

## HOW TO CHOOSE A BIBLE TRANSLATION

### “HOW TO AVOID DROWNING IN THE SEA OF VERSIONS”

All of us have been there. We stand there looking out at the sea of books in the average Christian bookstore, or thumb through pages on end of Bibles in a Christian book catalogue, trying to decide which Bible is best for us. All of them claim to be the version that has been waiting to arrive, to do what no other version can. Some of them claim to have literate accuracy, while others claim to be the most readable. Some profess to be geared towards a certain culture, while others try to soften the political correctness of the offense carried into the present day. The Black Bible Chronicle Series has published an offensive translation of the four Gospels called *Rapping with Jesus* in which the writer tries to capture how Jesus was “chillin’ with the homies!”

Add to that the hundreds of authors who supply study notes in the Bibles for interpretive and practical help. Most recently, an extreme example highlighted the new Bible for teen girls, filled with dating tips and fashion helps, packaged as a magazine, like *Teen Beat*, leaving the gold leaf and leather binding in the dark ages.

How do you as a Christian decide which translation is best for you? How should the leadership of a church decide which version to fill their pews with? How should a preacher decide which translation to preach from? *The purpose of this study is to interact with the issues surrounding Bible translation, describe the most prominent Bible versions available today, and provide a guideline for determining which Bible translation is right for you.*

#### 1. WHAT IS A TRANSLATION?

A translation is the transfer of information from one language into another. “According to Nida, a translation should stimulate in a reader (in his native language) the same mood, impression, or reaction to itself that the original writing sought to stimulate in its first readers.”<sup>1</sup>

The reason that this entire issue exists is because we do not presently speak the language in which the Biblical writings (AKA – original autographs) were given. Hebrew, Aramaic, and Koine Greek were the three dialects spoken at the times in which God’s Word was inspired. Because we do not speak or read in those languages, we have to rely on translators who have studied to learn them, and read their translations.<sup>2</sup> Many have made attempts to best represent the Bible to us in English, each dissatisfied at some level with the others.

The purpose of a translation therefore is to close the language gaps that exist between the inspired writings and our inability to read them. It is also equally important to note that since God inspired the writings of the original autographs, then a translation is not inspired! And because a translation is not inspired, it might contain errors. The

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<sup>1</sup>Nida, *Toward a Science*, 156, 164. cited in MacArthur, J. 1997, c1992. *Rediscovering Expository Preaching* (Page 308). Word Pub.: Dallas, 308.

<sup>2</sup> Studying the genius of God’s wisdom in causing certain languages to emerge when they did, for the purpose of inspiration is a fascinating study, for another time.

only reason that it would contain errors, however, is because it did not accurately reflect the original.

Therefore the goal of a translation is to accurately represent the original inspired writings of Scripture to a people that cannot read them for themselves. The quality of the translation depends on the translators ability to accurately represent the original, and only on that basis can claim to be the Word of God.

## 2. WHAT IS THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN THE TRANSLATIONS?

Three issues make up the debate within Bible translation: reliability, impartiality, and readability.

A. *Reliability* – The original writings of Paul, James, Peter, Matthew, Moses, etc. are not available today. They have been lost and all that remain are early copies.<sup>3</sup> Thus there is some discrepancy among Bible translators as to which family of manuscripts is most reliable. The earlier the manuscript, the more likely it is reliable.<sup>4</sup> Also important to note, just because there are more copies of a particular manuscript does not mean that it is more dependable, it just means that it has had a wider reach of influence.<sup>5</sup> The following is a breakdown of the issues surrounding ancient texts and their reliability.

- 1) The Old Testament – The Hebrew and Aramaic portions of the OT have many textual issues in question, but for the most part, scholars and translators of modern translations rely on one major text family – the Masoretic text. This is the oldest and most reliable manuscript collection of the Old Testament, in which a group of medieval scribes worked to preserve the text between the years 500-900 AD. Their work supplied pronunciation help through the addition of vowel pointings to the original text, and has been verified by the finding of the Dead Sea Scrolls, some of which had texts dating back to 200 BC. The debate is therefore most volatile in the New Testament families of manuscripts.

