

ON BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

PRINCIPLES FOR CHOOSING A SOLID BIBLE TRANSLATION

INTRODUCTION

There are an estimated 900+ translations of the English Bible in existence today! While many feel that this is an extreme excess since it's virtually impossible for the average person to read 900 different translations, many others feel it builds on our understanding of Bible translation and strengthens our ability to continue producing solid mainstream Bible translations for generations to come as the English language continues to change.

In this essay I want to address three primary points:

1. Is there only one only good translation of the English Bible?
2. The challenges of Bible translation.
3. Suggested Bible translations.

MY BIASES AND LIMITATIONS

Evaluating Bible translations is a very difficult endeavor. I believe that it is important to be truthful about our own biases and limitations when offering critiques of Bible translations so that we are not led by pride into deception. If you wish to skip this page, you may, but I offer these upfront for the purposes of transparency and honesty.

My first BIAS is that I am coming from an evangelical theological perspective of Biblical inerrancy.

My second bias is that I am coming from the perspective of a preacher and Bible teacher. This means that I use extensive Bible study tools and techniques to come to my own conclusions after much prayer and meditation regarding the meaning of the Bible.

My third bias is that I prefer Byzantine source text (Majority Text) Bibles that are translated with a formal equivalence philosophy like the NKJV to those Bibles from a dynamic equivalence philosophy and Alexandrian source text like the NLT.

My first major LIMITATION is that I have not yet achieved fluency in any of the Bible's original languages (though I can read Greek). This means that I cannot simply sit down with the original text and compare the flow between the new translation and the original text to see if they deliver the same message, doctrine, and ideas.

To compensate for this I use advanced Bible study tools that give me access to a wide range of scholarly resources by which I am able to study the meaning of individual words from the original language.

My second major limitation is that I am not proficient in the process of Bible Translation. This means that I do not have a high degree of understanding of the ins-and-outs of the process of Bible translation that has been developed and carefully honed for almost 2,000 years!

To compensate for this I have applied my experience preaching as a missionary to my readings of secondary arguments pertaining to the process of Biblical translation. But most importantly, I discipline myself with *humility*. Truly, "knowledge puffs up", and I have seen too many people who are not honest about their own limitations and biases offer damaging critiques on Bible translation. Indeed, I have admittedly felt this temptation personally.

My first bias comes into play here, but at the end of the day I believe that God watches over the Word to ensure that His infallible testimony is always on earth.

And I believe that translation criticism from pastors and laymen alike is an integral part of *accountability* in the translation process that greatly enhances the overall results of our Bible translations, but only if those who are offering these criticisms are honest and transparent about their limitations and do not overreach their bounds to inflict real damage on the Body by diminishing the credibility of perfectly valid translations. Critiques such as these must be done in humility.

Therefore, I offer this critique of Bible translation from a pastor's perspective.

ONLY ONE TRANSLATION?

It is unfortunate, but I feel that I must begin by addressing the KJV controversy.

I am keenly aware that there are those who are of the persuasion that the KJV is the only inspired English and that anyone who reads from another translation is necessarily condemned as a heretic and apostate. All I have to say to these brothers and sisters is that this judgment is not inherently validated by the KJV itself and we should fear rendering judgments that God has not plainly made.

To those brothers and sisters who do believe the KJV is the only fully inspired English translation of the Bible, but who do not render condemning judgments against their brethren based on translation, I invite your dialogue and discussion on this subject and hope this critique can serve to bring unity and soberness of mind to all parties involved (myself included).

SOURCE-TEXT CONTROVERSY

The primary point of contention is over the *source text* used for translation.

A brief survey of Biblical Source Texts can be found from [Wikipedia](#):

Another key issue in translating the Bible is selecting the source text. The Bible far predates printing presses, so every book had to be copied by hand for many centuries. Every copy introduced the risk of error. Thus, a key step in performing a translation is to establish what the original text was, typically by comparing extant copies. This process is called textual criticism.

Textual criticism of the Old Testament centers on the comparison of the manuscript versions of the Masoretic text to early witnesses such as the Septuagint, the Vulgate, the Samaritan Pentateuch, various Syriac texts, and the biblical texts of the Dead Sea Scrolls.

The New Testament has been preserved in more manuscripts than any other ancient work, creating a challenge in handling so many different texts when performing these comparisons. The King James Version (or Authorized Version) was based on the Textus Receptus, an eclectic Greek text prepared by Erasmus based primarily on [Byzantine Text](#) Greek manuscripts, which make up the majority of existing copies of the New Testament.

