VII. Biblical Examples

- **Psalm 2:7**
Word-for-Word

King James Bible (KJV)

I will declare the decree: the LORD hath said unto me, Thou art my Son; this day have I begotten thee.

New King James Bible (NKJV)

"I will declare the decree: The LORD has said to Me, You are My Son, Today I have begotten You.

American Standard Version (ASV)

I will tell of the decree: Jehovah said unto me, Thou art my son; this day have I begotten thee.

Thought-for-Thought

Contemporary English Version (CEV)

I will tell you promise the LORD made to me: "You are my son, because today I have become your father."

The Message

Let me tell you what GOD said next. He said, "You're my son, and today is your birthday."

Living Bible

His chosen one replies, "I will reveal the everlasting purposes of God, for the Lord has said to me, 'You are my Son. This is your Coronation Day. Today I am giving you your glory.'"

- **1Corinthians 6:9,**

(ASV) "Or know ye not that the unrighteous shall not inherit the kingdom of God? Be not deceived: neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with men, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers, nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God. And such were some of you: but ye were washed, but ye were sanctified, but ye were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ, and in the Spirit of our God."

There are various ways versions miss the boat in translating this passage.

Using a different term in place of "unrighteous" or "unjust", which is not precisely the same thing: NIV, NLT, CEV, NRSV.

Using incomplete definitions instead of the precise theological terms "sanctified" and "justified": NLT, CEV, GW. (Note: I have accepted NWT's "declared righteous" in place of "justified.")

Failing to distinguish practicing homosexuals from celibate homosexuals: BLB, NASB, ISV, GW, WEB, CEV, NKJV, LITV.

Using some word other than "washed", or explanatory text to eliminate baptism as an interpretation of "washed": AMP, ALT, CEV, NLT.

Weymouth translated the term for a practicing homosexual to "guilty of unnatural crime."

The Message was sort of a babbling without much connection to the text.

- **Acts 22:16,**

(ASV) "And now why tarriest thou? arise, and be baptized, and wash away thy sins, calling on his name."

NLT, HCSB, AMP, ALT, CEV, GNV, MSG and NWT all fail on this verse by inserting the word "by" before "calling on his name" without warrant from the original text. The term "wash" connects to "be baptized" (which is a washing), and the term "by" is inserted to force the interpretation that it is "calling on his name" that washes away the sins rather than the baptism. Interestingly the CSB, the update of the HCSB, corrects this error.

So, in pointing out this error, are we supporting baptism that is effective regardless of the faith of the subject? No; what we are saying is you need a stronger argument than a doctrinally biased translation, because even a moderately educated opponent will be able to say the word "by" should not be there in this verse. Where I would go with this is to point out that Paul had obviously already repented, so he did not need to be told again to repent; so, what Ananias said to Paul is identical to what Peter told the crowd in Acts 2:38.

- **Acts 16:14,**
(ASV) "And a certain woman named Lydia, a seller of purple of the city of Thyatira, one that worshipped God, heard us: whose heart the Lord opened to give heed unto the things which were spoken by Paul."

A lot of versions fail on this one: NIV, NLT, BSB, NASB, NET, GW, AMP, CEV, MSG, NRSV and NWT. The text says the Lord opened her heart to give heed or pay attention to Paul's message. It does not say the Lord opened her heart to respond to, to accept, to make her willing to pay attention, to give her a trusting heart, or to listen eagerly to Paul's message. The NWT fails because it inserts the name Jehovah without warrant from the original text; otherwise the NWT was correct.

VIII. Conclusion

What's Good and What's Definitely Not [from <http://www.chapter3min.org/bible-translations-comparison-charts>]

Recommended: The Bible that you choose to use is one of the most important decisions you will make as a Christian. Having the correct knowledge of God and your spiritual well-being are strongly dependent upon the accuracy of the Bible that you read and study. Please be careful and choose a good one. I recommend choosing a Bible from the left side of the charts like the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the English Standard Version (ESV), the King James Version (KJV), or the New King James Version (NKJV). (Though it is on the left side, I do not recommend the Amplified Bible.) These four versions do the best job of accurately translating the words and meaning of the original languages.

Avoid: Please do not choose the option on the far right of every chart: The Message Bible by Eugene H. Peterson. It is not a reliable version. I have long warned against it, as there are significant problems with it. To learn more please see the following articles on [chapter3min.org](http://www.chapter3min.org)

Avoid: There is a Bible that is growing in popularity. It is new, and hence not on the charts; yet it probably wouldn't be best to include it anyway. It is The Passion Translation (TPT) by Brian Simmons. If you use or are considering using this Bible, please note that it has some significant problems. Consider this quote from the [GotQuestions.org](http://www.GotQuestions.org) article [What is the Passion Translation of the Bible?](http://www.GotQuestions.org)

"The most important problem with The Passion Translation of the Bible (TPT) is actually found in its name—specifically, the term translation. In truth, The Passion Translation is a re-worded and re-written Bible, apparently intended to support a particular strain of theology. If the same material was marketed as a "commentary" or as a "study guide," it would still be concerning. As it is, The Passion Translation cannot honestly be called a translation or even a paraphrase. The TPT goes well beyond the idea of "translation" and reimagines the Bible as one human author thinks it ought to be written."

[Editor's Addition]

Avoid: All Bibles on the "Paraphrase" end of the above chart. The translations are entirely up to the translator's interpretations, which means they are likely biased in some way based on the beliefs of the translators.

Recommended: With any Bible, be aware that there are variations in English translation, some more accurate but less clear, some more easy to understand but less accurate. Be cautious and aware.

