

# *How to Choose a Translation*

## **Goal:**

To understand the differences in the available Bible translations and help select one to use for study and other purposes.

## **Reference Materials:**

International Standard Bible Encyclopedia, Electronic Edition

## **Introduction:**

Today we find many versions of the Bible on the shelves of our Christian bookstores and it can be quite confusing deciding which one to select. To make matters more complicated each translation is available from a number of different organization each which adds its own footnotes, study guides and translation notes. We have found that people usually select a bible translation based on the recommendation of a friend or pastor and they usually ask, "What are the differences?" or "Why should I select one over the other?". . This lesson is designed to educate people in the basic translations so they can more wise select a bible for their particular purpose. But before we do that I think it important for a person to understand the process by which the Bible was created. For if it is the Words of God, then we must have a grasp on how God has placed those words into a book.

There are basically 6 steps in the process by which God has delivered his thoughts to us. They are ;

1. Revelation / Inspiration of the author
2. Transmission (Writing & Copying of the text)
3. Canonization (Acceptance by the Jewish (OT) and Christian (NT) Communities)
4. Translation to Modern language
5. Illumination & Interpretation
6. Life Application

Here is a little more information on each step so you can see how it works;

**1) Revelation/Inspiration** : Gods thoughts were revealed to the Biblical authors minds. The author was then inspired to record them in words given by Spirit in an original document. Original documents written by 40 authors over a period of 1500 years written in three languages on three different continents.

**2) Transmission:** These documents were then copied by others in order to maintain them over time and distribute them among others. Accuracy among scribes who did the copying was of paramount importance.

**3) Canonization:** These documents were then “accepted” as Gods inspired words by the consensus of the leaders of the Jewish (OT) and Christian (NT) communities of the day. Here individual books and letters were grouped into collections called canons that fit the following guidelines

OT:

- Indication of Divine authorship ..... ie. with statements like "And God said"
- Written by an accepted prophet of one who was know to be in contact with God
- Historically Accurate (also prophetically accurate if applicable)
- Accepted by the Jews as scripture

NT:

- Apostolic Authorship ... i.e. written by one having direct contact with Jesus - 1 John 1:1-4
- Consistent with orthodox teaching as handed down by the apostles and the OT -1 Cor. 15:1-4 and Isa. 53
- Accepted by the Early Church at large as scripture (see Appendix A)
- Holding up moral and spiritual values consistent with the Holy Spirit (ie. John 16:7-15)

**4) Translation:** Over the years the original documents were lost but many of the copies that were distributed remained and acted as the source documents for the various translations we have today. The OT in Hebrew and the NT books in Greek or Aramaic. During the translation process a great deal of analysis of language and the context of the historical culture of authors and the intended recipients of the original writings was done in order to produce translations that correctly represented what the author intended when the original text was written for without this assessment of intention, the meaning of the texts could shift over time. Different translation teams used different copies of the original manuscripts, some even translations themselves. They also did their cultural assessments differently, had slightly differing theological bias's and somewhat differing goals for the use of the translation. These variations are behind the differences that appear in our modern translations today which will be contrasted below in more detail.

**5) Illumination & Interpretation:** Scripture tells us in 1 Cor 2:14 that ..” *the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned.*”. This point is no small matter for at its core is the concept that for any man to truly understand Gods words correctly he must be enlightened by the Holy Spirit. So the next step of the process to

know the thoughts of God deals with the recipient not the author. He must be “illuminated” or in other words, given the ability to understand scripture. So after picking up a particular translation to read, the author will have to impart meaning to the words (ie. interpret them) guided by the Holy Spirit.

Now many study Bibles today carry built in “interpretations” of scripture in the form of footnotes, outlines, commentary’s and even point by point lessons. These vary by publishing organizations which are each aligned with certain seminaries or theologians. For example you can buy an NIV translation with Scofield’s or Ryrie’s footnotes and study guides embedded. Each of these Bibles seeks to help the reader understand the text by providing the theologians “illumination” or insights.

**6) Application:** The last step in the process is that in which the reader takes the meaning of the scriptures and decides how to apply them to his or her life. So ,depending on the readers understanding of meaning of the passage and how the Holy Spirit applied it in their life a person decides a) whether the truth is relevant to them and then b) if relevant whether to put the truth into action or not. Here is where people decide what parts of scripture they want to follow and what parts they either don’t need to or don’t want to. This is where the will of the recipient is so key for it is what pastors and Christian educators spend their whole lives doing. Working to motivate people to conform their will to Gods and act on his word.

So now that you have seen the process, which translation is the best , which is closest to the original? Well to answer this we must remember that there are translations and there are study systems and these are mixed in today’s bibles. It is important to separate these and pick the translation best suited to your needs first and then decide on the the study system. So consistentt with this , lets look first at translations.

### **Translations:**

Translations fall into 3 catagories

1. Word for Word ..... KJV, NASB
2. Paraphrase ..... Philips,
3. Dynamic Equivalence ..... NIV

**Word for Word** translations are the closest to the original documents used as the source of the translation. These are best translations to use for study and to build key beliefs and doctrines on. However they are harder to understand than other types because the original languages do not map to English word for word and because they are more devoid of “intepretation” added by the translator. In order to correctly impart meaning to a word for word translation you should employ a Bible encyclopedia of some sort to gain the cultural context of the author and intended recipient and an and an original language dictionary to learn the optional meanings of key words in the original language.

**Paraphrase Translations** are those that convert the original language to English on a thought by thought basis. The translator isolates a complete sentence or thought in the original language and writes a sentence or two that conveys the equivalent thought. These translations are great for light devotional reading or for children but they are the most tainted by the theological training (bias) of the translator. Some paraphrase translations are actually translations not from original language but from other English translations.

