



Which Bible Translation is Best for Me?

If the title of this page led you to believe you'd find an in-depth comparison of Bible translations or the definitive treatise on why one particular version is superior to the rest, I'm happy to disappoint you. ☺

The focus of Walk with the Word is hearing God speak to us personally through His Word. In other words, the personal pursuit of applying God's Word to our life. This can be quite a distance from the academic pursuit of Bible as history, apologetics, or even theology. Those things aren't "bad", just not our focus. So I'm going to take a stab at how to select a version of the Bible that's most compatible with the goal of consistently applying God's Word to our life.

Disclaimer: Don't send me email claiming that one particular translation is the one and only "right" translation. I won't even respond. The assertion that a particular translation into a particular language is the only "true" or "right" version is absolutely, inarguably, patently false.

The following is **NOT** represented as the direct Word of God—it is an **OPINION**. You're free to *scrutinize* it, *disagree* with all or part of it, even to *completely dismiss* it. After many years of struggling with the issue and having grown up from a time when there were very few translations available to today's wonderful plethora of choices, I'm simply going to share where **I** have arrived. Hopefully this will be at least partially beneficial for those of us that seek to apply God's Word to our life as opposed to those that have become side-tracked with useless, pointless debates trying to establish a single translation's superiority over all others.

For the record: God's Word has proven over and over again to be equally powerful in every language, dialect and flavor. Don't let **any** of the following discussion of languages or translation issues dissuade you in the slightest that God's Word is anything less than perfect and inerrant. If you have the patience to read through to the end you'll see how I bring this full circle to meeting the goal of hearing God speak through His Word.

Languages: Written & Spoken

There's no getting around the eventual discussion of languages and related issues when it comes to the Bible.

- It was originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. So from the outset the Bible *itself* is multi-lingual.
- "Written" is a key word here because many of the individuals and people groups documented in the Bible spoke in languages other than the 3 languages it was written in or were often multi-lingual themselves. For instance, Jesus spoke in Aramaic but His words are captured by the Gospels writers in Greek.
- Every language changes over time. (Compare Shakespearian English with today's rendition.) This is why the names of some people and places seem to "change" from book to book. They're merely the new pronunciations or renderings as the language has changed in every day usage over hundreds and hundreds of years. (Take the word "frontier"—depending on the time of its usage in U.S. history it could mean anything from western Pennsylvania to Kentucky to everything west of St. Louis. You have to know the time when it is used to know to which of these geographic regions it describes.) The books of the Bible were written over a span of approximately 1,500 years so even the same language will change a bit from one generation to the next.

- The Jews of Israel in Jesus' time weren't speaking the *exact same* language Abraham or even Moses spoke. This is due in large part to Israel's conquests of nations and groups around her—thus assimilating some of their language into her own—and being conquered by others and being given over to the language of each ruler. (Just the captivity in Babylon alone completely changed the daily language embraced by Jews from that point on.) Even though Aramaic was the Jewish “homeland” language of Jesus' day, Greek had become so prevalent throughout the world and in Israel that the Jewish authorities themselves translated the Old Testament into Greek by Jesus' time. (We call it “The Septuagint” and it's the translation New Testament authors quote. Even **they** are quoting the Bible translated into another language other than its original. **That** should be a lesson for all of us in this discussion.)
- Even before the very first edition of the King James version of the Bible was released there was already vast numbers of translations in existence in a myriad of languages. Some of the most authoritative, earliest versions of the Bible are in a wide variety of languages such as Syriac, not to mention the later Latin Vulgate upon which many versions are based.

So the point is that we really do need academia to continue to study these languages and render translations for us. But it's worth noting that translating the Bible into other languages has been a staple of activity carried out before the church was even formed and continued **LONG** before it arrived in even the earliest English version. Many generations of Believers have embarked on updating translations to make them more relevant due to centuries of changes in their own languages.

God's Chosen Form of Communication

God could have written the Bible Himself but chose instead to communicate through speech, through the language of men. There are 3 instances where God actually wrote:

- The original tablets given to Moses
- On a wall to a Persian king
- In the dirt before a crowd of religious authorities

So God **could** have written everything down by His own hand and given it to man, but instead God spoke to men and instructed **them** to write His words down, obviously in their own language. And ever since, men have been translating His Word into other men's languages as well as providing updates as their own language has changed over time. What has **NOT** changed is the power and message of those Words as they transcend every linguistic and cultural barrier to change hearts in the same way every time.

This is due to the fact that God's Word is not merely a textual document but is, in fact, His power and character at work.

*“For My thoughts are not your thoughts,
Nor are your ways My ways,” declares the Lord.
“For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
So are My ways higher than your ways
And My thoughts than your thoughts.
For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
And do not return there without watering the earth
And making it bear and sprout,
And furnishing seed to the sower and bread to the eater;
So will My word be which goes forth from My mouth;
It will not return to Me empty,
Without accomplishing what I desire,
And without succeeding in the matter for which I sent it
— Isaiah 55:8-11*

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was in the beginning with God. All things came into being through Him, and apart from Him nothing came into being that has come into being.

