

Bible Translations

Recently someone asked me what version of the Bible is the best translation. We have the New International Version in our church pews and on the overhead, but the translation we use is not the latest NIV. The one we use was published in 1984 while the most current version of the NIV was published in 2011, for it was felt that an update in the translation was needed. In addition to the NIV, we have multiple translations available to us that are all different from each other. How can we know which one we should use? There are several things we should consider when choosing a translation.

First, we must consider the text of the original languages (Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek). Since the original manuscripts have not survived, all we are left with are copies (and often copies of copies of copies). Thankfully, we have many copies from various places allowing scholars to compare the variety of variant readings and make very careful decisions about which readings are the most likely to have been the original. Variant readings do not often change the core meaning of the text, but it is important to get as close as possible to the words that the biblical authors used. Thankfully, because of centuries of good scholarly work, we can be confident that the texts we now use in the original languages are reliable. Nevertheless, some versions of the Bible rely on older, less reliable manuscripts. (The King James Version is one of those versions, having been produced in 1611 at a time when access to the best original language texts was not yet available, but even that text is reliable enough to give us no reason for concern.)

The work of ensuring that we have an accurate original language text continues and while we can anticipate some minor change, we can be assured that what we have is faithful to the original. That being said, translators have to make sure that they understand the original language and make themselves aware of the different meanings and nuances of a word. Some Hebrew and Greek words have different meanings, depending on the context. English is the same, for the sentence, "That man is gay," means something very different depending on whether we are reading a sentence written in 1953 or 2023. Translators must be certain that they understand the meaning of the words they are translating. While the text of the original language remains stable, there is often discussion about the exact meaning of a particular word. (The word that is translated in Romans 3:25 as "sacrifice of atonement" is one of the words that evokes much discussion.) Again, we can be thankful that scholars generally agree on the meaning and usage of most of the Hebrew and Greek words. Even at that, we recognize that all translation is interpretive, meaning that the translators have begun the process of interpreting the Bible for us.

Translators not only have to be versant in the original language, but they must also be aware of nuances and meanings of words in English. As we are well aware, the English language changes over time (Shakespeare is difficult to read for most of us), and our language has regional differences (cars in England have boots and bonnets). This poses a challenge, for translators must choose language that their contemporaries will understand. This is one of the reasons that there are many translations available to us, and some of them have been updated more than once. What translators want to do is ensure that when we read our English translations, we understand the meaning as it was meant to be understood.

In translation work, translators must decide on a philosophy of translation, and their philosophy normally falls somewhere on a scale. On one of the scale we have more literal translations and on the other we have what some call a dynamic equivalent translation. In a more literal translation (no translation is fully literal), the original languages are translated word for word. Thus, in the King James Version, for example, we find the expression “bowels of mercy,” which is a literal rendering of the Greek. However, that makes very little sense to any of us, and we might miss the meaning of what was originally written. Thus, someone who is interested in getting the meaning across might decide to abandon literalism and substitute an equivalent idea and in the NIV, we find the word, “compassion.” That word we understand, although it might not get quite to the heart of the Greek word. In either a literal (word for word) translation or a dynamic equivalent (idea for idea) translation, there is always going to be a lack of precision in the translations, simply because we speak a different language. A literal translation can easily be misunderstood (and often is), but a dynamic translation can be a little looser than we might desire. Translations on both ends of the scale have benefits, but they also have their drawbacks.

It is important that when we choose a translation, we understand the intentions of the translators. If the translators tend toward literalism, we must not complain that their language is hard to understand and often difficult to read. On the other hand, when a translator intends to translate idea by idea, we ought not complain that their choices don’t necessarily reflect the depth or breadth of what was originally written. We must allow the translations to do what they were intended to do and appreciate them for that.

So, what do we do? There are several options. The first is to learn the original languages. I have studied both Hebrew and Greek, and I have a basic proficiency in them. However, I am far from fluent in either language, and must rely heavily on the work of others both in the meaning of the original word and way I should translate it. On my bookshelf is a 10-volume dictionary containing a discussion about the meaning of most of the Greek words used in the Bible. When I turn to these books, I must still decide which meaning and nuance is the best way for us to understand the word. Again, to do that well, I must rely heavily on scholars who are far more fluent in these languages.

The second option is to read several different translations. Most of us won’t learn the original languages, but most of us also have access to different translations. It wouldn’t be a bad idea to do some reading about the intentions of the translators so that we can best understand what to expect as we use their translation. When choosing several translations, it is best to pick one which is quite literal (e.g. New King James Version), one that tends toward dynamic equivalency (e.g. New Living Translation), and one that is somewhere in the middle (e.g. New International Version). If you can understand another modern language, reading a Bible in that language can also be helpful.

Sometimes we hear people say that they will read only one translation of the Bible to the rejection of all the rest. For them, all the rest aren’t good enough. That is probably a short-sighted decision, for those who read only one version are not getting the whole picture. While all of us have a preferred translation, it is helpful to appreciate other translations, for by reading them in parallel, we will gain a better understanding of what the original authors intended. While we may become confused by all the translations available to us, we also should be thankful for them. I grew up having only the KJV available to me, and while the words and phrases became familiar, my Bible was about as easy to understand as Shakespeare, and for good reason, for Shakespeare’s plays were produced at about the same time as the

KJV. Today, access to many translations gives us a better understanding of God's revelation, and that really is our goal. Let's use the tools God has given us and be thankful for those who made them available to us.

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