

Bible Translations and Versions

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The most important principle for understanding the Bible properly is to read, read and read it in order to gain a scope and feel for its main themes and overall content. This, of course, is true with any book. However, since the Bible was originally written in mostly Hebrew (Old Testament) and Greek (New Testament) all that is available for the normal speaker of modern languages is to read translations or versions of the Bible. In its technical sense the word translation refers to an original attempt to translate from one language into another while the word version refers to any revision or new edition of that translation. In practice, however, these words tend to be used interchangeably by the common man and often even by scholars as well. Fortunately, for the speaker of English there are many excellent translations and versions to use for Bible reading and study that are built on a long and rich history of biblical scholarship. Many of these can be used confidently as one's main text for reading and many others can be used in a comparative sense as aids in Bible study. It would, however, be a great mistake to think that any particular version or translation is *the* authoritative version. Instead, each has its own strengths and weaknesses – a fact that is almost guaranteed to occur because of the process of translation itself.

We should always remember that the main reason for reading the Bible is to gain spiritual nourishment so that we are “equipped for every good work” (II Tim. 3:16-17). Using a single version as your main text and augmenting it with other versions can greatly aid this process. Since the Bible is, in effect, a book of books organized with two major divisions – the Old Testament and the New Testament - the task of

Bible study is in many ways much more difficult than the study of a single book. Fortunately, there is a unifying theme, which ties it all together and simplifies the process of understanding. That theme is God's plan of salvation, which he brings to fulfillment through his Son, Jesus Christ. The 20th century NT scholar F.F. Bruce summarizes the key points of this plan of salvation and shows how it helps to unite the Bible as a whole:

“The Bible's central message is the story of salvation, and throughout both Testaments three strands in this unfolding story can be distinguished: the bringer of salvation, the way of salvation, and the heirs of salvation. This could be reworded in terms of the covenant idea by saying that the central message of the Bible is God's covenant with men, and that the strands are the mediator of the covenant, the basis of the covenant, and the covenant people. God himself is the Savior of his people; it is he who confirms his covenant-mercy with them. The bringer of salvation, the mediator of the covenant, is Jesus Christ, the Son of God. The way of salvation, the basis of the covenant, is God's grace, calling forth from his people a response of faith and obedience. The heirs of salvation, the covenant people, are the Israel of God, the church of God.

The continuity of the covenant people from the Old Testament to the New Testament is obscured for the reader of the common English Bible because "church" is an exclusively New Testament word, and he naturally thinks of it as something which began in the New Testament period. But the reader of the Greek Bible was confronted by no new word when he found *ekklesia* in the New Testament; he had already met it in the Septuagint as one of the words used to denote Israel as the "assembly" of the Lord's people. To be sure, it has a new and fuller meaning in the New Testament. The old covenant people had to die with him in order to rise with him to a new life - a new life in which national restrictions had disappeared. Jesus provides in himself the vital continuity

between the old Israel and the new, and his faithful followers were both the righteous remnant of the old and the nucleus of the new. The servant Lord and his servant people bind the two Testaments together” (*The Origin of the Bible*, pp. 11-12, Tyndale Pub.).

All of the major Bible translations and versions present this central theme of the Bible in a way that can be understood by the generally educated reader. Though they have a great number of, mostly minor, differences among them, it is easy to overstate the importance of these differences. Sometimes arguments can break out over translations that even cause divisions within the people of God. This is happening to day in a battle between users of two new translations, the English Standard Version (ESV) and the Today’s New International Version (TNIV). Unfortunately, this is nothing new. It has happened all too often in the history of Christianity including Jerome’s translation of the Latin Vulgate in the 4th Century and Tyndale’s translation of the Bible into English in the Reformation of the 16th century. While some of the issues involved are not minor, they are not of such major proportion that they should cause division within the body of Christ. When this does occur it is often a matter of becoming so engrossed in the details of translations that the central over-arching theme of God’s Plan of Salvation is lost. In other words, it is a matter of not being able to see the forest for the trees.