— John 1:1-3

Put another way, the message transcends the messenger. The power of God's Word has proven countless times that it successfully communicates regardless of the number of languages into which it is translated or the number of times it's updated for any single language.

Think about the consequences of the events at the Tower of Babel. The world was purposely changed from a mono-language entity to many. God, Who judges the hearts and thoughts of man, did not see a "problem" with so many languages. He knew that it was not an insurmountable barrier or He would not have executed this change.

Consider Pentecost, where **NONE** of the New Testament was yet written. The Holy Spirit descends on Christ's followers and immediately bridges the language gap by speaking the message of the Gospel in the language of everyone present. From the outset the Gospel transcends any one language and universally achieves the same results for every hearer of His Word. The precedent is set at Pentecost that God's Word will be translated and understood in every language.

The work continues to this day through organizations such as [Wycliffe Bible Translators](#) to translate the Bible into new languages. Every time the same results are experienced over and over again as God's message transcends language itself.

Let's Focus on English Translations

So if we can see that God's message is successfully and faithfully communicated regardless of the language into which it's translated, what about all the different translations and variations within a single language – such as English, for instance. They can't **ALL** be "right", can they? At the very least, can't we rank them so we'll know which is the "best" and "worst"?

We would really have to begin with some kind of categorization into which we can place each version. This is because the translators of each version have a particular viewpoint from which they pursue their work.

Some desire to translate as literally as possible. This approach is useful to many who don't want idioms or cultural expressions of language translated into English equivalents but allowed to stand exactly as they appear. For instance in today's English we might express a very emotional experience as being "kicked in the gut" whereas the literal Bible phrase of that day and time is something like "it moved my liver and kidneys". If translated literally there is still some education process needing to be imparted to the reader or they probably won't understand the meaning behind such a figure of speech.

Or take the example given by Jesus to settle affairs in advance so that a legal judgment rendered against you takes your last "lepton"; today's English would state your last "penny" and the message remains unchanged. This is why many versions attempt to stay as literal as possible *until* they encounter such idioms or figures of speech which are translated into modern day equivalents so we don't stumble over "What in the world is a 'lepton'?" when the **context** is unchanged by translating it as "penny".

At the other end of the spectrum are versions that want to make the biblical text as readable as possible in every day English such as *The Living Bible*[™] or *Good News for Modern Man*[™]. Their aim is to provide the Bible text in the most common, modern English usage.

But for each of these "extremes"—and all the variations along the spectrum between them—the question arises, "Are they **ALL** properly translating God's Word into English? How can one translator use a

completely different word from another?" As bizarre as this sounds, often they're not really using "completely" different words.

One upon a time the U.S. Army sent me to language school and, like all its attendees, I was provided one year in which to become proficient in a foreign language. (It was like college except you took the same course 6 times a day, 5 days a week for a little over a year.) The first anvil that struck my Coyote-like head was the fact that in order to understand the words, grammar and syntax of the foreign language, I had to clearly understand them in my native English tongue. (Yeah, I know... "Duh!") If you don't know what a "participle" is in English, you're probably not going to understand what a participle is in another language.

The second "anvil" that fell on me was the translation of words. Nearly every day I was presented with an English translation of the words or phrases being studied that **WERE NOT**, on first examination, properly rendered in English. In every case I was both "right" and "wrong". This is due to the fact that as a native English speaker, I did not grow up in a dictionary. I learned the meanings of words and phrases based on their everyday usage in my particular experience and environment, according to how people around me used them as well as in the geographic region in which I grew up. But the "wrong" definitions were actually "right" in that they were usually obscure, alternate meanings documented in the dictionary which I hadn't personally encountered, and therefore unfamiliar to everyday conversational English.

To see what I mean, open up a dictionary and look up a "normal" word such as "furniture." [Merriam-Webster's Online Dictionary](#) provides this sampling:

equipment that is necessary, useful, or desirable: as **a** *archaic : the trappings of a horse* **b** *: movable articles used in readying an area (as a room or patio) for occupancy or use*

The archaic definition immediately grabs your attention, but is the *regular* definition using words to describe the meaning of “furniture” using the words **YOU** would have used had you been the editor of the dictionary?

The point is that the scholars translating the Bible are experts in both the language they’re translating **AND** English. Whereas you and I use a word like “furniture” in the same way and may be completely unaware of all the alternatives, these language experts know **ALL** of the English equivalencies and **ALL** of the documented dictionary definitions. Look at the result of “furniture” in *Webster’s Revised Unabridged Dictionary*:

*\Fur"ni*tur\, n. [F. furniture. See [Furnish](#), v. t.]*

1. That with which anything is furnished or supplied; supplies; outfit; equipment.

The form and all the furniture of the earth. --Tillotson.

The thoughts which make the furniture of their minds. --M. Arnold.

2. Articles used for convenience or decoration in a house or apartment, as tables, chairs, bedsteads, sofas, carpets, curtains, pictures, vases, etc.

