

Buying a Bible That's Right for You

Once when Gregor Menga, an Albanian friend, was visiting he wanted to buy an English Bible. One afternoon I took him to a large Christian bookstore so that he would have a good selection to choose from. There must have been 1000 Bibles in different versions, editions, styles, and colors. He was overwhelmed by the choices—in Albania there's one translation of the Bible and it is rather old and inaccurate. Even though he spent about two hours looking at Bibles, he went home without one. He just couldn't make up his mind.

It's pretty confusing even for an English-speaking person to pick out a Bible. There are over fifteen different translations to choose from. There are numerous Study Bibles (some of which can be purchased in three or four different translations) which contain notes of some particular author or school of interpretation. In addition, our Bibles come in numerous colors and styles. How can you know what kind of Bible to buy?

Buying and using a Bible becomes more simple if you know some basic facts about the Bible, how it's translated, the differences between the various English versions, and some specifics about different editions of the Bible you'll find in a bookstore.

ABOUT THE BIBLE

When you buy a Bible today it is divided into two parts—the Old Testament and the New Testament. Each of these are further divided into books. There are 39 books in the Old Testament and 27 books in the New Testament.

What we call the Old Testament, Jewish people call the Hebrew Bible because it was originally written in the Hebrew language.¹ These books were written by a number of people over a long period of time (about 1000 years) and were slowly compiled into one volume over the centuries. The books of the Old Testament contain many different kinds of literature—history, prophecy, preaching, poetry, and wisdom writings.

The New Testament was written in "common" Greek, which was the universal language of the first century Roman Empire. The New Testament was written by nine different authors over a period of about fifty years. Just like the Old Testament, there are different kinds of writings in the New Testament including history, biography, preaching, letters, and prophecy.

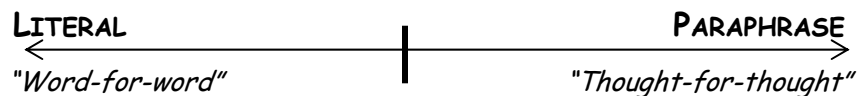
¹ A few passages of the Old Testament were written in Aramaic, a language related to Hebrew.

Early Christians accepted and used the Hebrew Bible from the very beginning of the church and called it the Old Covenant (or "Testament"). They also began to collect the various writings of the early Christian leaders, some of which had been sent to specific churches or individuals in different parts of the Roman Empire. This they called the New Covenant (Testament). The Christian Bible contains both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament and both are considered equally inspired and authoritative.

There are some writings alongside the Old Testament that were questioned by believers as to whether they were inspired or not. These are called the *Apocrypha*. The Jews regarded them as interesting accounts of history, but not as inspired, and the writers of the New Testament never quoted any of them as they did the Hebrew Bible. The Roman Catholic Church accepts eleven of these books as inspired scripture. That is why they are contained in a Roman Catholic Bible but not in other Bibles.

HOW THE BIBLE IS TRANSLATED

Translating from one language to another is difficult because languages differ in complex ways. This is especially true when translating from an ancient language to a modern one.² Those who have studied translation theory have identified two ways of translating: *literal*, (sometimes called, "Word-for-word") and *paraphrase*, (sometimes called, "thought-for-thought."³ You might picture them as a continuum with literal on one extreme and paraphrase on the other.



Let me define these terms:⁴

Literal: "The attempt to translate by keeping as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing in the original language, yet still make sense in the receptor language."

Paraphrase: "The attempt to translate the *ideas* from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original."

² The Hebrew and Greek of the Bible are "dead" languages, meaning they are no longer spoken. They are related to their modern forms in the same way Old English is related to modern English. A modern English-speaking person might recognize a few words in a sentence of Old English, but really can't read the sentence without translation.

³ The theories are actually quite complicated and are usually divided into three categories: complete equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and paraphrase. For a good explanation, see *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (1982, Zondervan), pages 34-41.

⁴ Definitions are from *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, p. 35.

A literal translation might be very accurate, but if it is too literal it will be difficult to understand, since word order and rules of grammar differ so much from language to language. On the other hand, since "meaning" is communicated in the words of the original, a paraphrase, because it is more concerned about ideas than words, can easily miss the very ideas it claims to communicate.

A balance is obviously the best. In other words, the best translation should be *both* accurate *and* readable. It should accurately represent the original language but communicate it in an understandable way in the language of the reader.

