

7 Tips for Thinking Right about Bible Translations

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Reading Time: 5 minutes

1. The King James Version was not the first English translation.

John Wycliff translated the first English Bible between 1382 to 1395, but he translated it from the Latin Vulgate (meaning he translated it from another translation). Then, in 1526, William Tyndale translated the New Testament and about half of the Old Testament from Hebrew and Greek texts. Other English translations soon followed suite, including the *Coverdale Bible* (1535), *Matthew's Bible* (1537), the *Great Bible* (1539) - which was the first Bible authorized by the King of England (Henry VIII), *Taverner's Bible* (1539), the *Geneva Bible* (1560), the *Bishops' Bible* (1568), and the *Douay-Rheims Bible* (1582). The *King James Version* came fairly late on the scene in 1611, being the **third** officially "authorized" version of the Church of England, and was a revision of the Bishops' Bible.

2. There is no such thing as a perfect translation of the Bible.

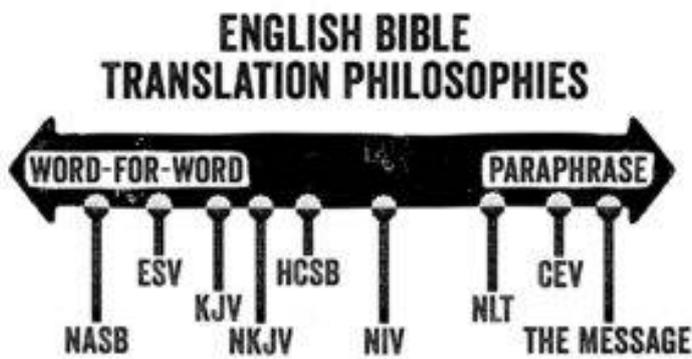
Not unless you read Hebrew and Greek, that is. However, if you're like me, you can't read Hebrew and Greek very well. Thus they need to be translated. The problem is, Hebrew and Greek words - the language the Bible was originally written in - don't always translate well into English. That is to say, there isn't always an exact English equivalent for every Hebrew and Greek word. **Therefore, an exact "word-for-word" translation isn't possible** (though some translations get closer than others). Thus, in many instances, translators must use their own judgment in how to render a passage of Scripture into English. Throw in the fact that the English language is constantly changing, and you have the perfect formula for why we have a continual need for an updated English translation of the Bible. **Something is always lost in translation. Always.** Therefore, we could point out translation problems in every English version of the Bible. Which brings us to...

3. Using multiple Bible translations isn't a bad idea.

Every translation of the Bible is a little bit different, so **it is wise to regularly cite other translations while you are studying the Bible.** Some translations render the Hebrew and Greek text better than others, and *vice versa*. If one translation renders a passage in a much different way than most of the other translation, you may want to avoid that particular translation. While I regularly carry an ESV (English Standard Version), I frequently read other versions when I am studying, such as the NASB (New American Standard Bible) and the NKJV (New King James Version).

4. All Bible translations fall on a spectrum between "word-for-word" and "paraphrase."

Again, it is impossible to have a perfectly word-for-word translation of the Bible. We just call them "word-for-word" because that is the goal of their translators. But some translations of the Bible do a much better job than others in retaining the literal meaning of the Hebrew and Greek text.



A translator with a “word-for-word” philosophy attempts to translate an English version of the Bible that is as close to the Hebrew and Greek text as possible. This means he wants to **protect the actual words of Scripture** as much as possible, even if it hinders how the text flows. I would consider the NASB, ESV, Amplified Bible, RSV, KJV, and the NKJV all “word-for-word” translations (again,

some more so than others).

On the other hand, a translator with a “paraphrase” philosophy attempts to translate what he believes is the ultimate, intended message of the original text. This means he wants to capture the “gist” of the words of Scripture by paraphrasing it and putting it in his own words. Incidentally, the more you paraphrase the Hebrew & Greek text, the more you must inject your own doctrinal bias into the text. This is why I consider paraphrase translations more of a risk, since **every word of Scripture can be vitally important** (cf. 1 Cor. 2:13; Matt. 5:18; Gal. 3:16).

