

How to choose a Bible

What Bible is “best”? Is the King James version “*the right Bible*”? You’ve likely asked yourself these questions and also wondered what’s the difference with all of the various versions of the Bible. Perhaps you’ve heard some passionate individual proclaim that the KJV is the “only true Bible”. This essay aims to explain some basic differences in versions, as well as offer suggestions as to how to choose a Bible that might be best for you.

Translation vs. Interpretation

Translation means to write or copy a message from one language to another. For example, taking a Hebrew manuscript and re-writing it into English. That process of discerning each Hebrew word or character into the English language is called translating. The original languages used to write the Holy Bible are Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. The Old Testament was originally written mostly in Hebrew, and the New Testament in Greek. Today, organizations study hundreds of thousands of ancient manuscripts from the Old and New Testament books (there are 66 books in the Bible), and they are diligently going through each letter and character to be as accurate as possible to translate copies into new languages.

The various books of the Bible were written by about forty different authors, over a period of about 1,600 years. These were people that lived in different eras, that spoke different languages, and lived on three different continents (Asia, Africa, Europe). These authors were directed by God regarding what to write. This is called being “inspired” by the Holy Spirit. In short, it’s not “*man’s word*”, it’s God’s Word written through man. Each author was free to write within his own context and personality, but the doctrine of the message and the fine details are no coincidence, but rather the divine Word of God. For example, you can read Moses’ writings and he writes using historical narrative which is a style that lays out details such as who, what, when, where, why, and how. Paul on the other hand, preaches and his tone of voice is strong and passionate, compared to the Apostle John, who speaks more tempered.

Some portions of scripture are very difficult to translate, because the original author was speaking in idioms. Idioms are phrases that are unique to the culture and language of origin, and may cause confusion when translated literally. Here are some examples of idiomatic phrases in the Bible: “Know” - A literal translation of yada (Hebrew) and ginóskó (Greek) gives us the sense of “knowing”; both words are used as an idiom for “*sexual intercourse*.” Adam “knew” his wife (Genesis 4:1, ESV). Joseph did not “know” Mary until after Jesus was born (Matthew 1:25, ESV). “Seed” - Someone’s “seed” in the Bible can be an idiomatic reference to his “children” or “descendants” (Genesis 22:17, KJV). “The manner of women” - The Hebrew idiom for a woman’s period can be translated literally as “the manner of women” (Genesis 31:35, NKJV). “Flowing with milk and honey” - God used this idiom to communicate to the Israelites that the Promised Land was “fertile” (Exodus 3:8). Translators are fallible and they may mislead the English reader by using unnecessary paraphrases to bring out one possible meaning and conceal others. Translators shouldn’t try to make decisions for readers, as it’s better for readers to wrestle with context and discern the authors intent. A word for word literal translation respects the original author’s way of writing. This is immensely important if you want to have an accurate interpretation.

NOTE – A Bible does not cease to be precious and powerful because its translators overuse paraphrase and put way too much of their own interpretation into the Bible. God’s Word breaks free from poor translations and poor preaching. God uses every version to bless people and save people.

Interpretation discerns what the author is trying to say. Interpreting asks questions like, “*What does Jesus mean when He says in Matthew 5:3, “**Blessed are the poor in spirit**”?*” The process of interpreting Scripture is called hermeneutics. Every passage of scripture has one single meaning, but can have endless application. For example, one shouldn’t ask, “*What does this verse mean to me?*”, but should ask, “*What did the author mean when he wrote this?*” After discerning what the author meant, then one can ask, “*How does this apply to me?*” Three key steps are important when studying the Bible, 1) Observation – “*What did the text say?*” 2) Interpretation – “*What did the author mean?*” 3) Application – “*How does this apply to my life?*”

Word for Word, Phrase for Phrase Translations, and Paraphrases

Word for word translations aim to translate the Bible into English by singling out every single word and character in order to come up with the most exact interpretation possible. Some popular examples of word for word versions of the Bible are New American Standard Bible (NASB), King James Version (KJV), New King James Version (NKJV), and the English Standard Version (ESV).

