

# How We Got Our Bible

## Lesson 5: Choosing a Translation

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### I. Translation Theory

- A. The Challenge: A word-for-word translation of one language to another will almost always be unreadable.
  - 1. Vocabulary terms often don't have an exact parallel in the translation language.
  - 2. Syntax and sentence structure vary widely from language to language.
  - 3. Every language uses figures of speech, slang, cultural/historical references, etc., which are often confusing or misleading in another language (e.g., "cool," "falling in love," "wise as an owl").
- B. Potential Solutions
  - 1. Formal Equivalency: "A formal equivalent translation of the Bible tries to follow the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek wording as closely as possible...The strength of a formal equivalent translation is its focus on being faithful to the original text. The weakness of formal equivalent translations is the fact that they tend to be a bit more difficult to read" (Jones, *How We Got the Bible*, p. 142).
  - 2. Functional (Dynamic) Equivalency: "A functional equivalent translation usually translates the original languages phrase-by-phrase, following the flow of the biblical text without trying to translate every word...The strength of these translations is that they are easy to read, especially for children and new believers. The weakness is that it's difficult to use these translations for any sort of detailed Bible study since so many words and phrases are modified to make the text flow smoothly in English" (Jones, p. 142).
  - 3. Paraphrase: "A paraphrase really isn't a translation at all. A paraphrase tries to restate the ideas in the biblical text in the ways that we might say them if they were written down today. Paraphrases add a lot of explanations and interpretations along the way. Paraphrases are easy to read, but they aren't meant to follow the exact wording of the original text" (Jones, p. 142).
- C. Arguments for Literalism
  - 1. Scripture assumes that God didn't merely inspire thoughts; he inspired the original words and phrases of Scripture (Jer 1:9; Matt 5:17-18).
  - 2. Literalism protects the translator from allowing his presuppositions to affect the translation.
  - 3. Literalism preserves the genuine ambiguities in the text and leaves the Bible student to discern the meaning in the strength of the Holy Spirit.

- “Many interpretive decisions that should be made *by* the reader are instead already made *for* the reader by the translator (in a dynamic equivalent translation). The sense of the original is often conveyed less fully than would be the case in a word-for-word translation, and many important nuances and contours of the original are lost” (Perman, “What Bible Translation Does John Piper Recommend?”).
4. Literalism best preserves correlations/quotations between passages of Scripture.
  5. Literalism best preserves the precision and depth of certain terms and phrases.
- D. Arguments for Readability
1. The NT was written in the common language—koine, not classical Greek.
  2. The goal of translation is understanding.
    - “An accurate translation no one can understand isn’t a translation. But if the target audience can’t read it, the text in question didn’t get translated...An ‘accurate’ translation into a language I don’t speak does me no good. I’m tempted, in fact, to say it’s not really accurate” (Ward, “An Answer to One of My Top Two Critics”).
    - “The reason for nonliteral translation is to communicate more effectively with the speakers of the target language. If that communication is effective, it is effective in capturing biblical meaning that would otherwise be lost. So we shouldn’t think that only literal translations capture biblical meaning. Literal and nonliteral translations differ in the kind of meaning they convey” (Frame, p. 257).
  3. Sometimes a strict word for word translation that doesn’t consider context or differences between languages can distort meaning or be misleading.
    - a. “Even in the most ‘literal’ of translations, the translator must on occasion make decisions as to the meaning of a passage. Or if he rightly understands the meaning, he may nevertheless be forced to choose among several options in the receptor language, all of which leave something to be desired” (Carson, *The King James Version Debate: A Plea for Realism*, p. 88).
    - b. “To the psalmist God’s words were in Hebrew; and no matter how careful, how literal the translation of those words into English, the result is still English words. And the semantic range of the English word will seldom if ever correspond exactly to the semantic range of the Hebrew word (or expression) that underlies it” (Carson, p. 91).
    - c. Syntax is often more fluid than we realize.
- E. Case Against Paraphrase
1. The further a translator moves from the words and phrases of Scripture toward readability and clarity, the more he will insert his presuppositions, theological commitments, and interpretations into the translation.
  2. At some point, his work becomes a commentary rather than a translation.