5. Your preferred Bible translation hints at your view of inspiration.

I say “hints” because — let’s be honest — most people don’t have a clear understanding of what inspiration even is, let alone have an opinion about it.

Yet, among those who *do* have an opinion, it seems that there are as many diverse views of the Bible as there are denominations within Christendom. (Don’t you just hate religious division?) There is the oldest, original, orthodox view that understands **the Bible to be the verbal, plenary Word of God**. By “verbal” we mean God approved of every word of Scripture. By “plenary” we mean that everything the Bible says is true. **Thus, the Bible is inerrant and infallible**. As a result, we understand that Scripture cannot fail, nor can it err. The Bible claims all of this for itself (cf. Prov. 30:5; John 10:35, 17:17; Rom. 3:4; Titus 1:2; 1 John 3:20; etc.). People who believe this about the Bible tend to want a “word-for-word” translation of the Bible (like the NASB, NKJV, ESV, etc.) because it gets them as close to the original Greek and Hebrew words of Scripture as the English language will allow.

There are some other, more sectarian (but nonetheless popular) views of Scripture. One view is that Scripture merely “contains” the Word of God and there is nothing special

about the actual words themselves. Those who hold to this view tend to believe that the way God intends for us to understand Scripture must change depending on the culture. (This is why almost every unashamedly theologically liberal and emerging church embracing the open practice of homosexuality these days.) Another view is that the Bible is **just as fallible as any other man-made book**, and thus it supposedly contains discrepancies and mistakes. This is the view that the Bible is really not much different than a book of poetry or literature (like Shakespeare or the *Iliad*). People who hold to these views of Scripture tend to want a “paraphrase” translation of the Bible (like the Message, NLT, CEV, etc.). This makes sense, since they do not value fidelity to the actual words in which Scripture was originally written.

The translators of the NIV (New International Version) claim a “dynamic equivalent” translation philosophy, meaning some passages of the NIV were translated with a more “word-for-word” approach, whereas others were translated with more of a “paraphrase” approach. (Have you ever heard of Russian roulette?)

I guess I’ll insert this comment here: The *New World Translation* is the official translation of the religious sect known as the “Jehovah’s Witnesses.” They do not believe Jesus is God (thus they are not truly a “Christian” denomination). They have altered every verse they can get away with that is contrary to their religious beliefs. Conveniently, they have kept their translators “anonymous.” Their “Bible” does not even make our list of legitimate Bible translations, since it is more propaganda than it is a scholarly translation of the Hebrew and Greek manuscripts.

6. Chapter and verse numbers aren’t inspired.

Scripture did not originally contain chapters and verses. When inspired authors like Moses, John, and Paul wrote their respective books of the Bible, they did not include chapters and verses. Over the course of hundreds of years, scribes (people who copied Scripture) slowly inserted them into the text, making things easier for us to find.

For example, in the 13th century, Stephen Langton (a professor at the University of Paris and later the so-called “archbishop” of Canterbury) inserted our modern-day chapter divisions in the New Testament. Three hundred years later, Robert Stephanus inserted our modern-day verse markings in his fourth edition of the Greek New Testament. After the 16th century, Bible translations slowly began to adapt a standardized chapter and verse system. It’s okay to occasionally think to yourself, “That chapter shouldn’t have ended there.”

7. Newer translations are not removing words and verses.

Occasionally, you will hear someone who prefers the KJV make the claim that newer translations are “removing words and verses” from the Bible. In reality, the translators of the KJV are typically the ones who added words and verses that more modern, superior translations have not. This is because the most reliable, respected Hebrew and Greek manuscripts do not have verses like John 5:4 or Acts 8:37 – verses which, by the account of nearly every conservative Biblical textual scholar, were not original to the inspired Scriptures. **Incidentally, whenever you find one of these unfortunately named “missing verses,” nearly every modern translation of the Bible still places them in the footnotes.**

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