Phrase for phrase translations don’t translate word for word, but instead look at each phrase as a stand alone thought to be translated. This practice of translation is more loose, and certainly some meaning gets lost in this type of translation. However, these versions can be said to be “*easier to read*”, as the translators communicate the general thought of the author without getting into the detail of every single word. Some popular examples of phrase for phrase translations are the New International Version (NIV), the New International Readers Version (NIRV), and the Revised English Bible (REB).

I personally study and read from an NASB, word for word translation, which is a translation that I picked up in seminary. I prefer the accuracy of a word for word translation as studying the Bible is a significant portion of my life. If I didn’t study from the NASB and had to choose another version, I’d go with the ESV. This version is becoming more widely embraced by the evangelical Church as it’s got a word for word exactness that pastors like, but a bit more of an easier to read style. As pastor John Piper puts it, he moved from NASB to ESV as he thought the ESV reading was a little too “wooden” for his preference. Take this for whatever it’s worth.

You might hear of other versions of the Bible, called **paraphrase**. Paraphrase versions are not literal Bibles, and a paraphrase of the Bible should not be used as a Christian’s primary Bible. We have to remember that a paraphrase is what the author thinks the Bible says, not necessarily what the Bible says. A paraphrase of the Bible could essentially be used as a commentary on the Bible, a way to get another perspective, but that is it. Paraphrasing the Scriptures can result in missing significant details that in turn change or distort doctrinal truths. Some popular versions are The Living Bible and The Message. Bottom line, I would rather have people read any paraphrase of the Bible—no matter how weak—than to read nothing of the Bible at all. I’ve given some inmates paraphrases, like The Message, simply because their reading comprehension level was so poor that even easier to read phrase for phrase translations gave them challenges. However, when I gave them a paraphrase, I’d always preface it by saying, “*You should know this isn’t a literal Bible, but one man’s commentary on the Bible. It should be used as a supplemental tool to help understand the Bible.*”

Is the King James Version the “only true Bible”?

This is easy to answer. No, the KJV is not the stand-alone, superior, one and only correct Bible. I don’t know why some Christians insist that these things are so, but this simply isn’t true. Sadly, I’ve heard more than one Christian pastor proclaim that all other versions of the Bible are an abomination. This type of untruth is destructive and totally unnecessary. There are people all over the world that have never heard of the KJV, and

yet are reading many other versions of the Bible and are being fed the divine Word of God. The KJV was written in 1611, long after the Bible was already a completed book and doing just fine, thank you! Heaven will be full of people that have never heard of the KJV, as most people today have never heard of it. It's not a translation that is popular in most countries, and most people in the world don't speak English, and I don't suppose a single person in the world today speaks 17th century Elizabethan English, as the KJV is written. All this to say, the KJV is God's Word, among other translations which are equally God's Word, and therefore should be taken seriously. No version of the Bible is error-free. Again, God's Word is sacred and divine, and the Lord uses flawed people, flawed pastors, and flawed translators and authors to get His message out to all people. There are no major contemporary English translations that are going to lead people into serious doctrinal error.

What matters in a Bible translation?

- equivalence to the original language
- readability
- appropriate dignity
- accessibility

Examples of differences in stronger/weaker versions

NKJV vs. KJV

1 Timothy 6:10

- NKJV – "For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil"
- KJV – "For the love of money is the root of all evil"

Here, the NKJV more accurately translates the original text. The love of money is not the root of all evil, as the KJV reads, since evil was around long before money ever existed. There are many roots of evil; jealousy, lust, greed, anger, etc. The love of money is one of them, it's a root of evil.

ESV vs. NIV

Romans 8:35-36

- ESV – "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or danger, or sword? As it is written, "For your sake we are being killed all the day long."
- NIV – "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written: "For your sake we face death all day long."

From the NIV translation one could argue from a health, wealth, and prosperity "gospel" that "*famine and nakedness*" won't really happen to God's children, as they seem to in verse 35, because the Old Testament support that Paul quotes in verse 36 only says "*we face death*," but not that we really "*are being killed*." So, the paraphrase "*face death*" removes an utterly crucial argument that Paul gave to make the true point that true Christians really do get killed and really do face famine and nakedness.

CONCLUSION - Pick the version where you feel most helped by the Lord to hear His voice with authority and clarity. Then, use other versions to wrestle through any parts that you don't understand by comparison. What matters most of all is that all of us immerse our minds in the Scriptures daily.