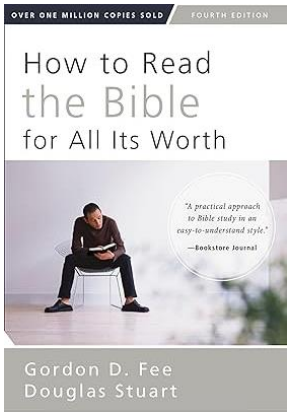
Which Bible Version Should I Use?



In their book, How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth, Old Testament professor Douglas Stuart and New Testament professor Gordon Fee provide practical guideline and tools for understanding the Bible.

The sixty-six books of the Protestant Bible were originally written in three different languages: Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a sister language to Hebrew used in half of Daniel and two passages in Ezra), and Greek (all of the New Testament). Naturally most Bible readers do not know these ancient languages which is why **the most basic tool needed is a good translation.**

First, it is probably a good practice to regularly read one main translation, provided it really is a good one. This will aid in memorization as well as give you consistency. Also, if you are using one of the better translations, it will have notes in the margin at many of the places where there are difficulties. However, for the study of the Bible, you should use several well-chosen translations. The best option is to use translations that one knows in advance will tend to differ. This will highlight where many of the difficult problems of interpretation lie. To resolve these matters, you will usually want to consult one or more commentaries.

But which translation should you use, and which of the several should you study from? No one can really speak for someone else on this matter. But your choice should not be simply because “I like it” or “This one is so readable.” You should indeed like your translation, and if it is a really good one, it will be readable. However, to make an intelligent choice, you need to know something about the science of translation itself as well as about some of the various English translations.

The Science of Translation – There are two kinds of choices that translators must make: textual and linguistic. The first kind has to do with the actual wording of the original text. The second has to do with the translators’ theory of translation that underlies their rendering of the text into English.

The Question of Text – The first concern of translators is to be sure that the Hebrew or Greek text they are using is as close as possible to the original wording as it left the author’s hands (or the hands of the scribe taking it down by dictation). Is this what the psalmist actually wrote? Are these the very words of Mark or Paul? No handwritten “original” exists for any biblical book. What does exist are thousands of copies produced by hand (called “manuscripts”) and copied repeatedly over a period of about 1,400 years.

Since no two of them anywhere in existence are exactly alike, a whole science developed to enable scholars to sift through all the available material, compare the places where the manuscripts differ (these are called “variants”), and determine which of the variants represent errors and which one most likely represents the original text.

Although this may seem like an imposing task — and in some ways it is — translators do not despair, because they also know something about textual criticism, the science that attempts to discover the original texts of ancient documents. For the vast majority of variants found among the manuscripts, the best (or good) external evidence combined with the best internal evidence yields us an extraordinarily high degree of certainty about the original text.

All of this is to say that translators must make textual choices, and it also explains one of the reasons why translations will sometimes differ—and also why translations require making both textual and interpretive decisions.

The Questions of Language – The next two kinds of choices — verbal and grammatical — bring us to the actual science of translation. The difficulty has to do with the transferring of words and ideas from one language to another. To understand what various theories underlie our modern translations, you will need to become acquainted with the following technical terms:

1. Original language: the language that one is translating from; in our case, Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. For convenience, we will usually say just “Hebrew or Greek.”

2. Receptor language: the language that one is translating into; in our case, English.

3. Historical distance: has to do with the differences that exist between the original language and the receptor language, both in matters of words, grammar, and idioms as well as in matters of culture and history.

4. Formal equivalence: the attempt to keep as close to the “form” of the Hebrew or Greek, both words and grammar, as can be conveniently put into understandable English. The closer one stays to the Hebrew or Greek idiom, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation often described as “literal.” Translations based on formal equivalence will keep historical distance intact at all points. The problem here, however, is that “understandable” English is not the goal of good translation; rather the goal is good “contemporary” English that is comparable in language and meaning to the original author’s intent — as much as that can be determined from the context.

5. Functional equivalence: the attempt to keep the meaning of the Hebrew or Greek but to put their words and idioms into what would be the normal way of saying the same thing in English. The more one is willing to forego formal equivalence for functional equivalence, the closer one moves toward a theory of translation frequently described as “dynamic equivalent.” Such translations sustain historical distance on all historical and factual matters but “update” matters of language, grammar, and style.

6. Free translation: the attempt to translate the ideas from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A free translation, sometimes also called a paraphrase, tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible and still be faithful to the intent of the original text. The danger here is that a free translation can easily become too free--reflecting how the translator wishes the concepts would have been conveyed, rather than reflecting faithfully how they actually are conveyed in the original text.

7. Theory of translation has basically to do with whether one puts primary emphasis on formal or on functional equivalency, that is, the degree to which one is willing to go in order to bridge the gap between the two languages, either in use of words and grammar or in bridging the historical distance by offering a modern equivalent. For example, should “lamp” be translated “flashlight” or “torch” in cultures where these serve the purpose a lamp once did? Or should one translate it “lamp,” and let readers bridge the gap for themselves? Should “holy kiss” be translated “the handshake of Christian love” in cultures where public kissing is offensive? Should “coals of fire” become “burning embers/coals,” since this is more normal English?

