



HOW TO CHOOSE A BIBLE VERSION

An Introductory Guide to
English Translations



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Mentor





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In memory of Dewey Lockman
whose interest in Bible translations
fueled my motivation for this study





INTRODUCTION

The Bible is of greatest importance in the life of every Christian. It is the one and only means of receiving authoritative and specific communication from his/her God. It is the chief weapon in the spiritual conflict that he/she wages from day to day.

English-speaking Christians face a unique challenge, that of choosing which version of the Bible they will use. The multiple options available to them pose a problem of immense proportions, which has never before existed in the history of the Christian church, or at least, has not existed in the same degree of complexity as it does at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The availability of so many translations of the Bible in the English language creates an unparalleled dilemma. The existence of many versions is advantageous in making the gospel known more widely, but it is disadvantageous because a choice of the 'best' translation for regular use becomes more complex.

Teaching everyone the original languages of Scripture is the ideal solution to the problem, but it is not a practical one. Translations of the Bible into various languages have been God's way of getting the gospel message to people throughout the centuries of Christian history. Dependence on those translations puts the average Christian into a position of having to evaluate the possibilities and choose which version he will adopt as his major resource.

A number of excellent books about translations have provided a wealth of details regarding individual translations and are valuable resources. Other works have specialized in one phase or another of Bible translating. Yet little or nothing has presented a full picture of relevant information





by placing the versions side-by-side in a manner that allows them to be compared systematically in the relevant spheres of comparison.

Data regarding translations fall into distinct categories, allowing each version to be evaluated category by category. Examining translations in such groupings of information rather than lumping dissimilar kinds of information together provides a clearer picture of the distinctives of each one. That method is far superior to trying to derive sound conclusions from a process that mixes categories.

A knowledge of suitable categories of comparison can greatly aid the average Christian in drawing a better picture of the strengths and weaknesses of various available versions. A degree of expertise is necessary in each area of evaluation. Only years of background study can make one a proficient independent evaluator in any one of the areas. Yet a knowledge of what kinds of information are relevant combined with the opinions of those who have worked in the individual areas can impart considerable confidence to the non-expert in helping him choose a personal translation.

The survey presented in the following pages will introduce broad subject-areas related to English versions. It is only a survey and tries to be suggestive, not exhaustive, in relaying types of information about individual Bible versions. The survey's main function is to categorize the types of information relevant to one's choice of a version for personal use. Though the survey is not sufficient to provide a degree of expertise required to form independent judgments in any one of the areas, it will establish categories for discussion and pinpoint which elements are the main considerations in each category. Such guidelines will allow the task of evaluation to proceed in an orderly and profitable way. Further, if this discussion can whet a reader's appetite to delve into one or more of the areas in detail, another goal of this work will have been met.





FIELDS RELEVANT TO AN EVALUATION OF BIBLE TRANSLATIONS

Practically everything, if not everything, that has been written or said about Bible translations falls under five headings. Each of the five plays a significant role in determining the value of a version. It is not the purpose of this treatment to lead readers to a final decision as to which version is 'best' in each category of discussion. Deciding what is best must be a personal decision. Though a preference may be implicit in various discussions, the preference will emerge only after what is hopefully a balanced description of the issues involved. This will permit each person to evaluate versions in light of his own personal objectives in the use of an English Bible translation.

1. Historical Backgrounds of Bible Translations

How, when, where, and with whom a translation of the Bible originated is certainly significant. Was it produced by an individual or a committee? Has it been around a long time, or is it of recent vintage? Is its beginning connected with my confessional standards, or did it spring from some other? Those are among the many questions that one may and should ask about the origin of a Bible version when searching to find the best version as a guide for life.

2. Textual Bases of Bible Translations

The ultimate basis for every Bible translation is a language other than English - Hebrew and Aramaic in the Old Testament and Greek in the New Testament. Excellent copies of the original works that came from the hands of the authors are available, but these copies do not always agree with one another in every detail. The Greek New Testament has many more resource manuscripts than the Hebrew and Aramaic Old Testament, so the disagreements are particularly problematic in establishing the exact wording of the New Testament. Decisions regarding which variations to follow are necessary when making English translations, because in





many cases the choices affect English renderings. A person will want a version that bases its English renderings on wise choices from among the variations in the various sources.

3. Methodological Techniques of Bible Translations

This century has witnessed the development of a somewhat new approach to Bible translating. The traditional method renders English translations that correspond as nearly as possible to original-language vocabulary and grammatical constructions. That technique has given way in some quarters to free translations and paraphrases which convey the *translators' understanding of the ideas*. The result is a translation into English words and sentences that sometimes do not approximate the form of the source languages. Both the traditional approach and the newer one have advantages and disadvantages. A reader needs to decide between the two options in light of the way he intends to use Scripture. Well-known translations of both types are available, and one will need to determine at some point which route to follow.

4. Theological Biases of Bible Translations

As hard as a translator may try, it is impossible to exclude theological bias from a translation. At times a choice of renderings will boil down to a doctrinal preference. That is the nature of changing a message from one language to another. Of course, sometimes translators may insert doctrinal preferences intentionally as in the case of study Bibles. A Bible user needs to be aware, at least in a general way, of what theological bias or biases occur in a version before settling upon one as his constant resource. Otherwise, he may unknowingly buy into a teaching that does not agree with his own convictions.

5. Varieties of English in Bible Translations

Ways to communicate a message in English constitute the largest field among the five categories under consideration. Different people respond favorably to different types of English. A single word choice has often been the occasion of





many hours of discussion among translators. Choosing from among many possibilities the best way to state a proposition in order to produce maximum understanding among listeners or readers is crucial. Some prefer a paragraph format for the text because it is customary in other types of literature, but others like the verse divisions as individual units with the verse number at the beginning. 'Which is best for me and my purposes?' each person must ask and answer. These are samples of multiplied issues that relate to the matter of English usage.

Since each of the five subjects is a major topic for discussion in itself and one book attempting to deal with all five cannot possibly answer all the important questions, a supplemental reading list appears at the end of each chapter to provide further resources. In these lists are works that supply additional information relevant to matters discussed in that chapter.

The remarks to come should be sufficient to answer many questions and to inform readers in a general way. Then they can deal more specifically with issues that will lead them to choices of versions of the Bible that will best meet their own needs.