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<sup>3</sup> This does not present a problem for the Christian however because of God's promise of preservation, a topic for another lesson.

<sup>4</sup> It is important to note that there is no such promise of inspiration given to scribes who copied the Bible, in the days before the printing press and copy machines. Scribal errors have therefore become a serious factor in Bible translation.

<sup>5</sup> This is a common argument used by those who would erroneously hold to a "King James Only" position, that because there are more manuscripts, it should be trusted. The fact is that more is not better, it is just more.

2) The New Testament – among the four major text families, two of them are at the center of the debate, from which most Bible translations draw: the Byzantine Family and the Alexandrian Family.

a) Byzantine Family – the majority of the texts available are from this family and therefore they have inherited the name, “Majority Text,” mainly because of the reach of its publication. These texts are further removed from the original documents of Scripture and therefore less reliable. In their history, however, many colorful details emerge that call this family into scrutiny.

It all began with Erasmus, who was a Roman Catholic scholar that was eager to publish a version of the Greek NT when the printing press was invented. At the same time, he was competing with another man, Diego Lopez de Zuniga, and wanted to produce his volume first. In haste Erasmus collected as many Greek manuscripts as possible, but found difficulty because such items are rare and guarded. Because of his persistence, he secured a complete copy of Acts, the Gospels, and the Epistles.

In some places, his copy was illegible or corrupted, and since he did not have the Greek in those places, Erasmus took the Latin versions he had, and translated them back into Greek, hoping to be as close to what he guessed the Greek would look like. In other words, instead of copying the Greek, he relied on another translation of the Greek and through reverse translation, inserted his guess of what the text might have said.

Therefore, his Greek NT contains in those places, writings that are found no where else in any manuscript family, and the Majority Text family still contains them to this day.

In the other portions of the NT, such as in Revelation, where his ability to find a complete copy of the letter resulted in the same technique as above.

Furthermore, as Erasmus finished his Greek NT, and published it, criticism and mistakes forced him to revise his work 35 times, littering the medieval world with thousands of copies in 35 different forms. It is estimated that over 300,000 copies of Erasmus’ versions were spread throughout the known world, and are used in the translation of the King James and New King James Bibles.

b) Alexandrian Family – by far the oldest and most reliable manuscripts contain this family of Greek texts, dating as far back as the end of the 2<sup>nd</sup> century. It has been noted that at least 165 differences exist between the Alexandrian and Byzantine families, in which the Alexandrian is to be preferred.<sup>6</sup> None of these present major doctrinal problems, but the issue rests in whether the writings of Scripture are accurately represented.

B. *Impartiality* – Communicating information from one language into another can provide some unique challenges for the translator. Unless he is transferring word for word in a wooden literal fashion, he will be faced with the challenge to walk the thin line between representation and interpretation. He must represent the text, but guard against making an interpretive decision that will lead the reader away from the truth of Scripture. If he is not careful, the translator will give the English reader something that the original author did not intend to say.

For example, the terms *sarx* (*sarx*) in the Greek is translated “flesh” in the more literal translations, but in versions that are more of a paraphrase it is translated “sinful nature.” The word should read flesh, but because the translators of the NLT, NIV, and others do not think the readers will understand, they replace “flesh” with “sinful nature.” However, this presents a theological problem for the reader who will discover elsewhere in Scripture that his old nature is dead, and he is new and alive in Christ. The translator has now come in between the reader and the text, and having made the interpretation for him, and wrongly so, has defiled a proper interpretation of the passages in which *sarx* appears.

C. *Readability* – All of us have read versions before that have been cumbersome, verbose, wordy, and difficult. That is because some versions emphasize a more wooden literal approach, missing the fluid nature of language, while others were written in a time period in which they spoke differently. The King James Bible is the most familiar example, with all of its –eth’s, and –est’s. While it might have a dignified ring in the ears of the hearers, because it was the common way of speaking and reading in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, it is not common in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

A Bible that is not readable is not understandable, and is therefore a hindrance in the life of a believer, just like the Greek is to someone who does not speak it! Therefore, one of the three goals of a good Bible translation is readability. It is the last of three considerations in terms of priority, but nonetheless it is an