Should “endurance inspired by hope” (1 Thess 1:3), a formal equivalent that is almost meaningless in English, be rendered “your endurance inspired by hope,” which is what Paul’s Greek actually means?

Translators are not always consistent, but one of these theories will govern all translators’ basic approach to their task. At times the free or literal translations can be excessive, so much so that Clarence Jordan in his Cotton Patch Version “translated” Paul’s letter to Rome as to Washington (!), while Robert Young, in a literal rendering published in 1862, transformed one Pauline sentence into this impossible English (?): “Whoredom is actually heard of among you, and such whoredom as is not even named among the nations — as that one hath the wife of the father” (1 Cor 5:1). This is not a valid translation at all. The several translations of the whole Bible that are most easily accessible may be placed on a formal or functional equivalent and historical distance scale, as shown on the following graph (line 1 represents the original translations, line 2 their various revisions; note that in the case of the RSV, both the NRSV and ESV move more toward the middle, as does the NIV2 (2011), while the NJB, REB and NLT [the revision of the Living Bible] also have moved more toward the middle from their originals).

Formal Equivalence (literal)			Functional Equivalence (dynamic)				Free	
1. KJV	NASB	RSV	NIV[1]	NAB	GNB	JB	NEB	LB
2. NKJV	HCSB	NRSV ESV	NIV[2]	NJB	REB	NLT		The Message

Our view is that the best theory of translation is the one that remains as faithful as possible to both the original and receptor languages, but that when something has to “give,” it should be in favor of the receptor language — without losing the meaning of the original language, of course — since the very reason for translation is to make these ancient texts accessible to the English-speaking person who does not know the original languages. But note well: If the best translational theory is functional equivalence, a translation that adheres to formal equivalence is often helpful as a second source; it can give the reader some confidence as to what the Hebrew or Greek actually looked like. A free translation also can be helpful — to stimulate thinking about the possible meaning of a text. But the basic translation for reading and studying should be something in the NIV/NRSV range.

The problem with a free translation, for study purposes, is that the translator updates the original author too much. In the second half of the twentieth century, three “free translations” served succeeding generations of Christians: Phillips (by J. B. Phillips), the Living Bible (by Ken Taylor, who “translated” into language for the young not the Greek Bible but the KJV), and The Message (by Eugene Peterson). On the one hand, these renditions sometimes have especially fresh and vivid ways of expressing some old truths and have thus each served to stimulate contemporary Christians to take a new look at their Bibles. On the other hand, such a “translation” often comes very close to being a commentary, but without other options made available to the reader. Therefore, as stimulating as these can sometimes be, they are never intended to be one’s only Bible, as even these translators would be quick to admit. Thus, the reader needs regularly to check these rather eye-catching moments against another translation or a commentary to make sure that not too much freedom has been taken.

ON CHOOSING A TRANSLATION

We have been trying to help you choose a translation. We conclude with a few summary remarks about several translations.

First, it should be noted that we have not tried to be exhaustive. There are still other translations of the whole Bible that we have not included in our discussion, not to mention over eighty others of the New Testament alone that have appeared since the beginning of the twentieth century.

Among the whole-Bible translations not discussed are some that are theologically biased, such as the Jehovah's Witnesses' New World Translation (1961). This is an extremely literal translation into which have been worked the heretical doctrines of this cult. One should probably also include here The Amplified Bible, which had a run of popularity far beyond its worth. It is far better to use several translations, note where they differ, and then check out these differences in another source than to be led to believe that a word can mean one of several things in any given sentence, with the reader left to choose whatever best strikes his or her fancy.

Which translation, then, should one read? We would venture to suggest that the current NIV (2011), a committee translation by the best scholarship in the evangelical tradition is as good a translation as you can get. The GNB, HCSB and NAB are also especially good. One would do well to have some or all of these. The NAB is a committee translation by the best scholarship in the American Catholic tradition. The HCSB is a committee translation by evangelical scholars holding to the inerrancy of Scripture. The GNB is an outstanding translation by a single scholar, Robert G. Bratcher, who regularly consulted with others and whose expertise in linguistics has brought the concept of dynamic equivalence to translation in a thoroughgoing way.

Along with one or more of these, readers would also do well to use one or more of the following: the NASB or the NRSV. Both translations are attempts to update the KJV. The translators used superior original texts and thereby eliminated most of what in the KJV did not exist in the original languages. At the same time, they tried to adhere as closely as possible to the language of the KJV, with some modernization. The NRSV is by far the better translation; the NASB is much more like the KJV and therefore far more literal — to the point of being wooden.

Along with one or more of these, we recommend you also consult either the REB or NJB — or both. Both of these are committee translations. The REB is the product of the best of British scholarship and therefore includes many British idioms not always familiar to North American readers. The NJB is an English translation from the French Bible de Jerusalem. Both of these translations tend to be freer at times than the others described here as functionally equivalent. But both of them also have some outstanding features and are well worth using in conjunction with the others.

If you were regularly to read the NIV 2011 and then consult at least one from three other categories (NRSV/NASB; GNB/NAB; REB/NJB), you would be giving yourself the best possible start to an intelligent reading and study of the Bible.*

* ***N.B.*** *this is an abbreviated summary of chapter two "The Basic Tool—A Good Translation"*