As I stated in an earlier article I do not believe that any of the major Bible translations and versions published in the past 50 years are much better than the others *in terms of reading and understanding the Bible as a whole*. They all have their strengths and weaknesses and are all based on the solid scholarship of biblical scholars who, at least in the great majority, love God and are trying to convey accurately the meaning of the Scriptures in a way that people can understand. In addition, all of these

scholars and translation committees agree in general on the basic principles of translation, though each favors a particular translation philosophy that would place them at a particular point on a scale stretching from a more literal translation to a more free translation. Most importantly, all of these translations can be read with confidence and enjoyment in understanding the central truths of the Bible as a whole.

For reference I present below a scale of many of the best of these major Bible translations that are now in use. I have put in bold print the ones that are my favorites and which I most use and recommend to others. With the exception of the King James Version (KJV published in 1611) and the Revised Standard Version (RSV completed in the early 1950s) all of these translations and versions have been completed since the 1970s. All of the versions listed on the second or third lines are revisions of earlier translations or versions that are listed on the first line above them. They move from very literal (word for word) on the left to very free (meaning for meaning) on the right:

<u>Literal</u>	<u>Balanced</u>	<u>Free</u>
NASB	KJV	RSV
NIV	NET	NEB
JB	CEV	LB
NKJV	NRSV	TNIV
REB	NJB	NLT
ESV		NLT 2004

In choosing a version to be one’s main text for reading and memorization there are two important factors to consider. First, one should consider *readability*. It simply makes no sense to choose a Bible that is not readable for you and thus will discourage you from reading it. Second, the translation you choose should be a faithful rendering of the *meaning* of the underlying Hebrew and Greek texts. We must always remember that the most important goal of translation is to convey the *meaning* of the

original text as clearly as possible into the target language so that the reader can *understand* properly what the original text *means*. The above chart is only an approximation but it is useful for understanding the differences in translations. My own personal favorites for use as a main text for reading, study and memorization are the more literal ESV, the balanced NIV/TNIV and the freer NLT 2004 edition. A person could use any of these as his main text if he consulted the others as well. But other combinations could be used equally well. The key is to consult across the spectrum of literal to free, and for in-depth study, the more the merrier.

Generally speaking, the more literal the translation the less likely there will be interpretative error in the translation. However, it is also true that the more literal the translation the more likely it is that the translation will have a wooden, unnatural feel to it and the more likely it is that there will be ambiguities left in it that are not in the original text itself. All of this can lead to discouragement on the part of the reader and break the flow of reading. On the other hand, there are some free translations that, though very readable, are so interpretative that they can at times also be very misleading. Thus, one can read along quickly, easily, and with understanding of what is said, and yet, being misled at the same time. In all cases with all translations the *original intent and meaning* of the inspired biblical writer is the only proper and stable control for both translation and interpretation. Without that everything deconstructs into subjective chaos.

One issue that has come up in the last twenty years or so is that of the use of gender inclusive language. This issue revolves around the question of how to translate the generic form of “man” = “human being” = “person” along with corresponding pronouns into English without causing ambiguity or the impression of gender bias. Without getting too far into the

details of this debate, I will only say that as a high school history teacher I deal with this issue every day and it is, in fact, a real issue. In fact, I find myself using gender inclusive language more and more without even thinking about it in my own speaking and writing. It is simply the way most young people think and speak and also the normal manner of discourse in the press and the arena of public affairs.

