

Choosing Translations for Bible Study

A preacher should have as much money in his library as in his pickup truck, or so says a pastoral advisor to my church. Those charged to regularly teach the scriptures need good tools for study. So do the rest of us. Not all of us will spend thousands of dollars on commentaries or devote years of our lives to studying the Greek and Hebrew languages in which the scripture was written. But, as Christians, we all must be students of the Word.

Fortunately, the most important tools for Bible Study are inexpensive and easy to obtain, at least for English speakers. The tools I have in mind are the Bible itself, in its multiple translations into our native language. Bible translations can be a confusing subject. There is an alphabet suit of different translations available like the ASV, CEV, ESV, KJV, NAB, NEB, RSVand the list goes on! What we should remember is that this represents an embarrassment of riches for English speakers. In this article I focus, not on choosing a bible for primary use like public reading and memorizing, but rather on assembling a small collection of translations for study purposes.

Choosing a set of translations for Bible study

Bible apps make it easy to compare many translations of a given verse. This is helpful, but I still advise getting two or three translations in print. You will become familiar with these select translations, and it will be easier to pore over passages, or to read extensively, with a book in front of you. If you don't own at least two or three translations in print, what should you purchase to build your library? If you have several translations and want to add a few more, how do you know what translations will best complement your existing collection?

Of all the translations on the market, many fall into families, or natural groupings. You want to aim for a balanced collection by choosing Bibles from various groupings. One family of translations consists of those that derive from King James Version of 1611. This includes the NASB, the ESV, the NKJV, and NRSV as well as the older RSV, RV, and ASV and a host of other minor translations. (Don't worry, the table below imposes some order on this confusing alphabet soup!) While these translations will vary among themselves, it is helpful to compare them to another translation that is not a derivative of the familiar KJV.

Another grouping of English translations is those done by Evangelical scholars. The ESV, NIV, CSB, NET, NLT and others reflect the biblical scholarship of the modern Evangelical community. On the one hand Evangelicals are generally committed to a high view of scripture and to understanding scripture in line with historic Christian orthodoxy. This makes careful translations by Evangelicals a good choice for studying the Bible. On the other hand, even the most careful translations are inevitably affected by how the translators understand scripture and its teachings. For this reason, we do well to include translations from other branches of the Christian church and other scholarly communities.

The following table marks out four quadrants based on these two ways of grouping bible translations. The top left lists versions which derive from the KJV and have been translated by Evangelical scholars. The top right lists translations derived from the KJV, but not reflecting modern Evangelical scholarship. The bottom left represents other translations done by Evangelical scholars. The bottom right lists some other modern translations. At a minimum you should own at least one translation from each row and at least one from each column. Ideally your study collection would include one from each quadrant.

	Evangelical Scholarship	Non-Evangelical Scholarship
KJV based	English Standard Version (ESV) New American Standard Bible (NASB or NAS) New King James Version (NKJV)	American Standard Version (ASV) New Revised Standard Version (RSV) Revised Standard Version (RSV)
Not KJV based	Christian Standard Bible (CSB or HCSB) New English Translation (NET) New International Version (NIV or TNIV) New Living Translation (NLT)	New American Bible (NAB) New English Bible (NEB) Revised English Bible (REB) Jerusalem Bible (JB) Common English Bible (CEB)

Notes on the Apocrypha and the Septuagint

You should have a copy of the Apocrypha. Most contemporary Anabaptists don't consider it part of the Bible, but reading the Apocrypha provides an important background for understanding the New Testament, and you will frequently see it referenced by earlier Christian writers. Most translations in the right-hand column are available with editions that include the Apocrypha.¹ (Learn more about the Apocrypha in these two episodes from Anabaptist Perspectives.)

It is also helpful to have a translation of the Old Testament derived from the Septuagint. Before the time of Christ, the Hebrew Bible was translated into Greek. The New Testament, itself of course written in Greek, often quotes the Greek Septuagint. Several English translations of the Septuagint are available and adding one to your tool kit is not a bad idea.²

Notes on Translation Issues

One reason to study from multiple translations is so that we don't blindly follow the quirks of any given translations. Diversity is protection. Nonetheless, a basic understanding of some differences among translations can be helpful. I will offer a few comments here that might stir you to further research.