The majority of New Testament textual critics now favor a text that is [Alexandrian](#) in complexion, especially after the publication of Westcott and Hort's edition. There remain some proponents of the Byzantine text-type as the type of text most similar to the autographs. These include the editors of the Hodges and Farstad text and the Robinson and Pierpoint text.

Here's the basic idea: the majority of ancient manuscripts in existence today fall under the Byzantine Source Text (commonly called the Majority Text), while some of the oldest fall under the Alexandrian Source Texts. Those who favor a "Textual Criticism" translation philosophy will favor using the older Alexandrian texts, while those who favor a "Majority Criticism" will favor using the vast Byzantine texts.

Many critics of the Alexandrian texts go into controversies surrounding Alexandrian Occults and modern Alexandrian editors like Westcott and Hort that I will not get into here for reasons that will become evident later. It will be sufficient to say here that I do believe these controversies make valid points, but are not sufficient to discredit our modern sound translations of the Bible. I feel these controversies have in some cases morphed into conspiracies and inspire fear, skepticism, doubt, and an unstable mind that is dangerous and unhealthy to believers.

THE HOLY SPIRIT

Scripture, and humanity's entrance into the truth, is a sovereign work of the Holy Spirit in accordance to the will of God.

2nd Timothy 3:16-17 (MEV) "All Scripture is inspired by God and is profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for instruction in righteousness,¹⁷ that the man of God may be complete, thoroughly equipped for every good work."

2nd Peter 1:19-21 (MEV) "And we have a more reliable word of prophecy, which you would do well to follow, as to a light that shines in a dark place, until the day dawns and the morning star arises in your hearts. But know this first of all, that no prophecy of the Scripture is a matter of one's own interpretation. For no prophecy at any time was produced by the will of man, but holy men moved by the Holy Spirit spoke from God."

John 16:13 (MEV) "But when the Spirit of truth comes, He will guide you into all truth. For He will not speak on His own authority. But He will speak whatever He hears, and He will tell you things that are to come."

Vigorously faithful Bible translation is an important and necessary response to the Holy Spirit's work of inspiring Scripture, but entering into an understanding of the truth requires the Holy Spirit Himself; no translation, not even reading the originals, is sufficient to bypass the necessity of the Holy Spirit in leading us into the truth!

While this reality has been used by some people to pick up fallacious paraphrases like "The Message" as their primary Bible, ignoring this truth has likewise led many to think they had aspired to the truth by their own means. I suggest rather than ignoring or mishandling this truth, we keep it in perspective while we seek to please God in all things.

Herein is the point: Bible's based off both primary source texts have been used of God in the English language to lead many people to a genuine and sincere holy faith in Jesus Christ; freedom from sin, regeneration in the Holy Spirit, and subsequent faithfulness of life in perseverance through trials and tribulation have resulted in those who have read Bibles from both source texts. To ignore this is to ignore the work of God that merits praise and thanksgiving be rendered to Him. Those who condemn others based on their version do so, not based on the plain judgments of God, but based solely upon controversy.

WEAKNESSES VS ERRORS?

Do significant weaknesses exist in a translation like the NASB (Alexandrian source text) as opposed to the KJV (Byzantine source text)? Yes! But there are also significant weaknesses in the KJV when compared to the NASB!

An *error* either contradicts the truth of God's word or prevents the reader from understanding and accessing this truth, while a *weakness* only obscures the truth and makes it more difficult to access. The most common misconception about translation errors is that "using a word that was not originally used" is an error. This is a misunderstanding about the translation process and would bring even the KJV into error. An example is in the KJV's translation of the Greek word "agape" as "charity"; "agape" is significantly more than "charity", but there's simply no equivalent to "agape" in English.

Another common misconception is that when two translations use different words they are contradicting one another. The reality is that they may actually be revealing different sides of the same word in its original meaning! James 1:12 illustrates this point in that the MEV uses the word "temptation" while the NASB uses the word "trial"; these are different thoughts in English, but the Greek word **πειρασμός** (peirasmos) actually means both trial or temptation!

Bible translators must find the nearest match and then the Church must mature the understanding of that word through sound doctrinal teaching so that over time the word used by the Bible translators can begin to match the meaning of the original word. What may rile many people about Bible translation are *weaknesses* wherein an undeveloped or inadequate word has been selected and the rich meaning of the original has been obscured. Weaknesses are not good, but they are not entirely avoidable.