ABOUT "GENDER-INCLUSIVE" TRANSLATIONS

Some of the newer translations of the Bible are attempting to be "gender-inclusive," which means they avoid using male terms to refer to both men and women. The supporters of these translations believe that translations need to reflect changes in the English language. In particular, they feel that the use of male pronouns to refer to both men *and* women should be revised.

Traditionally, the English language has used the male gender in a "generic" way. "Man" could refer to an individual male, to male human beings or to human beings in general. "He" could refer to a man *or* a woman (as in 2 Corinthians 5.17, "If anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation").⁵

In contemporary English, there have been some changes in this area. For example, some Bible translators today use the words, "humankind" or "human race" instead of "man" or "mankind." This is perfectly acceptable because the terms are clearly generic. The difficulties arise primarily in two areas: Translating the word "he" and translating the word "son."

Gender-inclusive translations often avoid the use of the word "he" by making the sentence plural, usually by replacing "he" and "his" with "those" and "their". The problem with this is that there are passages where the writer used the singular for a purpose and translating it as a plural obscures what the writer meant to say.⁶ An additional problem with making sentences plural that were written in the singular is the loss of individual focus. Much of the Bible was written to individuals (just think of John 3.16). If we make all of those passages plural, as though they were written to a group of people rather than to

⁵ Like most languages, including Biblical Hebrew and Greek, English doesn't have a neutral word that can refer to both a man *or* a woman. Male pronouns are generally used in a generic way.

⁶ Often to contrast the one with the many. For example, compare Psalm 1 in a traditional and a gender-inclusive translation.

an individual, we mute the Bible's focus on our individual response, and responsibilities, to God.⁷

Gender-inclusive translations also often seek to avoid the word "son" (which could refer to both male and female offspring in the Bible) by replacing it with the word "child". While it is true that sons *are* children, they are two different words with two different meanings in Biblical Greek and Hebrew and in English. Translating "son" as "child" may obscure a writer's intention to draw a contrast between *young* children and *adult* children.⁸ When using a gender-inclusive translation, it's good to also have a more literal English translation at hand in order to be clear on what was actually written.

MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE BIBLE

In a bookstore you will find a number of different versions of the Bible. What are the differences between them?

The *King James Version*⁹ (KJV) is the Bible that had the greatest impact on the development of the English language. It was first published in 1611 and was, for almost three centuries, the only English Bible used by Christians. Unfortunately, the English in use at that time is very archaic to us today, and people find it difficult to read. Nevertheless this Bible is still widely sold and you will find many editions of it in most bookstores.

The *New American Standard Bible* (NASB) was produced in 1971, as a revision of the *American Standard Version* of 1901. It is a very literal translation and is very accurate, but is somewhat wooden to read. Many Study Bibles today use the NASB.¹⁰

The *New International Version* (NIV) was published in 1978 as a completely new translation from the original languages. It is generally good translation, though at points a bit more readable than accurate. It has become the most widely sold version in English and many study Bibles contain the text of the NIV.

⁷ *Today's New International Version* does this at least 596 times in the New Testament alone. (www.cbmw.org/tniv/categorized).

⁸ For example, compare Romans 8.14 in a traditional and a gender-inclusive translation.

⁹ Also called the "Authorized Version" because its translation was authorized by King James I of England in 1604.

¹⁰ The NASB used archaic language, like *thee* and *thou*, when *God* is being directly addressed (as in prayer or in the psalms). An Updated Edition, published in 1995, has changed this to reflect modern English. The older edition is still found in bookstores, so if you are buying one of these, check on the title page to make sure it says "NASB Updated Edition."

Today's New International Version (TNIV) is a revision of the NIV New Testament published in 2002 (the whole TNIV Bible is due to be published in 2005). Essentially it makes the NIV gender-inclusive but also contains many additional revisions of the NIV, not all of which are helpful or accurate.

The *New American Bible* (NAB) is the contemporary English translation produced by the Roman Catholic Church. It is a rather good translation of the New Testament, but not so good of the Old Testament. Unfortunately, it is only published with notes that are reflective of official Roman Catholic teaching.

The *New King James Version* (NKJV) was published in 1982. It is a complete revision of the KJV in modern English. It is an exceptionally good translation of the psalms. Its accuracy and readability is very much like the NASB. For those raised on the *King James Version*, this may be a good choice.

The *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) came out in 1989. It is a complete revision of the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV) of 1952, which was, until recently, the Bible most widely used by scholars. The NRSV is an essentially literal translation and is gender-inclusive.