**Dynamic Equivalence** translations in between Word for Word and Paraphrase. These translations are those where the translators converted the text phrase by phrase into what an equivalent phrase would be in English. This makes the translation much easier to understand but still keeps it closer to the original language than a paraphrase. They have less confusing language but still include more “translator assigned meaning” than the Word for Word versions do. These are great for general study use but should not be used as sole sources to define key doctrines especially those associated with “difficult or controversial passages”

**Key Message:**

So in general , use a Word for Word translation for deeper study and to validate for yourself key church beliefs or doctrines that might be controversial. Use a Dynamic Equivalence for general use and use a paraphrase for devotional use.

Now that we understand what kind of translation exist, lets look at some of the most common specific English translations & how they developed and what they are based on.

Completion of Hebrew OT (39 books) .. 500BC..

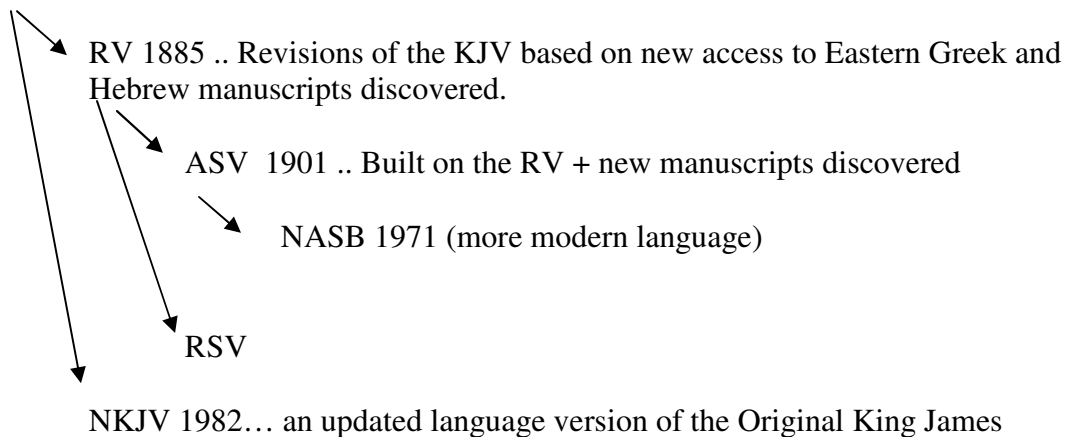
Completion of Greek OT translation 200BC.

Completion of Greek NT.manuscripts 100AD ..

Jeromes Lating Vulgate 390AD Translation

Wicliffe .1384 . Translated from the Latin Bible .. the Vulgate.. the first complete English edition.

KJV .. 1611 .. Translated from the Latin Vulgate, the Greek Test of Erasmus and Masrotic Hebrew. The Greek manuscripts which were available at the time were western in nature and incomplete. The translators were given guidelines to maintain consistency with certain church doctrines.



NIV .. 1965-1979 a fresh translation from the Greek , Aramaic and Masoretic (Hebrew) texts with emphasis on literalness and readability.

### Translation Summary:

The NASB is probably the most developed Word for Word translation based on the best original texts we have today, however it has not existed very long and does not agree with a number of passages from the KJV which has existed and is still widely used after 400 years. This makes it somewhat controversial. The widely circulated NIV is very well accepted. It's a literal and very readable translation but it is specific in a number of places where other translations are more general showing its bias towards clarity, some perhaps filled in by the theological bias of its translators. It's weakness maybe too much clarity in some places without sufficient cultural context and yet too broad of use of the word saved. We use the NASB or KJV for deeper study and making decisions on controversial beliefs but only when used in conjunction with sufficient cultural context. We use the NIV for general reading and teaching youth and like the Living Bible for devotions.

Appendix A: Partial New Testament Canon (who decided what books were scripture)

	AD70	95	101	110	115	120	130	150	185	315	340	400	400	325	393	397	419			
	Pseudo Barnabas	Clement of Rome	Ignatius	Polycarp	Hermas	Irenaeus	Diognetus	Justyn Martyr	Clement of Alexandria	Tertullian	Origen	Cyril or Jerusalem	Eusebius	Jerome	Augustine		Council of Nicea	Council of Hippo	Council of Carthage	Council Carthage (2)
Matt	X	X		X	X	Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Mark	X			X	X	Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Luke	X			X		Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
John		X		X		Y		Y	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Acts				X	X	Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Romans				X		Y		X	Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
1 Cor.				X	X	Y		X	Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
2 Cor		Y		X	X	Y	X	X	Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Gal				X		Y	X	X	Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Eph	X	X	X	X		Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Phil			X	X	X	Y			Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Col			X	X		Y	X	X	Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
1 Thess			X	X	X	Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
2 Thess			X	X		Y		X	X	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
1 Tim		X		X	X	Y			Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
2 Tim	X				X	X				X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Titus	X					X	X		Y	X	X	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Phil												Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
Heb	X	X	X		X	X			Y	X	D	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
James		X			X							Y	D	Y	Y		D	Y	Y	Y
1 Peter	X			X	X	Y			Y	X	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
2 Peter	X	X										Y	D	Y	Y		D	Y	Y	Y
1 John				X	X	Y			Y	X		Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y
2 John				X		X						D	Y	D	Y	Y		D	Y	Y
3 John												D	Y	D	Y	Y		D	Y	Y
Jude						X			Y	X		Y	D	Y	Y		D	Y	Y	Y
Rev						Y			Y	X	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y		Y	Y	Y	Y

Key: X=Cited Y=Named as Authentic D=Disputed