CHALLENGES IN BIBLE TRANSLATION

Perhaps the **biggest challenge** in Bible Translation is conveying the exact meaning of the original text into a language where no comparably exact word exists.

As a missionary I run into this when preaching the gospel all the time. My translators are constantly struggling to find words that convey the meaning of the more theologically developed English words that I use when preaching. For example, there is no exact match for the word “sanctification” in the local language here, however, the Church is beginning to cultivate their own language and, over time, they will possess an equally robust word for “sanctification”.

Another major challenge is finding a word that is philosophically sufficient but not religiously contaminated.

One of our biggest challenges here is found in John 1:1. “In the beginning the Word...” The Greek word “*logos*” does not just mean “word”; it was a very philosophically sophisticated word that meant much more than simply a “word”. However, our English word, “WORD”, was pure from any pagan religious connotation and possessed the needed flexibility and potential to be developed into an equally robust word as the Greek word *logos*.

In our local language, the Church struggles to find a sufficient word to translate the Greek word *logos* that is not religiously contaminated. The word currently being used already has a lot of pagan religious connotation to it. So the Church must struggle to either distinguish their word for logos, or find a new and more neutral word that they can develop on their own.

Another major challenge in Bible Translation is conveying the meaning of a phrase from the original text that would be entirely senseless in another language.

Again, I run into this all the time as a foreigner living in a country that does not speak English. How do you say “no thank you”, in a language where the exact word for “no” combined with the exact words for “thank you” is utterly meaningless? You must use the equivalent for “no thank you” in the new language, even though the exact words do not match, otherwise you would have an entirely senseless and wrong translation!

TRANSLATION PHILOSOPHIES

Here are the two primary translation philosophies used today:

1. Formal Equivalence (often called word-for-word)
2. Dynamic Equivalence (often called thought-for-thought)

In my experience *functionally* with the text as a preacher, I find strengths and weaknesses in both philosophies. So I am going to speak from this point of view rather than pretending to be a translation scholar.

FORMAL EQUIVALENCE

The strength of formal equivalence is that the nearest possible word to the original text is presented to the reader, even when the plain meaning of the original text may be somewhat obscured. I prefer this when studying because it leaves the decision of interpretation up to me, rather than giving it to the translators to make the decision for me. However, because there are often-times no exact matches in the English language, I prefer to have multiple formal equivalence versions available to me so that I can gain the broader spectrum of the original word being translated.

The obvious weakness of this approach is that the plain meaning of the original text may be lost to those who do not apply themselves to faithfully studying the word and praying for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

The strength of dynamic equivalence is that the translators seek to bring the plain meaning of the original text into the new language, even if that means using words in the new language that did not appear in the original text. This allows a reader to access the meaning of the text by simply reading the text without applying more arduous study techniques to the text.

The obvious weaknesses of this are that one must rely on the translators to interpret the meaning of the text for you. Since the theological background of the interpreters of the passages you are reading may not be readily available to you, this means you have to trust an unknown man or woman to make the final say on the meaning of the text for you without even knowing his or her theological biases.

MY SUGGESTION

To a reader who does not know how to apply more rigorous study methods to their Bible I would suggest prayerfully reading from a combination of versions: read from a formal equivalence translation like the MEV or NKJV, and then also read from a dynamic equivalence Bible like the old NIV or the NET / CEV. But do not be afraid to read from a formal equivalence translation like the NKJV. If you are born again, you are being led by the Holy Spirit and He will guide you into all truth!

The NASB is a hybrid translation that mightily uses both approaches.

I was raised on the NIV and entered seminary with it. Later I transitioned to the NASB when I entered the ministry and grew exponentially – I'm sure a great deal of that growth had to do with entering the ministry, but I have found that I grow a lot every time I switch to a new translation. Later, while in the mission field, I switched to the NKJV for my primary Bible.

Here's what I have found: keeping a consistent primary translation for a prolonged period of time is important for helping you to catch onto a consistent theme of the Biblical message, while supplementing your Bible reading with a diverse number of translations will help you see the manifold wisdom of God's word that may be obscured if you read only from one translation.

I have also found that a sound *study method* is equally important. Your study method should involve prayer, frequent Old and New Testament Book readings, and occasional topical study.

MY SUGGESTED BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

The following translations are those that I have found to be most helpful in my own Bible study and Bible teaching.

1. NKJV – The New King James Version
2. NASB – The New American Standard Bible
3. MEV – The Modern English Version
4. ESV – The English Standard Version
5. ASV – The American Standard Version
6. KJV – The King James Version
7. WEB – The World English Bible

NKJV

The NKJV is from the Byzantine source text and employs a formal equivalence translation philosophy. It originally set out to be an update to the KJV, but due to copy-right laws, eventually became a version in its own.