## F. Case for Context

1. Christians often like to debate which translation is the best, as if we must choose one translation for every context. We should instead ask, “Which translation is best for my particular context?”
2. Expository preaching is best served by a literal translation that stays true to the original words and phrases and that preserves genuine ambiguities.
  - “Preaching that gives clear explanations and arguments from the wording of specific Biblical texts tends to be undermined when a Bible paraphrases instead of preserving the original wording on good English. And when that kind of preaching is undermined, the whole level of Christian thinking in the church goes down, and a Bible-saturated worldview is weakened, and the ability of the people—and even the pastors themselves—to root their thoughts and affections in firm Biblical ground diminishes (Piper, “Good English with Minimal Translation: Why Bethlehem Uses the ESV”).
3. Personal Bible Study
  - a. A mature, well-educated believer will be well-served by a literal translation, especially when working through small portions of Scripture.
  - b. A new believer or child who is just getting started in Bible study will be best served by a more readable translation.
  - c. When you are reading or listening to large portions of Scripture, you will benefit from a smooth translation with simple sentence structure.
4. Evangelism and Basic Discipleship
  - “One of the best things you can do in evangelism or counseling is to ask people to read the Bible in your hand for themselves. This way they can see that you’re not making up what you’re saying. You can focus instead on what God says. Such a conversation—on the bus, on a plane, in a park, at a store—is not the place for expository-level textual analysis. You want simple, clear English and a minimum of interpretive difficulty” (Ward, “5 Guidelines for Picking the Right Bible Translation”).

### Dr. Combs' Chart

Formal Correspondence				Functional Equivalence						Free		
ASV	KJV	RSV	ESV	CSB	NIV	NJB	GNT	NLT	JB	PHILLIPS	LB	MSG
NASB	NKJV	NRSV	NAB	NET	CEV	REB	NEB					

## II. Major Modern English Translations

### A. New King James Version (NT: 1979, OT: 1982)

1. The NKJV is a literal translation that also seeks to preserve the style and beauty of the KJV.
2. Thomas Nelson produced the NKJV. Their website states, "The purpose of the New King James Version is to preserve the authority and accuracy, as well as the rhythm and beauty, of the original King James Version while making it understandable to current readers. The result is a Bible translation, scrupulously faithful to the original, yet truly updated to enhance its clarity and readability."
3. The NKJV was a legitimate and helpful update of the KJV. It's literal and fairly readable; however, it is still based on the Textus Receptus.

### B. New American Standard Bible (NT: 1963, OT: 1971, Updated: 1977, 1995, 2020)

1. The Lockman Foundation's website states, "The NASB has been produced with the conviction that the words of Scripture, as originally penned in the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, are inspired by God. Therefore every word must be accurate and precise so that they are read with confidence."
2. "The NASB does not attempt to interpret Scripture through translation. Instead, the NASB adheres to the principles of a formal equivalence translation. This is the most exacting and demanding method of translation, striving for the most readable word-for-word translation that is both accurate and clear. This method more closely follows the word and sentence patterns of the biblical authors in order to enable the reader to study Scripture in its most literal format and to experience the individual personalities of those who penned the original manuscripts. Translating text from one language to another always comes with trade-offs, but the NASB places the highest priority on consistently adhering to formal equivalence translation, so the literalness of the original manuscripts is not sacrificed. Instead of the translation choices telling the reader what to think, the NASB simply provides the most precise English translation it can. This way readers can study the text as they personally journey through the Word of God" (Lockman Foundation).
3. If you are looking for a literal, conservative translation, the NASB is the place to go. The most common critique of the NASB is that it often awkward and difficult to read.