Gender Language in the Bible: Should translations be "gender-neutral."

This is a touchy one. Until the last few decades, the English language allowed free use of the "generic masculine." Pronouns like "he" and "his", and even the word "man", could be used to refer to a person of unknown gender. In many cases a phrase like "any man" would mean, not "any adult male," but simply "any person." For better or for worse, the English language has shifted, and we can no longer say "a man" when we mean "a human." Even using "he" or "him" when a person of either gender could be in view is a real stretch in today's English.

Translations of the last few decades have found various ways to deal with issues of gendered language. In many passages the solutions are quite simple. Other passages bring more complicated issues. For two different ways of dealing with gender issues compare the preface to the ESV with the preface to the NIV. If you take the time to read these prefaces you will also find valuable perspective on how these two translations handle the two issues discussed next.

New Testament Manuscripts

The word "manuscript" means hand copy. Thus, when we talk about Greek manuscripts we are referring to handwritten copies of all or part of the New Testament. Manuscripts date from the days of the early church all the way up to the Reformation era when they were replaced by printed texts of the New Testament. Naturally, hand copied texts incorporate slightly different variations, not only in spelling and punctuation, but also in wording. Many of these variant readings cannot be translated into English and many which can be translated do not affect the sense of the passage. However, some variant readings are more significant and involve whole

verses, or in two cases, paragraphs.

Today, the most common printed text of the New Testament is known alternatively as the NA28 or UBS5. This text was compiled by carefully comparing readings from the manuscripts we have, with special emphasis on the oldest manuscripts of the New Testament. Almost all recent bible translations follow the basic pattern of the NA28 when it comes to which variant readings from the manuscripts they choose to follow. The one major exception is the NKJV which attempts to translate the exact manuscript readings which underlie the King James Version of 1611. The NKJV provides extensive notes, that allow readers to compare its textual basis to standard editions of the text of the Greek New Testament.

The Role of Paraphrase

I want to register a concern about translations that rely too much on paraphrases. I don't have in mind the "functional equivalence" employed to various degrees by all translations, but rather renderings that prioritize what the translator thinks a passage means over precise attention to what it says.

Outright paraphrases like The Message, I regard as more of a commentary than a Bible, but of the translations on the chart above, I would call attention to what I regard as excessive use of paraphrase in the NLT. The approach of the NLT means that the theological beliefs of the translators seem to come through rather clearly. To illustrate, let's compare two verses in the NIV and NLT.

Ephesians 4:30

NIV: *And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.*

NLT: *And do not bring sorrow to God's Holy Spirit by the way you live. Remember, he has identified you as his own, guaranteeing that you will be saved on the day of redemption.*

It is not hard to miss the NLT's emphasis that true Christians cannot, ultimately, fall away from God's salvation. To do this, the NLT pulls in wording from Ephesians 1:13-14, which is why the

NLT reads so differently than other translations in this verse.

2 Peter 1:10

NIV: *Therefore, my brothers and sisters, make every effort to confirm your calling and election. For if you do these things, you will never stumble,*

NLT: *So, dear brothers and sisters, work hard to prove that you really are among those God has called and chosen. Do these things, and you will never fall away.*

Again, theology shows through. For the translators of the NLT, confirming our calling and election does not appear to mean taking steps to safeguard ourselves from the real danger of falling away from God, but rather “proving” that we are among the elect (who God would never allow to fall away). Whether or not you agree with the theology reflected in the NLT in these two passages, I am concerned that the wording prejudges interpretation in a way that the NIV and other major translations do not.

Summary

What should we take away from these notes on Bible translation? Sorting out the advantages and disadvantages of various versions is tricky. Most of us will naturally end up with one translation for our primary use in reading, memorizing, and teaching. The concerns I raised about paraphrases in the NLT means I can't recommend that translation for your primary use. However, this doesn't mean you shouldn't have the NLT in your Bible study tool kit; it can definitely be helpful. Just be aware of the issues. Don't let the NLT (or any other translation) be the only Bible you read.

¹David Bercot - https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_n7oHBcWM7I

Stephen Russell - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=T2bhjxy0RIk> Return to context→

²Learn more about the Greek Old Testament in this episode from Anabaptist Perspectives.

[Return to context↗](#)