

## CHOOSING A BIBLE TRANSLATION

Reading, studying and praying through the Bible are an essential part of the Christian faith. The Bible teaches us about who God is; the purpose of human life; and how we should live in relation to God, to other people and to the created world. But more than just a source of information, beliefs, and practices, when we read the Bible with faith it becomes one of the key places where we encounter God. Indeed, when we pray for God's Spirit to bring the ancient words alive, we are promised an encounter with God's living Word – Jesus himself.

All of this makes choosing which Bible translation to use an important decision. The two main things that go into this decision is how faithful it is to the original Hebrew and Greek Biblical manuscripts (so it will communicate what the Bible really says), and whether it's easy to understand and enjoyable to read (so that you'll actually want to read it). Picking a good translation means balancing the two – some translations focus on being as literal as possible (word-for-word), while others focus on taking the ideas spoken in the ancient languages and putting them into easily understandable modern English (thought-for-thought). Below I've listed four translations which are among the most common ones used today.

### **NRSV (New Revised Standard Version)**

The NRSV is a mainly word- for-word translation of the Bible that is the most commonly used translation in university level Biblical studies. One of its distinctive features are the fact that it was translated by a group of scholars that included Protestant, Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Christians, which makes it largely free of bias towards any one Christian tradition. It also makes use of gender neutral language where the translators felt that the original text referred to both men and women (ie. when New Testament uses the word 'brothers' as a general term for Christians, the NRSV translates this as "brothers *and sisters*"). This can be a mixed blessing as on the one hand it makes for a Bible that's more inclusive for women, but there are times when it can confuse or change the meaning of a passage. This has been my primary Bible for some time (though for formal study I usually refer to several different translations including the ESV, NIV, NASB and NET). It's relatively straightforward to read, but preserves enough of the distinctive flavour of Hebrew and Greek to make you pause to remember that the book of the Bible were written in other languages and cultures with their own distinctive ways of thinking.

### **ESV (English Standard Version)**

The ESV is another good choice for a literal translation of the Bible. If you read them side by side the ESV and NRSV are quite similar since they're both based on an older English translation called the RSV (Revised Standard Version). The main difference between the two is that the ESV reflects a mainly Protestant outlook, is more conservative in its interpretation and does not use gender neutral language. For this reason it's generally more word-for-word than the NRSV, especially when it comes to the way the Biblical writers use gendered words (ie. when the New Testament says 'brothers,' the ESV translates it directly as "brothers"). It's a more recent translation (2001) but is becoming more common in universities as an alternative to the NRSV. Choosing between these two literal translations really comes down to a matter of personal preference. I generally find the NRSV a bit more of a neutral translation (thought all translations involve interpretation and reflect the opinions of the translators) but there are many times when I appreciate the slightly more literal nature of the ESV.

## **NIV (New International Version)**

The NIV is by far the most popular English Bible Translation in use today. It generally favours the thought-for-thought translation approach and tends to be a fairly easy Bible to read (though in many places it's actually quite word-for-word). But because it follows more of thought-for-thought approach the translators had to do more interpretation when translating. For this reason it often reflects the Protestant and moderately conservative outlook of its translators. The original version of the NIV was completed in 1984, and this is the version many people think of as the NIV. But in 2011 the NIV was significantly revised to reflect the latest scholarship and changes in the English language. This is the only version of the NIV available for purchase today. I personally find the new 2011 a major improvement on the 1984 original, correcting many of the issues I found with the 1984 edition (especially in how it translates the Apostle Paul's letters in the New Testament). More controversially for some more conservative readers who loved the 1984 version, the 2011 NIV makes moderate use of gender neutral language in speaking of women and men – though to a lesser extent than the NRSV. Overall the 2011 NIV is a solid translation, and because it's easier to read than either the NRSV or ESV it's accessible to most people. Also, chances are someone else around the table will have the same Bible as you.

## **NLT (New Living Translation)**

The NLT is another common thought-for-thought translation of the Bible, though more recent and not as popular as the NIV. As Bible translations go it's one of the easiest read (other than those like the Good News Bible or Contemporary English Version which are aimed at people with a basic reading level). However, it's the least literal of the four translations I've listed and there are times when it narrowly interprets a Biblical passage in one particular direction. This means there are many times when what you're reading is mainly the interpretation of the translation team. For this reason I'd mainly suggest it as a first Bible that's easier to read than the first three I've listed. It's no good owning a Bible if you never want to read it, so if the more formal style of the others puts you off at first the NLT is a good option to get your started. You may also want to pick up the NLT as a second Bible if you already own a more literal translation and want something that's more casual for devotional reading.

## **Others**

The NASB (New American Standard Bible) is another highly literal translation. The reason I don't usually recommend it is that in trying to be as literal as possible the translation is often awkward and difficult to read (especially out loud). At the other end of the spectrum is *The Message*, a popular Bible paraphrase written by Eugene Peterson. It's a good way to get fresh insight into the Bible or to start reading for the first time, but because it's a paraphrase and not a direct translation I wouldn't use it without owning a fairly literal Bible translation to check it against. Many of Peterson's interpretations are unique to him, and because it was written in a very contemporary style (from 1993-2002) it's also starting to show its age. Finally there's the NET (New English Translation), which is one of the best modern translations I've come across. However, it's quite new and not that common, so if you're reading the Bible with others you'll probably be the only one who has it. But as I said before one of the main things is to pick a Bible that will encourage you to read it, so if any of these gets you reading, use it.

## **What About the King James?**

The King James Version (KJV) was the most popular Bible in English for almost four centuries, but unless you're reading it for its poetic language (which is quite beautiful and unmatched in most modern translations) I wouldn't use it as your personal Bible. There are two main reasons for this. First, English language has changed so much that the KJV is now very difficult for most people to understand (even with the many updates since it was first published there are still over 300 words in today's KJV that don't mean the same thing they did in 1611). The second is that while the KJV was translated from the best ancient Greek and Hebrew manuscripts available at the time, in the past 400 years a number of older and more accurate manuscripts have become widely available to Biblical scholars. Basically this means that most modern English Bibles (especially the more literal translations) are closer to the original Biblical writings than the KJV.<sup>1</sup> If you love the language for personal reading certainly keep a copy and read it, but I would recommend that you also own a modern literal translation like the NRSV or ESV.

## **Reading the Bible in Community**

As much as I've talked about the importance of choosing a good Bible translation, there's another essential way to be sure that you're reading the Bible regularly and getting a good interpretation of its meaning – and that's to get together with other Christians and read it together. When we're off on our own it's easy to get off track and forget to use our Bible. It's also easy to misinterpret things when we don't have anyone else to share our perspective with. So what's even more important than choosing a Bible translation is choosing a church. More than anything else being part of a Christian community will ensure that the Bible becomes much more than just words on a page.

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<sup>1</sup> For this reason I'd also recommend against the New King James Version (NKJV), which is just a translation of the KJV into modern English. Basically you lose the beauty of the King James but get to keep all of the manuscript issues.