

How the Bible has Been Translated¹

Before the year 1881, you had three choices for an English Bible translation: the KJV, the KJV, or the KJV. Obviously, this is no longer the case. How did the King James Version get dethroned? Which translation is best today? Are any of the modern translations faithful to the original?

I. What is a Faithful Translation?

Many people 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 in the translation. This type of translation is called “formal equivalence.” The KJV, ASV and NASB come the closest to this ideal.

On the other end of the spectrum is a “phrase-for-phrase” translation, also known as a “dynamic equivalence” or, more recently, as a “functional equivalence” translation. A dynamic equivalence translation is not as concerned with the grammatical form of the original language, as it is with the meaning of the original. It allows more room for interpretation and is easier to understand. The NIV and the NEB follow this philosophy.

II. The Difficulty of Translating a Language

John Beekman and John Callow provide some humorous examples of just how misleading a literal translation can be. In some languages of northern Ghana the phrase meaning “he got married” translates literally into English as “he ate a woman”. In this case a literal translation retains the form but completely misses its meaning. In another West African language a literal translation of Jesus’ words to James and John, “Are you able to drink the cup that I drink?” (Mark 10:38), comes across as one drunkard challenging another to a drinking contest. To translate “literally” in that language would portray Jesus and his disciples as drunkards! Eugene Glassman provides an example from the Urdu language. The phrase literally translated “My throat has sat down” means “I have lost my voice” (The phrase “I have lost my voice” is actually an English idiom for “I cannot speak because of some irritation in my throat.”)

Anyone who has learned a second language knows that a word-for-word translation is impossible much or most of the time. Idioms and colloquialisms in a language need to be paraphrased to make sense in another language.

Even the KJV translators realized this. In a couple of places in the Old Testament, the Hebrew text literally reads, “God’s nostrils enlarged.” But, the KJV translates this as, “God became angry”—which is what the expression means. In Matthew 1:18 the KJV says that Mary was found to be with child. But the Greek is quite different and quite graphic: “Mary was having it in the belly!” In many places in Paul’s letters, the KJV

¹ Notes taken mostly from Daniel B. Wallace, “Choosing a Bible Translation” in *Bible Study Magazine* Nov/Dec 2008, p. 23-26 (accessible at <http://www.biblestudymagazine.com/preview/choosetranslationWeb.pdf>)

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 a translation being faithful to the original, we need to clarify the question: Is it faithfulness to form? Or, faithfulness to meaning? Sometimes faithfulness to one involves lack of fidelity to the other. There are problems with each of the translation philosophies. The KJV, with its attempted fidelity to form, does not make sense in some passages. (In 1611, these instances did not make sense either). Likewise, The NASB often contains wooden, stilted English.

On the other hand, functional equivalence translations sometimes go too far in their interpretation of a particular phrase. The NIV, in Eph 6:6, tells slaves to “Obey (their masters) not only to win their favor.” However, the word “only” is not in the Greek, and I suspect that 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 correct. The addition of one interpretively-driven word can change the entire meaning of a clause or a passage.

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, functional 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.

A formal equivalence translation lets the reader interpret for himself or herself. However, the reader often does not have the background information or the tools to interpret accurately. The net result is that he or she runs the risk of misunderstanding the text, simply because their translation was not clear enough.

On the other hand, a functional equivalence translation is usually clear and quite understandable. But if the translators missed the point of the original (either intentionally or unintentionally) they may communicate an idea foreign to the biblical text.

III. Which Translation Is Best?

To the question: Which translation is best?—There can be no singular answer. I suggest that every Christian who is serious about studying the Bible own at least two translations. At least one formal equivalence (word-for-word) translation and one functional equivalence (phrase-for-phrase) translation. It would be even better to have two good functional equivalence translations because in this type of translation, the translator is also the interpreter. If the translator’s interpretation is correct, it can only

clarify the meaning of the text; if it is incorrect, then it only clarifies the interpretation of the translator!

