

The Best Translation

Why are there so many translations? Which is best?

In John 8:31-32 we read:

*To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. Then you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free.'*

So, if it's the **truth** that will set us free, how do we make sure it is properly translated?

The Status of Bible Translation

Languages spoken in the world: 7396

Complete Bible: 805 New Testament: 1842

Some Scripture 1520 In Progress: 4440

No Scripture: 1663, of which 522 are viable;

Approx 37 million speakers

In September 1986 we held the dedication of and distribution of the Sochiapam Chinantec NT – 40 years ago this month; representing 16 years of working with and living with the Chinantec people.

What should be our goal when translating the Bible?

Eugene Nida's classical definition is a good starting point: "**...the reproduction of the closest natural equivalent of the source language message.**"

The Translation Process – Should it be "Word for word?"

The first challenge is, translation at the word level

In all languages we encounter individual words with multiple meanings. (one form—several functions)

Many words have both a Primary & a Secondary meaning.

Primary: the most common use of the word—its "default" meaning

Secondary: the other meanings of the word – which rarely match

French "marcher"	English "walk"
1. Le bebe ne <u>marche</u> pas encore.	1. The baby isn't walking yet.
2. Le train est en <u>marche</u> .	2. The train is moving.
3. Les affaires <u>marchent</u> .	3. Business is going well.
4. Est-ce que ca <u>marche</u> ?	4. Is that working out?
5. La montre <u>marche</u> .	5. The watch is working/running.
6. Je ne <u>marche</u> pas dans cette affaire.	6. I have nothing to do with this matter.

And we also need to recognize that there is only partial equivalence, the same "reality" we all experience is divided differently

English: "cloth" – Hausa: "zane; kyalle; yaddi"

English: "woman, wife" – Greek: "gune"

English: "love" – Greek: eros, philea, storge, agape

The text is the evidence of a message—a communicative situation—the text is not in itself the entire message. The speaker or writer assumes the audience has information that doesn't need to be mentioned.

e.g. "the Israelites crossed the **Jordan**"

If you lived in an isolated community with limited knowledge of history or geography, how would you know what the Jordan is? – Is it a mountain? A valley? A forest? A lake? A city? A river?

And then we have the issue of IDIOMS, or “Figures of Speech”...

Hagar tells Eddie, his Viking companion, to tell the bartender in French "We want drinks on the house!"

Eddie says: “ *Nous desirons vin sur la maison.*”

And that is exactly what they get!

So, how should I translate “We want drinks on the house”? Well, according to Google translate:

« Nous voulons des boissons offertes par la maison. »

Here’s two more examples of “figures of speech.”

It's raining cats and dogs! – **Meaning?**

He’s good at breaking the ice! – **Meaning?**

So if translating word-for-word, produces miscommunication, how **should** we translate?

Is it valid to rigorously translate one word in the source language by always and only one word in the receptor language?

Why? (or why not)

...there is only partial equivalence.

In addition, all translations make grammatical structure adjustments –

Here is the literal Greek-English interlinear of 1 Peter 1:10-11...

Concerning which salvation sought-out and searched-out prophets the concerning the for you grace [ones] prophesying searching for what or what-sort-of time made-clear the in them Spirit-of-Christ forewitnessing the for Christ suffering and the after these glories

(Somewhat incomprehensible! Can you imagine having the entire Bible translated this way?)

1 Pet 1:10-11 in NIV – “Concerning this salvation, the prophets, who spoke of the grace that was to come to you, searched intently and with the greatest care, 11 trying to find out the time and circumstances to which the Spirit of Christ in them was pointing when he predicted the sufferings of the Messiah and the glories that would follow.” (Better, clearer, but still **all one sentence** as in the Greek.)

1 Pet 1:10-11 in CEV – “Some prophets told how kind God would be to you, and they searched hard to find out more about the way you would be saved. 11 The Spirit of Christ was in them and was telling them how Christ would suffer and would then be given great honour. So they searched to find out exactly who Christ would be and when this would happen.” (Much easier to understand when put into 3 sentences.)

A literal translation can lead to misunderstanding of the message.

In Mark 3:5 the KJV says... *And when he had looked round about on them with anger, being grieved for the hardness of their hearts, he saith unto the man, Stretch forth thine hand. And he stretched it out: and his hand was restored whole as the other.*

What is implied in English when you call someone “hard-hearted”?

A hard-hearted person is:

English - uncaring, cruel

Chinantec - powerful, influential

Hebrew - unwillingness to understand, stubborn

He looked around at them in anger and, deeply distressed at their stubborn hearts, said to the man, “Stretch out your hand.” He stretched it out, and his hand was completely restored. (NIV)

So if there is a problem translating word-for-word, how should it be done?