3. The necessary appendages to anything, as to a machine, a carriage, a ship, etc. (a) (Naut.) The masts and rigging of a ship. (b) (Mil.) The mountings of a gun. (c) Builders' hardware such as locks, door and window trimmings. (d) (Print) Pieces of wood or metal of a lesser height than the type, placed around the pages or other matter in a form, and, with the quoins, serving to secure the form in its place in the chase.

4. (Mus.) A mixed or compound stop in an organ; -- sometimes called mixture.

You and I would probably never stray from number 2 above, whereas a translator that is committed to the most literal interpretation possible from the Greek or Hebrew may find instances where the use of “furniture” is the right English word choice given a particular nautical, military, construction, printing or even musical context. They’d use the English word “furniture”, assuming we have the same

expert knowledge of English they have and know all the obscure meanings. Translators seeking the most modern, everyday definition would reject using the word “furniture” and substitute “gun mountings” if that was the real meaning based on the context. Both would be right. And we haven’t even considered all the possibilities a Thesaurus would provide of similar words that convey the same meaning or concept in a variety of flavors.

(Thanks for sticking with me.) *Here’s the point:* All of the translators of all the versions from one extreme to another and in between are probably correct to one degree or another. They are essentially choosing a definition of a word or phrase from a list of many possible meanings and gradations. Literal translators will often choose a more obscure definition from the list which is probably hyper-accurate for their purpose; translators desiring the most common usages have alternates to choose from that still belong to the same list as their more technically-minded colleagues. Ultimately, the words chosen **STILL** convey the **SAME** basic message.

So Which Translation is “Best”?

Now I know that some will think this is just a wind bag’s way of getting out of directly answering the question. In fact, the really astute in the crowd will have picked up on the fact that all the Scripture provided throughout this web site and in its supporting materials exclusively use the *New American Standard Bible™* and are just waiting for me to provide the justification for why that translation is superior over all other translations. (Makes me giggle uncontrollably just thinking about it.)

I believe that as a Christian matures in their walk with Christ and as they commit time each and every day to God’s Word that the translation they use **PERSONALLY** (make note of that word because I’ll come back to it) will probably change over time. Paul describes this as first feeding on “milk” and working your way up to “meat”. (Invokes the image of how the care and feeding of a baby differs as it grows

into a child and then an adult.) I strongly encourage new Believers to seriously consider the *New Living Translation*™ or the *New Life Version*™ or any of many similar offerings. (Your local pastor and/or Bible bookstore would love to assist you in this.) However, getting back to the “personally” aspect, if this version differs from that used every week in your local church, make every attempt to have a copy of that particular version as well for **PUBLIC** events so you can effectively follow the teaching.

As you grow in stature and knowledge of Christ it is not unusual to find that someone else’s version—probably a more literal translation used by a local pastor or teacher—begins to attract your ear. It’s not heresy to move to another version and is probably a good indicator that you desire to move from “milk” to “meat”. If the Spirit ultimately leads you to learn Greek and Hebrew and carry the Bible around in its original languages, so be it. The progression will be natural—and slightly different—for each person as they pursue God’s voice through His Word.

Because of the linguistic situation described above, wherein many versions result from the many choices that can be made about how to translate a word into English, the best situation is to consistently read God’s Word in more than one format. Ideally, having at least 3 Bible translations—1 from each end of the spectrum and 1 from the middle—is the closest you’ll come to being an actual Bible translator yourself without ever learning an ancient language. Simply by reading and comparing more than one translation you will experience all the “flavors”, if you will, of the text and the different translation possibilities that actually compliment each other. Instead of *contradicting* each other you’ll discover they *compliment* each other. And in the comparison of translations you will come to personal knowledge as to which are the “best”.

One of the great things about Bible software packages available today is that they will show the same passage side-by-side simultaneously in

multiple versions. Most of them allow you to set up defaults so that you can consistently use the same 3 or 4 versions of choice. (I know many of the packages come with *dozens* of versions but try to keep regular use down to the same 3 or 4.) Printed parallel Bible versions are not only great in this regard but provide the added benefit of being a mini-fitness program. (They tend to be the largest, heaviest Bibles. Having one at home is a good goal.)

Final Thoughts

The NASB™ is the most comfortable for me and I'm no longer distracted should the speaker be using a different version. What we all have to "get over" is the sub-conscience thought that somehow the version we're reading isn't working as accurately as another to convey the "true" meaning of God's Word. This trap presupposes that the "problem" is with the Bible translation when in fact the "problem" is with us. When a sermon contains mini "grammar lessons" about the Greek or Hebrew origins of words or phrases, the speaker is **NOT** undermining English versions but is providing a depth of knowledge in referring back to the original written languages of the Bible.

The point is that we hear God speaking when we're *listening*, not distracted by the argument of which version is "right". It is God's voice behind the Word that opens our mind, changes our heart, and works out salvation in our life.

I have found that other than prayer and an attitude adjustment, the best resource to assist in hearing God speak through His Word is a good Bible dictionary. When a word or phrase or place-name becomes a stumbling block, look it up in the Bible dictionary so you may be provided its meaning as used throughout *all* Scripture so as to resolve how it's used in this particular context. This also helps keep you focused on your version of choice.