King James Version (KJV) & New King James Version (NKJV)

The KJV has with good reason been termed, “the noblest monument of English prose” (RSV preface). Above all its rivals, the KJV 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 Jesus,” or some such nonsense, we must remember that the KJV of today is not the KJV of 1611. It has undergone three revisions, incorporating more than 100,000 changes. Even with all these changes, much of the evidence from new manuscript discoveries has not been incorporated. The KJV was translated from later manuscripts that are less accurate to the original text of the Bible. Furthermore, there are over 300 words in the KJV 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 KJV, I recommend the New King James Version (NKJV).

Revised Standard Version (RSV) & New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The RSV was completed in 1952 and was intended to be, in part, a revision of the KJV. Its attempt to be a fairly literal translation makes its wording still archaic at times. The NRSV follows the same principle of translation, though it has been updated based on new manuscript discoveries, exegetical insights, and linguistic theories. Much of the difficult wording has been made clearer, and gender-inclusive language has been incorporated. At times, this is very helpful; at other times, it is misleading.

American Standard Version (ASV) & New American Standard Bible (NASB)

Like the RSV, the ASV and NASB were intended to be a revision of the KJV. However, there are three major differences between the RSV and the NASB: (1) the NASB is less archaic in its wording; (2) its translators were more theologically conservative than the RSV translators; and (3) because of the translators’ desire to adhere as closely as possible to the wording of the original, the translation often contains stilted and wooden English.

New English Bible (NEB) & Revised English Bible (REB)

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 of the KJV, nor of any other version, 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 follows the same pattern as the NEB: excellent English, though not always faithful to the Greek and Hebrew.

New International Version (NIV) & Today's New International Version (TNIV)

The NIV was published in 1978. It may be considered a counterpart to the NEB. (The NEB is strictly a British product, while the NIV is an international product). It is more of a phrase-for-phrase translation than a word-for-word translation. The translators 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 its simplicity of language. The editors wanted to make sure it was easy to read. In achieving this goal, they often sacrificed accuracy. In the New Testament, sentences are shortened, subordination of thought is lost, and conjunctions are often deleted.

The TNIV is to the NIV what the NRSV is to the RSV. Gender-inclusive language is used, and specific terminology is clarified (e.g., instead of “the Jews,” the TNIV will read “the Jewish leaders,” and when “Christ” is used as a title, is substituted for “Messiah”). This is usually helpful, but such interpretations built into a translation can at times be misleading.

New Living Translation (NLT)

The NLT was first published in 1996. The NLT is a functional equivalence translation, which focuses on the thoughts of the biblical authors, rather than their actual words. The translators of the NLT have gone to great lengths to convey the meaning of the text. Although this is helpful, it often results in large interpretive decisions being made for the reader.

The Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)

The HCSB, first published in 1999, uses a translational philosophy called “optimal equivalence.” Where a word-for-word translation is not clear in English, they will opt for a phrase-for-phrase translation. The translation incorporates new manuscript discoveries, as well as contains many important translational footnotes. The HCSB is a nice alternative to choosing between a formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence translation

English Standard Version (ESV)

The ESV, published in 2001, is the newest and most up-to-date formal equivalent translation. The ESV has eliminated the stilted English of translations like the NASB, while maintaining the literary excellence of translations like the KJV. Even though the ESV is a new translation, it maintains some of the theological terms that have systematically developed in English (e.g., justification, sanctification and propitiation). The ESV has also consistently translated specific terms in the original language to make theological developments easier to follow, and English concordance searches more accurate. Like the KJV, it has many unforgettable expressions, suitable for memorizing.

New English Translation (NET)

The NET Bible was published in 2005. The net has all the earmarks of a great translation. At times, it is more accurate than the NASB, more readable than the NIV, and more elegant than either. It is clear and eloquent, while maintaining the meaning of the original. In addition, the notes are a genuine gold mine of information, unlike those found in any other translation. The net aims to be gender-neutral. The NET Bible is the Bible behind the bibles. It's the one that many modern translators use to help them work through the original language and express their meaning in literate English. I would highly recommend that each English-speaking Christian put this Bible on their shopping list.

New World Translation

Finally, 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.

Conclusions

In summary, I would suggest that each English-speaking Christian own at least an RSV, NIV, and NET. For someone who wishes to study the Bible, an ESV, KJV and NEB would also make good additions to their library. And then, make sure that you read the book!

