



Choosing a Bible Translation

Have you found yourself scrolling through abbreviations like NIV, NLT, NASB, ESV, NET, or CSB and wondering what the difference is between them?

In the end, no single version of the Bible will perfectly capture every thought or nuance communicated through the Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic writing in our available manuscripts. And that's okay! Rather than attempting to identify the most accurate or best translation, we, like scholars, can learn to read and compare different versions in order to gain a deeper, fuller understanding of Scripture. Let's dive in!

The Biblical Translator's Balancing Act

Scholars developing English translations of the Bible are balancing two goals: reliability and readability. They want to stay true to the wording of original-language manuscripts, while also providing an understandable reading experience. Sometimes we assume that a strictly literal, word-for-word translation would be the most accurate, but that doesn't always work.

word-for-word into English from the original Greek text without trying to make it readable would likely end up with something like this:

Someone translating John 3:16 word-for-word into English from the original Greek text without trying to make it readable would likely end up with something like this:

For so loved, God, the world, that his Son, the only begotten, he gave, that everyone who is believing on him may not perish, but may life unto the age.

Most published translations will not render the original language this awkwardly. However, some translations, like the New American Standard Bible (NASB) and the New King James Version (NKJV), will give more weight to matching the original language word-for-word. Translations like the New Living Translation (NLT) and the Contemporary English Version (CEV) give more weight to readability. And paraphrases push the readability goal even further. Bibles like The Living Bible (TLB) and Eugene Peterson's The Message (MSG) take more creative license to adjust words, capturing a dynamic thought-for-thought translation rather than literal word-for-word.

Wisdom in Reading Multiple Translations

No single English translation will ever represent the original biblical languages perfectly. Why? In part because the Bible's ancient languages do not function like English. A word in Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic might not have an exact English word to match. And each language constructs sentences differently, which means a variety of words or reconstructed sentences will always be necessary.

This is okay, even good. It keeps us in an inquisitive, learning mode alongside others who are also trying to understand the Bible. It helps us remember that our Bible is not an answer book or instruction manual—it is a collection of sacred Scriptures we are to meditate upon within community.

When translations differ, we can wonder: Did English culture change? Or is something so fascinating and complex happening in the original languages that it can't be resolved with only one English word?

When we notice what appears to be a disagreement between translations, instead of getting argumentative, discouraged, or confused, we can get curious. We can receive an invitation to discover more. We can read the full context, meditate on the biblical text with other people in our community, and read it in as many translations as possible.