The NKJV is my primary Bible and preserves the consistency of word-translation that I find very useful for understanding Bible themes across scripture.

NASB

The NASB is from the Alexandrian source text and employs a hybrid philosophy between both formal and dynamic equivalence known as optimal equivalence. It has become known as one of the standard bearers for Bible translation accuracy.

I regularly use the NASB in conjunction with my NKJV because it is so powerfully translated! This was the first Bible I switched to from the NIV and I did not find the transition to be insurmountable.

MEV

[The MEV](#) is a new translation completed in 2014 in the KJV tradition of the Textus Receptus and a formal equivalence philosophy. It began by military chaplains who wanted to get an updated Bible version from the KJV tradition into the hands of military servicemen and women.

Though I was initially skeptical of this Bible, I have fallen in love with it and it has become my preaching and evangelism Bible. The language is very accessible to the average everyday reader, yet it does not lose the power of the original text in most cases. I would not hesitate to recommend this Bible as a primary Bible and have even considered it for myself.

Since adopting it in late 2016 for my preaching Bible, we have seen genuine repentance brought to new converts through this translation.

ESV

The ESV is from the Alexandrian source text and employs a formal equivalence translation philosophy. It is a beloved translation by many people all over the world and is considered one of the more easily understood formal equivalence translations.

My wife prefers the ESV to this day. I have found that it has the smoothest flow of almost any other Bible on this list.

ASV/KJV

I have a very high regard for the KJV and its lesser-known style-rival, the ASV.

The ASV was translated in 1901 from the Alexandrian source text with formal equivalence, and the KJV is Byzantine (Textus Receptus) and formal equivalence. The academic realm still considers the ASV to be the most literal version of the English Bible to this day, and the KJV is unparalleled in scope of influence, both in the Church and the English language itself. The ASV is equally arduous to read as the KJV, but the word-choice is based on a late 1800's, early

1900's vocabulary, so it is more accessible to modern day readers. The primary difference between these two translations, outside of the era of English language in which they are written, will be the source text from which they are translated.

I use both the KJV and the ASV as base-texts when checking new translations. But I do not use them as primary reading or studying Bibles because they are too inaccessible.

Because I have encountered so many brothers and sisters who think they understand KJV-era English, but do not, I contacted the editor of the King James Bible Society to ask for resources that would help modern readers get a more accurate grasp of KJV vocabulary, and he gave me the following recommendation: Webster's 1828 Dictionary of the English Language (a free online version can be obtained [here](#)).

WEB

The WEB is from the Byzantine source text and employs a formal equivalence translation philosophy. It is a little-known and unique work in the realm of Bible translation because it is based off the ASV English version, but looked to the Byzantine source text wherever the Alexandrian text departed from the Textus Receptus.

It is not under copy-right, but is under a free license like the KJV. Another feature is that it uses the actual names of God instead of "LORD". It also uses modern contractions like "don't" instead of "do not". Therefore, "do not lie to one another" has been rendered "don't lie to one another".

My extensive search for a preaching Bible from the Byzantine source text led me to the World English Bible before I discovered the MEV. While I still prefer the MEV to the WEB because the WEB is just a little bit too clunky, I am very impressed with the WEB and really love that they translated the Lord's names directly.

Having no copy-right laws means that it may be used conscience free online without restrictions.

Perhaps the biggest downside to this version is that it is designed primarily as a digital version, meaning I have only found one format in printed version!

CONCLUSIONS

My hope is that this critique of Bible translation and some of the processes, controversies, and experiences involved, will help you understand the value of using multiple versions when studying the Bible!

There is no doubt that I have met wonderful, healthy, vibrant Christians who use only one Bible translation – including those who only use the KJV – and I am confident of the Lord's work in their life to both positively impact the Kingdom of God for His glory and safely bring them home to Jesus, I also have personally experienced the richness and joy that comes from studying God's holy word in multiple versions.

I have not addressed what are referred to as "paraphrases" – like The Message or The Living Bible – because these are not true translations. But in brief, I believe paraphrases should be used for nothing more than *commentaries*, and would strongly advise against reading them as if they were actually the Bible. Even a superficial survey of what a paraphrase is should immediately support this conclusion.

Although this is not an advanced scholarly critique of Bible translations, I hope this pastor's critique will be of benefit to the precious bride of Jesus Christ.