

'Lost in Translations'

Which Bible Shall We Read?

How Do Bible Translators Work?

Today we have numerous different Bible translations in English. The translators tend to use two different approaches:



- **Literal** – try to translate the *exact words and phrases* of the original language. A 'word-for-word' approach; also known as '**Formal Equivalence**'.

- **Dynamic** – try to translate the *thoughts and ideas* of the original text. Update words, idioms and grammar by finding *equivalents* in the receptor language. An 'idea-for-idea' approach; also known as '**Functional Equivalence**'.

For examples of the difference, compare different translations of Mark 15:33 (in NT times, what we call 'noon' was 'the sixth hour') or Phil. 1:8 (literally 'bowels', understood to be where compassion arises).

Most translations use both approaches, but prefer one more strongly than the other. The box below gives a rough guide to which way each of the most commonly available versions leans.

Which Translation is Which Type?

In very broad terms, we can think of a spectrum between these two approaches:

Formal Equivalence		Functional Equivalence					
('word-for-word')		('idea-for-idea')					
KJV&NKJV	RSV&NRSV	NIV&TNIV	NirV	GNB	CEV	NLT	LB
NASBu	ESV	ISV	JPS	REB	NEB		
		CEB	rNJB	NJB	JB	NCV	Message
		BfE		NETbib			

Abbreviations ('-----' indicates a family connection, usually a revision)

BfE = Bible for Everyone (Goldingay & Wright)

CEB = Common English Bible

CEV = Contemporary English Version

GNB = Good News Bible (originally called Today's English Version)

ISV = International Standard Version

JB = Jerusalem Bible ----- NJB = New Jerusalem Bible-----rNJB = revised NJB

JPS = Jewish Publication Society translation (Tanakh/OT only)

LB = Living Bible ----- NLT = New Living Translation

NASBu = New American Standard Bible update

KJV = King James Version ----- NKJV = New King James Version

NCV = New Century Version

NEB = New English Bible ----- REB = Revised English Bible

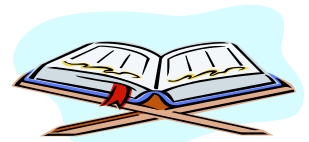
NETbib = New English Translation (www.bible.org/netbible)

NIV = New International Version ----- TNIV = Today's New International Version

NirV = New International Reader's Version

RSV = Revised Standard Version ----- NRSV = New Revised Standard Version

----- ESV = English Standard Version



But – placing versions on this spectrum is a question of judgement, which may be debated.

Which Translations Shall We Read? Some Issues to Consider

For careful and detailed study of the biblical text, a more literal ('Formal Equivalence') translation is recommended, for two reasons:

- it gets us closer to the original, allowing the features, complexities and ambiguities of the original language to stand out;
- it usually translates a recurring word from the original language in the same way each time, so we can notice any repetition.

The most widely accepted 'Formal Equivalence' translation today is probably the NRSV.

KJV is a magnificent piece of literature, a hugely influential part of our cultural heritage. It was translated over 400 years ago, using the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts which were available at that time. More manuscripts have been found since then, many of them earlier and more accurate than those used for the KJV. In addition, our understanding of ancient languages such as Hebrew and Greek has increased through other discoveries. And our own English language has changed, so that words which once had power no longer do so (eg. James 1:21 *superfluity of naughtiness*, meaning 'overflowing of evil'). NKJV attempts to reduce these problems, but still relies on the same manuscripts as KJV.

RSV, NRSV and **ESV** stand in the tradition of the KJV, trying to update it while translating from the most up-to-date Hebrew and Greek sources. NRSV sometimes changes the text significantly to use inclusive language (eg. 'brothers and sisters' rather than 'brothers', 'they' rather than 'he'). ESV largely rejects this approach.

NIV is now widely used and is intermittently updated by its translation team. TNIV was a revision which sought to make language more gender neutral. A more recent major revision (2011) effectively combined NIV and TNIV. The evangelical perspectives of the translation team occasionally emerge in the choices they make.

The New International Readers Version (NirV) is a simplified version, aimed at people with a lower reading age or with English as their second language.

GNB, CEV, NCV, CEB and **NirV** all use a deliberately limited vocabulary. This makes some of the ideas in the text accessible to adults whose knowledge of the English language is limited, and also to children. But the subtlety and ambiguity of the original can be lost, especially when reading biblical poetry.

Other translations are also intermittently revised; the second edition of **NLT** is a recent example, resulting in a very respected Functional Equivalence version.

The extreme end of the 'Functional Equivalence' range becomes more paraphrase (or even commentary) than translation. These versions can be refreshing and thought-provoking, particularly with a bible passage which has become too familiar to us.

Study Bibles can be helpful, such as the New Oxford Annotated Bible, the New Interpreters' Study Bible, the Catholic Study Bible and the (more conservative) NIV Study Bible, ESV Study Bible and Zondervan Theological Study Bible. Often these have notes which alert the reader to alternative possibilities in translating a particular text.

A related approach is that of the NETbible, which tends to prefer Functional Equivalence in its translation, while the accompanying notes provide more Formally Equivalent alternatives.

Conclusion

Many of us like to read one version regularly. Alongside this, it's good to dip into others as well. Using one from each end of the translation 'spectrum', and a third from the middle, gives a good overall balance of views.

Use the wealth of resources available to us. Compare different translations of key words such as *'hesed'* (Ps. 33:5), to explore its meaning: 'steadfast love' (NRSV), 'faithful love' (NJB), 'faithfulness' (NETbib), 'mercy' (KJV); 'unfailing love' (NIV, NLT). English does not have a single word which does justice to the richness of this Hebrew term.

You can find many versions at www.biblegateway.com and www.biblehub.com

