

How do we choose a version of the Bible?

Fifty years ago most people in the UK used the *King James Version*; now there are many English translations available. So how do we decide which to use? You may or may not be pleased to hear that I am not going to tell you which version to use or which one is best. What I shall attempt to do is to outline issues to consider and make a few comments about some of the better known translations, which I hope will help you to make choices.

Of course all English versions are translations of the original texts. The ideal would be to read the Bible in Hebrew and Greek, but most of us will never be able to do that, though there are Greek New Testaments available with a literal English translation alongside, and these can be helpful for study. No translation is perfect. Anyone who has learned another language knows that it is not straightforward to translate. Just as one English word can have several meanings, so can Hebrew and Greek words, and grammar and idiom are not the same in different languages. So translators might have to make difficult choices, which already involve interpretation. Anyway, the aim of translation is not to give a word for word rendering, which would be very wooden, but to communicate the sense of the original in language used today; hence the need for new translations as language and culture change. Also, a good version for study might not be so suitable for rapid reading, and a translation which is best for one person might not be best for someone with a different reading level.

The translator's task is to strike a balance between accuracy and readability. At one end of the scale is literal accuracy but awkward English; at the other is good contemporary English which takes liberties with the meaning. Most translations fall somewhere between these extremes, aiming to enable the reader to understand the text in much the same way as the original readers would have done. It is worth knowing what sort of translation yours is – look for information about it; read the preface; ask for advice.

Some guidelines:

- Don't just use a Bible version because you always have, because you like it or because it is easy to read. Accuracy is important as we need to understand correctly what God is saying to us.
- Use a version translated from the best manuscripts of the original languages. Over the centuries older manuscripts have come to light and knowledge of Hebrew and Greek has improved.
- By and large, translations done by a committee are preferable to those by individuals, who might choose renderings reflecting their own theology rather than ones which are difficult and do not seem to 'fit'.
- Do not use a paraphrase as your only or primary version, though it can be helpful as a supplement to your main version.
- It is good to use one translation most of the time and to become familiar with that, but consult at least one other sometimes so that you are exposed to possible alternative meanings. It is useful to possess at least one more literal translation for study and another freer one for reading larger blocks and for comparison. If you can afford it and can cope with more, all the better.

A few remarks on some of the more familiar versions we are likely to use:

The **King James Version (KJV)**, often called the **Authorised Version**, is precious to many of us and has had a rich history and influence, only losing its place as the world's best-selling Bible about 20 years ago. However, we need to be aware that it was not based on the best original texts, that understanding of Hebrew and Greek was not as good 400 years ago as it is today, and that the English language has changed considerably since the early 17th century.

There is a **New King James Version (NKJV)** published in 1982 as an attempt to modernise the language of the KJV, but it used the same original text rather than being an actual new translation, and so rather falls between two stools.

The **Revised Standard Version (RSV)** sought to update the KJV using better original texts, although it does retain some archaic language and has fallen in usage now that there are genuinely modern versions available.

The **Good News Bible (GNB)** is a translation rather than a paraphrase, done originally for those for whom English is a second language. It avoids traditional Bible vocabulary, seeking to bring out the meaning of theological terms to those unfamiliar with them.

The **Living Bible** is more a paraphrase, and whilst easy to read runs the danger of being over-interpretive. Probably to be preferred is the **New Living Translation**, which is more accurate, though still very readable in British English.

The Message is also more a paraphrase, so has the same drawbacks as the *Living Bible*, and some find it too American, though others love it.

The **New International Version (NIV)**, which we have in the church and which is now the best-selling version in the UK, is like all versions not perfect, but seeks to achieve a balance between accuracy, dignity of language and readability. Some think it is not literal enough, others find the English too formal, but many accept it as the best currently available for general use.

There is a recent more literal translation, the **English Standard Version (ESV)**, which might be worth investigating for study purposes.

One warning – introductions and notes included in some Bibles are not part of the text. They can be helpful but are not infallible and need to be weighed critically, not swallowed whole.

Confused? Well, I did say that I was not going to give any clear-cut answers, and there will always be differences of opinion on the best way to convey God's word in modern English. We should be grateful that we have so many versions available, as together they give valuable insights, and the majority of variations are not crucial to doctrine. The Greek translation of the Old Testament used in Jesus' time was far from ideal, but Jesus never criticised its use, only disobedience to it. Accuracy is important, but God can speak through any version and the vital thing is to read the Bible and obey it.