

Which Bible translation is best?

Scripture: Selected Scriptures

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The common question of which Bible translation to use is very important—it concerns the most important words ever spoken, the words of God the Creator. It's crucial to understand at the outset that behind each version is a fundamental philosophy of Bible translation. You want to make sure the version you use reproduces in your own language what God actually said.

Translation Philosophy

You can separate modern Bible translations into two basic groups—formal equivalency and dynamic equivalency. Formal equivalency attempts a word for word rendition, providing as literal a translation as possible. Dynamic equivalency is more like a paraphrase, trying to convey ideas thought by thought.

Since no one language corresponds perfectly to any other language, every translation involves some degree of interpretation. A translation based on formal equivalency has a low degree of interpretation; translators are trying to convey the meaning of each particular word. When faced with a choice between readability and accuracy, formal equivalency translators are willing to sacrifice readability for the sake of accuracy.

By its very nature, a translation based on dynamic equivalency requires a high degree of interpretation. The goal of dynamic equivalency is to make the Bible readable, conveying an idea-for-idea rendering of the original. That means someone must first decide what idea is being communicated, which is the very act of interpretation. How the translators view Scripture becomes extremely important in the final product.

Sadly, there are many in the Bible-translation industry who have a low view of the Scripture. They think the Bible is merely a product of man, replete with mistakes, contradictions, and personal biases. Many translators today have also adopted the postmodern idea of elevating the experience of the reader over the intention of the author. They make the contemporary reader sovereign over the text and demote the intended meaning of the historic human writers who were carried along by one divine author (2 Peter 1:19-21).

Therefore, it's vital that you find a translation that represents what the Holy Spirit actually said as faithfully as possible. Who's interested in some contemporary translation committee's spin on what they think contemporary readers want to read? We want to read what the author intended us to read, which is what the Holy Spirit originally inspired.

Translation Survey

The most popular dynamic-equivalency translations, which dominate the evangelical world, are the New International Version (NIV), Today's New International Version (TNIV), The Message (MSG), The Living Bible (TLB), the Good News Bible (GNB), and the New Living Translation (NLT). Of those, the NIV is the most reliable.

The NIV was completed in 1978. Its translators did not attempt to translate strictly word for word, but aimed more for equivalent ideas. As a result, the NIV doesn't follow the exact wording of the original Greek and Hebrew texts as closely as the King James Version and New American Standard Bible versions do. Nevertheless, it can be considered a faithful translation of the original texts, and its lucid readability makes it quite popular, especially for devotional reading.

The four most popular formal equivalency translations in English are the King James Version (KJV), the New King James Version (NKJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the English Standard Version (ESV).

The KJV is the oldest of the four and continues to be the favorite of many. It is known as the Authorized Version of 1611 because King James I approved the project to create an authoritative English Bible. Although it contains many obsolete words (some of which have changed in meaning), many people appreciate its dignity and majesty. The NKJV is a similar translation, taken from the same group of ancient manuscripts, that simply updates the archaic language of the KJV.

The NASB, completed in 1971 and updated in 1995, is a revision of the American Standard Version of 1901. It is a literal translation from the Hebrew and Greek languages that incorporates the scholarship of several centuries of textual criticism conducted since the original KJV. It quickly became a favorite translation for serious Bible study.

The ESV is the most recent translation, which stands firmly in the formal equivalency tradition. It is a very solid translation in updated language that aims to reproduce the beauty of the KJV. The result is one of the most poetic and beautifully structured versions that maintains a high degree of accuracy and faithfulness to the original languages.

Translation Choice

Which version is the best to use? Ultimately, that choice is up to you. Each of the formal-equivalency versions has strengths and weaknesses, but they are all reliable translations of the Bible. If you want to read a dynamic-equivalency translation, the NIV is the most reliable.

Ideally, as a serious student of Scripture, you should become familiar enough with concordances, word-study aids, and conservative commentaries so that even without a thorough knowledge of the original languages, you can explore the nuances of meaning that arise out of the original texts.

For more study on Bible translations, the following resources provide reliable overviews and analyses:

[The Canon of Scripture](#), F. F. Bruce

[How to Choose a Bible Translation](#), Robert L. Thomas

[The King James Only Controversy](#), James White

[The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism](#), D. A. Carson

[Words of Delight: A Literary Introduction to the Bible](#), Leland Ryken

[The Word of God in English: Criteria for Excellence in Bible Translation](#), Leland Ryken

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