Recent surveys indicate that when English-speaking people hear the word “man” used in a sentence 80% of them take it to mean someone of the male gender. The same is true of the generic “he”. Because of this when a translation translates the generic “man” as “man” rather than as “person” or “human” or “one”, etc. they risk grave misunderstanding on the part of the average reader. Though one can make a strong case that the word “man” should be retained in its generic form based on: (1) its proper generic meaning in the Biblical texts, (2) its proper generic meaning in the English language, (3) retaining continuity with its generic historical usage in all forms of literature, and, finally (4) not bowing to political correctness driven by a feminist agenda, the plain fact is that English usage has changed dramatically in recent years and it is not likely to change back any time soon. Due to these facts and based on the goal of communicating *meaning* in a way that can be understood effectively almost all of the more recent translations and versions have adopted gender inclusive usage in some way, ranging from mild usage to more extreme usage.

The NIV was translated just before the era of gender inclusive versions began and it has promised that it will not be revised from its present form. The TNIV is called a new version. The ESV has generally found a good balance on this issue while still not going far enough at times. The NRSV, TNIV, NLT, etc. have each in their own way gone somewhat too far at times in their gender inclusive versions while at

other times finding just the right balance. Let's look at an example in I Timothy 2:4-6:

“Who desires all men to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one Mediator between God and men, the Man Christ Jesus, who gave himself for a ransom for all, to be testified in due time.” (NKJV).

“Who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for men – the testimony given in its proper time.” (NIV).

“Who desires all people to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and there is one mediator between God and men, the man Christ Jesus, who gave himself as a ransom for all, which is the testimony given at the proper time.” (ESV).

“Who wants all people to be saved and to come to come to the knowledge of the truth. For there is one God and one mediator between God and human beings, Christ Jesus himself human, who gave himself as a ransom for all people. This has now been witnessed to at the proper time.” (TNIV).

All of these translations of this section of Scripture are “correct.” However, the NIV is the least clear as to meaning since there is possible ambiguity throughout in its use of “man”. On the other hand, the TNIV is the clearest as to the meaning of the text without leaving any possible ambiguity that could be misunderstood. In my view, when the original text says “man” in its male gender meaning the translation “man” should be retained, even when this “man” is representative of others. A footnote can make clear the representation (e.g. see Psalm 1 in ESV). When, on the other hand, “man” is used in the original to refer to “man” in its generic form it is often – though not always - better to translate it as “person”, “one”, “human being”, etc. (e.g. see Rom. 3:28 in ESV, TNIV).

Another problem is how to translate pronouns corresponding to the generic “man”, “person”, “one”, or “human being”. Though from one point of view it is valid as a translation technique to pluralize the third person singular pronoun “he” in its generic sense to “he or she” or “they” in order to avoid any hint of gender bias, it often produces some very awkward, strange or unnatural English. Thus as is often the case, going to an extreme to overcome one problem results in creating other problems including very unnatural English. Compare, for example, the same versions above on Romans 14:1-5. In this case the English of the ESV is natural, consistent, and understandable (as are the fully pluralized renderings of NRSV and the NLT) while the language of the TNIV sounds unnatural even though gender misunderstanding has been eliminated. One can certainly ask, “Would the original text have sounded so unnatural to the original readers?” I don't think so. Nevertheless, I wouldn't want to make too much of this issue. Usually, the translation choices of the NRSV, TNIV, NLT, etc. in this regard do not affect the sense of the passage in question and they can alleviate a common misconception in translation.

In conclusion, I must emphasize that a student of the Bible needs to learn to properly use the Bible or Bibles that he reads and studies. He should learn all the different translation philosophies and methodologies listed in the chart above and make full use of the benefits of them all. And at a minimum, every Bible reading person should read the Preface and Introduction of any version he's going to seriously use so as to get the most out of it and so as not to abuse it due to misconceptions. In addition, almost all Bible versions have their own web-sites now that give you a wealth of information about their own versions and their corresponding translation philosophies. Finally, never allow anyone to limit you to using a particular version or versions of the Bible. Some churches, Bible study fellowships, etc.

use a common text - usually, for good reasons; however, this should not prevent you from making full use of the other versions in your own private study. Read, study and enjoy the

Bible – it is our fountainhead for spiritual truth and spiritual nourishment. And, it is the greatest literature in the history of the world.