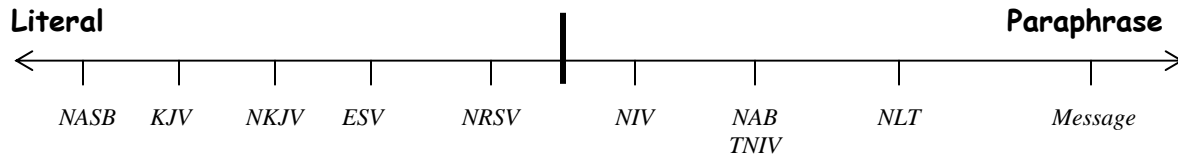
The *English Standard Version* is a revision of the RSV published in 2001. It is an excellent translation that has the strengths of both the NIV and NASB but not their weaknesses.

The *New Living Translation* (NLT) was published in 1996 as a revision of the *Living Bible*, a paraphrase published in 1971. While it is not as free in its translation as the *Living Bible*, it is still essentially a paraphrase. The English is very readable but the translation is not always accurate. It is gender-inclusive.

The Message is a very free-paraphrase of the Bible. (The New Testament was published in 1995; the whole Bible was published in 2002.) Unfortunately, it is written in such contemporary language (slang, at points) that I think it will be outdated in a relatively short period of time.

There are a number of other translations in English but these are the major ones you will find in a bookstore.

How can you define the differences between these versions of the Bible? Using the same continuum we looked at before can help us to picture them:



Another way to think of the differences between them is to compare the reading level of the different translations:¹¹

King James Version.....	12 th grade
New American Standard Bible.....	11 th grade
English Standard Version.....	10 th grade
New Revised Standard Version.....	10 th grade
New King James Version.....	9 th grade
New International Version.....	8 th grade
New Living Translation.....	6 th grade
The Message.....	5 th grade

The Bible was meant to be read and understood—that doesn't necessarily mean the concepts should be easily grasped, but it does mean the vocabulary and sentence structure shouldn't be mysterious to people. A Bible that doesn't sound like the English that basically educated people read today isn't much use to most of us. On the other hand it's important to remember that the Bible was originally written by and to people who could read and write quite well in their own language. Even to the original readers, the Bible was a challenging book to read. We should be careful not to try to make the Bible "simpler" than it was meant to be.¹²

If you're in the market for a Bible, here's some advice about translations:

The *New International Version* has become the most widely used English Bible today and it is the version we have available on Sunday mornings at Grace. If you attend a Bible

¹¹ Reading level information from www.ZondervanBibles.com

¹² Actually, the different books of the Bible were written at varied reading levels, because they were written by different people for different audiences. In the New Testament, they range from a rather complex Greek, with a large vocabulary and intricate sentence structure (Luke, Acts, and Hebrews), to very elementary Greek (Gospel of John). The level of the writing doesn't affect the level of complexity, however, since the Gospel of John contains many passages difficult to understand! No translation could really reflect this.

study group, the majority of people will probably be using the NIV, so it is probably a good Bible to own. It is a very readable translation, though I find it a little too free at some points.¹³

If you want to study the Bible, or at least be able to compare two different translations, it is probably best to own either the *English Standard Version*, the *New American Standard Bible* or the *New King James Bible* (I personally use the ESV as my basic reading and study Bible). Not only are they more literal translations, but they have more marginal notes that make you aware of alternate ways of understanding a passage.

But the most important fact to remember is this: *The best translation of the Bible is the one you will read!* You can have a number of Bibles on your shelf but if you don't read them they won't do you any good.

SOME THOUGHTS ON STUDY BIBLES

In a Christian bookstore today, most of the Bibles will be "Study Bibles" — they will contain the notes of some theologian, pastor, or viewpoint. Consequently, people searching for a Bible are bewildered not only by the various translations but also by the huge variety of editions of the Bible that they find.

Almost all Bibles contain some notes in the form of "marginal" or "alternate" readings which tell the reader about another way of translating a word or phrase or a more literal translation of some idiom. Many Bibles also contain cross-references, usually in a column down the center of the page. These simply refer the reader to other places in scripture where the same word, phrase, or concept occurs. These can be very helpful. A Study Bible, however, is different. It contains notes that interpret and apply the text of the Bible for the reader.

There's only one thing you need to remember about Study Bibles: *The notes are not inspired.* Many people treat the notes on the page of their Study Bible as having the same authority as the text of the Bible itself. Only the text of scripture is inspired; the notes are people's interpretations.