A proposition (i.e. a complete thought as expressed in a clause) should probably be regarded as the “minimal unit of translation” **e.g. raining cats & dogs.**

The King James Version is loved for the majesty of its language and for the way God has used it in ministering to millions down through the centuries. Some Christians feel that no other translation can possibly replace it.

The New International Version is today the most widely distributed and utilized translation in the world. It is much more a thought-for-thought translation, but employs a moderately traditional tone that makes it appropriate for both public worship and personal reading.

The first thing we may want to ask ourselves is:

Is translation a valid undertaking, or should we all learn Hebrew and Greek so that we can understand the Bible?

I would like to affirm that, YES, translation is valid and appropriate for communicating the truth of the Scriptures.

Right from the very beginning of the church, translation was used to communicate the Good News!

Have you ever thought about which language Jesus used to communicate to the people of His day? Aramaic began to replace Hebrew as the language of the Jews from about the 5th century B.C. By the time of Jesus, Jews in Judea primarily spoke Aramaic. Hebrew continued to be used as a liturgical language and to discuss spiritual matters. However, almost everything Jesus said and taught is presented to us in Greek. So we are immediately presented with Jesus' disciples **translating** His teachings from Aramaic or Hebrew into Greek, the language of wider communication of that day. Read Acts 2:1-12 and there you will see that the Holy Spirit approves of, and even enables translation of the Good News.

Tyndale was the first to translate the NT into English back in 1526 – 500 years ago! It is difficult to give an exact figure for the number of translations of the Bible, or portions of the Bible translated into English since Tyndale. In part this is due to the difficulty of how we should count translations that are not a complete Bible or New Testament, but just a group of NT books or even a single book. The American Bible Society has calculated that there are about 900 translations and paraphrases of the Bible into English.

And yet, as mentioned in the slide on "The Status of Bible Translation" – there are over 1600 languages in which work hasn't even begun!

So, why are there so many translations into English?

At the heart of the issue are two views as to what a translation should be.

1. On one side are those who feel a translation should stick as closely as possible to every word of the original Hebrew and Greek. They want the translation to be a literal transfer, word for word, of the original words into English. They feel this will provide the greatest accuracy possible. This is called a "**Formal Correspondence translation**".

Unfortunately, this approach encounters real problems. Some words simply don't have an exact equivalent in English. The word order and the entire sentence structure just don't match from one language to another. So these word-for-word translations are wooden and unnatural, often failing in terms of comprehension and readability.

Other translators are convinced that a translation should transfer the **message**, that is, the thoughts and emotions of the original text. To do this, it should use as many words as are necessary to reproduce the same impact in English as was conveyed to the original audience. Accuracy is achieved when you convey the message of the original in a way that the reader can understand it. A thought-for-thought translation is called a "**Dynamic Equivalence translation**".

Some consider the KJV to be a literal word-for-word translation, and often it is. But, on the other hand, there are times the King James translators took a thought-for-thought approach.

Looking at the index of Youngs Analytical Concordance of the Bible is very enlightening. Take the Greek word *logos* for example.

The Greek word *logos* occurs +/- 330 times in the NT and is translated 23 different ways in the KJV: "account, cause, communication, doctrine, game, intent, matter, mouth, preaching, question, reason, rumour, saying, shew, speech, talk, things, things to say, tidings, treatise, utterance, word, work".

***logos* is translated most commonly as "word" (208 times), most of the other translations of *logos* occur only 1-8 times each. This is dynamic translation!**

Actually, anyone who has ever learned to speak a second language **fluently** knows that a word-for-word translation is impossible most of the time. Idioms in one language need to be paraphrased. Even the King James translators realized this. In a couple of places in the OT, the Hebrew text literally reads, "God's nostrils enlarged." But the King James has, "God became angry"--which is what the idiom means. In Matthew 1:18 the King James says that Mary was found to be with Child. But the Greek is quite different--and quite graphic: "Mary was having it in the belly"! The idioms have been translated!

Considering that there was no "philosophy" or "science of Translation Methodology" developed at the time the KJV was done, it is a remarkable translation – at times very literal, yet other times quite dynamic, but unfortunately becoming more and more obscure as the English language changes over time.

SO WHICH IS THE BEST ENGLISH TRANSLATION?

Here is listed just a few of the many options...