### C. English Standard Version (2001, Updated: 2007, 2011, 2016)

1. Crossway Books purchased the rights to the Revised Standard Version (1971), and used it as a starting point with the goal of producing a literal but readable, conservative translation.
2. “The ESV is an ‘essentially literal’ translation that seeks as far as possible to capture the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer. As such, its emphasis is on ‘word-for-word’ correspondence, at the same time taking into account differences of grammar, syntax, and idiom between current literary English and the original languages. Thus it seeks to be transparent to the original text, letting the reader see as directly as possible the structure and meaning of the original...Every translation is at many points a trade-off between literal precision and readability, between ‘formal equivalence’ in expression and ‘functional equivalence’ in communication, and the ESV is no exception. Within this framework we have sought to be ‘as literal as possible’ while maintaining clarity of expression and literary excellence” ([esv.org](http://esv.org)).
3. “I think it is fair to conclude that the nature of the ESV is closer to the NIV than to the NASB. This is contrary to the popular perception of the ESV (and might even be to the publisher an unwelcome comparison)” (Decker, “Translation Philosophy and the English Standard Version New Testament,” p. 30).

D. Christian Standard Bible (NT: 2000, OT: 2004, revised: 2009, 2017, 2020)

1. The CSB was originally entitled the *Holman Christian Standard Bible*. It was translated under the direction of the Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention.
2. “The CSB was created using optimal equivalence, a translation philosophy that pursues both linguistic precision to the original languages and readability in contemporary English. We believe that you don’t have to choose between faithfulness to the original text and clarity. The CSB text has been proven to optimize both, making it ideal for preaching and study, and for sharing with others” ([csbible.org](http://csbible.org)).
3. The CSB strives to land somewhere between the ESV and the NIV. The goal is a flexible translation for multiple contexts from serious study to a children’s Sunday School class. It is not an exclusively Baptist translation. The translation team was interdenominational but wholly conservative.

E. New International Version (NT: 1973, OT: 1978; revised: 1984, 2011)

1. The NIV grew out of an alliance in 1965 between the Christian Reformed Church and the National Association of Evangelicals. Their goal was to produce a new and conservative Bible translation that would enjoy the broad impact of the KJV.
2. “When the books of the Bible were first written, they spoke clearly to people in their heart language. There was no gap between hearing God’s Word and understanding it. The translation philosophy of the New International Version (NIV) is to recreate this experience for you in contemporary English. Sometimes the Bible can feel like a foreign book. But that’s not how it felt to its original audience. The Scriptures captured exactly what God wanted to say to them in their everyday language and idiom. Those who

heard God's Word could understand it. To be sure, there are plenty of things for us to wrestle with in the Bible. But your translation shouldn't be one of them. That's the translation philosophy behind the New International Version (NIV): giving you the most accurate text possible in clear, natural English" ([thenivbible.com](http://thenivbible.com)).

3. The NIV has captured a wide audience. Since 1986, it has outsold every other Bible translation, including the KJV.
  4. The CBMW and a resolution at the 2011 SBC annual meeting were both critical of the NIV11's use of "gender accuracy," when translating certain masculine nouns and pronouns. Douglas Moo, the chairman of the Committee on Bible Translation, responded by stating, "Our gender decisions were made on the basis of very careful and significant research ... and the decisions we've made about gender have no motivation of not offending people...The motivation, rather, is to communicate clearly to people what we think arguably is contemporary English" (quoted by Foust in "TNIV Debate Renewed in Critique of New NIV").
- F. New Living Translation (1996, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition: 2004, updated: 2015)
1. The NLT is a revision of the Living Bible; however, it was translated using the original languages (The LB was a free paraphrase of the ASV).
  2. Craig Blomberg states, "I relished the chance to work on the NLT...team to convert the LB into a truly dynamic-equivalent translation, but I never recommend it to anyone except to supplement the reading of a more literal translation to generate freshness and new insights, unless they are kids or very poor adult readers. My sixteen- and twelve-year old daughters have been weaned on the NLT and have loved it, but both already on their own are now frequently turning to the NIV."
- G. The Message (NT: 1993, OT: 2002)
1. "This is a highly idiomatic personal paraphrase of the Bible produced by Eugene H. Peterson, a pastor and college professor. It uses contemporary American slang" (Combs Syllabus).
  2. "Though it is one of the best-selling "Bibles," it is incorrect to place it in the category of what is normally called a "Bible. There is nothing evil about reading it, but one must be careful to realize that one is reading one person's interpretative paraphrase" (Combs Syllabus).