Let me briefly describe the main Study Bibles you will find in a bookstore:

The *NIV Study Bible* is, in my opinion, the best. The notes contain helpful historical or background information and they often clue the reader in to different possible interpretations of some difficult passage. The same notes are now printed with the text of the *New American Standard Bible* (Updated Edition) as the *NASB Study Bible*.

¹³ I do not recommend *Today's New International Version* because the translation changes render it much less accurate than the original NIV. If you want a gender-inclusive translation, the *New Revised Standard Version* is probably the best.

The *Life Application Bible* is also helpful, though it is quite bulky to carry around. The notes are more application oriented (though good application is based on correct interpretation). The type is small and there is so much information on the page that I find it difficult to read. If you are buying one of these Bibles be aware that the *Life Application Bible* comes in a variety of translations—NIV, NASB, NKJV, and NRSV. Be sure you are getting the version you want. The notes are the same in each of them.

The *Ryrie Study Bible* is also good and comes also in a variety of versions (NASB, KJV, NIV). The notes are more theological in nature. The layout on the page is easy to read.

The *MacArthur Study Bible* comes only in the NKJV. The notes are very detailed and generally helpful. Like the *Life Application Bible*, the page seems crowded with information which makes it difficult to read. The notes reflect the theological persuasion of the author, who tends to be rather dogmatic in his interpretations. He often doesn't let the reader know that there are different views than the one he is presenting.

The *Geneva Study Bible* has notes of a specific school of interpretation, called "Reformed Theology." It comes only in NKJV. The *Spirit-Filled Life Study Bible* contains notes based on a charismatic or Pentecostal interpretation. It comes only in NKJV. The *Women's Devotional Bible* is the NIV with devotional thoughts of special interest to women.

There are many others but those are the main ones.

Now, here's my advice about Study Bibles. I think it's best to own and usually read a Bible that contains *only the text of scripture* without notes (except marginal readings and maybe cross-references). For personal reading and devotion this brings the reader into direct contact with the word of God and allows him or her to trust the Holy Spirit to be the teacher and guide. Use a Study Bible like you would a commentary—only when you are studying or to find out some information on a difficult verse or passage.

If you are going to buy a Study Bible it's probably best to get one in a different translation than your main Bible. This allows you to not only have notes but also to have two different versions to compare.

BUYING A BIBLE

When you go to a bookstore you will find that the Bibles come in a variety of styles and colors. Generally speaking, Bibles come in paperback, hardcover, bonded leather, and genuine leather. Here's some information.

You don't have to pay a lot for a Bible. Most versions come in an inexpensive hardcover edition that will hold up well with general use. However if you are going to buy a Bible with

notes or one that is leather you can pay a lot of money. There are a couple of things to know about this.

First, if you want a leather Bible it is best to pay a few dollars more and purchase *genuine* leather rather than *bonded* leather. Bonded leather is made up of remnants of leather that have been glued together to form a sheet. *Genuine* leather is a single sheet of leather and will last much longer without tearing or breaking.

Second, if you are going to pay a lot for a Bible, try to get one that is *sewn* rather than *glued*. A *sewn* binding is where the pages are printed and folded into little books that are then sewn together and bound. *Glued* bindings (sometimes called "perfect bound") is where each page is printed individually and then glued together as one book and bound—these tend to break apart with use. *Sewn* bindings are becoming difficult to find, since they cost more to produce. Today even very expensive books are often perfect bound, but they are usually of a higher quality than in the past. Some publishers (like Zondervan) no longer sell any Bibles with *sewn* bindings. Generally speaking, if you can find one, a *genuine-leather, sewn* Bible will last the longest with careful use.

If you know exactly what kind of Bible you want to purchase, you may want to get on the world-wide web and search for sites that sell Bibles. You can often find a Bible for 10% to 50% less than you will pay in a store.

Remember this: the cover on a Bible doesn't change the contents, so don't pay more than you need to.

CONCLUSION

Sometimes a trip to a bookstore to look for a Bible brings more confusion than clarity. But remember that we have the privilege of having God's message to us in our own language in words we can understand—many of the people in our world cannot read. Even if they can read, there is either no translation or an inaccurate translation of the Bible in their language.

More important than the translation itself is the discipline of reading and meditating on the Bible. When you do this, you will find with the psalmist that...

*The unfolding of your words gives light;
it gives understanding to the simple.*
(Psalm 105.130)