American Standard Version (ASV)	Good News Translation (GNT)
Amplified Bible (AMP)	Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)
Amplified Bible, Classic Edition (AMPC)	International Children's Bible (ICB)
BRG Bible (BRG)	International Standard Version (ISV)
Christian Standard Bible (CSB)	J.B. Phillips New Testament (PHILLIPS)
Christian Standard Bible Anglicised (CSBA)	Jubilee Bible 2000 (JUB)
Common English Bible (CEB)	King James Version (KJV)
Complete Jewish Bible (CJB)	Authorized (King James) Version (AKJV)
Contemporary English Version (CEV)	Legacy Standard Bible (LSB)
Darby Translation (DARBY)	Lexham English Bible (LEB)
	Living Bible (TLB)

Ironically, when the King James Bible was first published in 1611, it was condemned by many for being too easily understood! People of that time assumed that a sacred text had to be hard to understand. But after 400 years, the English language has changed.

Modern translations are good because they give back to the people an easily understood message. Much like the writers of the NT when they translated the Aramaic Jesus spoke into Koine Greek, that is, the everyday Greek commonly spoken – not some antiquated hard-to-understand classical Greek!

It is difficult to say which translation is the "best." "Best" would be determined in part by the translation method you personally considered most suitable.

A literal, formal equivalence translation such as The New American Standard Bible (NAS) lets the reader interpret for him-or-herself. But too often, the average reader doesn't have the background knowledge to interpret accurately. The net result is that the text is easily misunderstood.

Dynamic equivalence translations often make things very clear. In Phil 2:6, for example, the NIV tells us that Jesus was "in (his) very nature God." But most formal correspondence translations state that he was "in the form of God". The problem with these formally correct translations is that they are misleading: the Greek word for 'form' here means essence or nature.

The NIV and NLT, for example, aim to take the original thought that was being presented in Greek and Hebrew and then express that thought in English (thought-for-thought).

And then there are paraphrases such as The Message or The Living Bible which can be used to gain a different perspective on the meaning of a verse.

Christians don't have to agree on one translation of the Bible. There are several reasons why various Bible translations are good and even necessary:

Reasons why it's good to have various Bible translations:

1) All languages change over time, and words and spellings become obsolete.

For example, how would you define the word "let"?

Isaiah 43:13 in the KJV says: *Yea, before the day was I am he; and there is none that can deliver out of my hand: I will work, and who shall **let** it?*

The original meaning of "**let**" was "**to prevent**" or "**to stop**". It is still used that way in legal documents "without let or hindrance".

The NIV translates it this way: *Yes, and from ancient days I am he. No one can deliver out of my hand. When I act, who can reverse it?*

2) Christians don't have to agree on one version of the Bible because only the original documents were inspired. Every translation of those words since that time has involved a measure of human interpretation—that's just the nature of translating.

3) Having different translations allows more people access to God's Word because different versions of the Bible are written at various reading levels. They vary from a third grade to a twelfth grade reading level. The KJV, largely because of its antiquated English, is about a 12th-grade reading level. The NKJV is about a 7th-grade reading level. The New Century Version has a 3rd-grade reading level.

Translations done for less experienced readers have shorter sentences, draw from a smaller English word pool, and avoid uncommon words. The TEV (or Good News for Modern Man) was done for new speakers of English, as was the ERV (Easy-to-Read Version). John 3:16 in the ERV is, "Yes, God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him would not be lost but have eternal life."

If all Christians agreed on the NIV Bible, for example, anyone at a reading level lower than year 10 would have difficulty reading God's Word.

The differences among the good translations are not differences in doctrine. Whichever translation we're reading, Jesus is still the Lord and one-and-only Saviour, and salvation still comes by grace through faith!

Do you prefer a literal translation or one that has been translated "thought-for-thought"? Do you prefer the widely accepted and respected New International Version, or the very readable New Living Translation or the Contemporary English Version?

The verse we read at the beginning, John 8:31-32:

³¹ *To the Jews who had believed him, Jesus said, 'If you hold to my teaching, you are really my disciples. ³² Then you will know the **truth**, and the **truth** will set you free.'*

It is the truth that needs to be translated, **NOT** the sentence structure or the exact same number of words!

Each translation has the power to transform your life when you immerse yourself in God's Word! Though the cadence and the choice of vocabulary may differ, the voice of God can speak to you through each one.

The real question is: **How will you respond to God's voice as He speaks to you from the pages of this life-changing book?**

In Conclusion: Which is the best translation?...

It is the translation that most powerfully and clearly speaks to **your heart**. It is the one that has you coming back to read more.

Look up: **www.biblegateway.com**

You will see over 60 English translations, plus translations into many other languages.