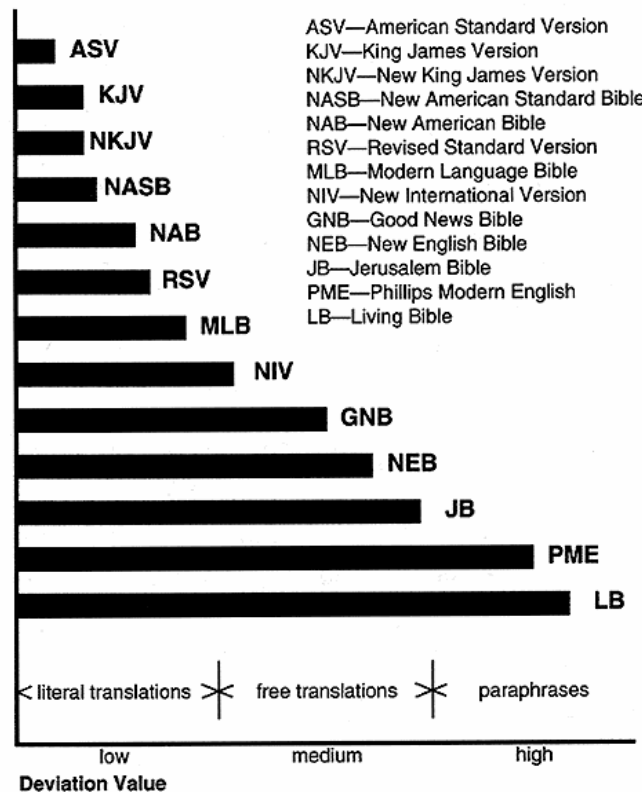
<sup>6</sup> See Robert L. Thomas, *How to Choose a Bible Version* (Geanies House: Christian Focus, 2000), 55-88.

important consideration. Therefore, archaic, rigid, and wooden literal versions should be used carefully.

On the other hand, the same care must be exercised with paraphrases, which might be readable, but could compromise the ability to represent the original. For example, paraphrases also tend to eliminate crucial transition words at the beginning of the verses such as “for, and, then, or so” to make them read more smoothly, but in so doing, remove the ability of the reader to follow the thought of the author.

For the sake of readability, many translations change the word order (which in the Biblical languages is essential), remove words from the original that do not appear to be necessary in the mind of the translator, alter the meaning of the words to suit the intended audience, and make additions to the original text for the sake of flow.

Scholars have tried to calculate how “deviant” certain translations are by examining how many changes are made to the original. The more changes, the less literal and more of a paraphrase it becomes. Consider the following chart<sup>7</sup>:



<sup>7</sup> Robert L. Thomas, “Bible Translations: The Link between Exegesis and Expository Preaching” Master’s Seminary Journal, vol. 1, 54-75.

### 3. WHAT ARE THE MAJOR TRANSLATIONS AND THEIR ORIGINS?

Identifying the kinds of translations available narrows the discussion into three categories of Bible versions:

A. *Literal Versions* – A translation for the detailed Bible student that is most concerned about accuracy, and secondly with readability. Below is a list and description of the major versions in this category:

- 1) King James Version – started by the King of England, and first published in 1611, this version was to remove the English version of the day called the Bishop's Bible, which was full of High Church language, and Arminian theological bias. King James translators were allowed to change Bishop's only when absolutely necessary, and relied heavily on it and the Textus Receptus, from the most unreliable family of manuscripts – the Byzantine. After 350 years of revision, the King James has dominated as the most popular version, and retains tight closeness to the literal rendering, with a conservative theological bent in the translators. It has been given a 12<sup>th</sup> grade reading level, mainly due to its difficult readability.
- 2) New King James Version - It has been given a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level.
- 3) New American Standard Bible (Updated 1995) – 10<sup>th</sup> grade
- 4) Revised Standard Version - 7
- 5) English Standard Version

B. *Free Versions* – A translation for the Bible reader who is most concerned about readability, and secondly with accuracy. Below is a list and description of the major version in this category:

- 1) New International Version -7<sup>th</sup>

C. *Paraphrase Versions* – Notably not a translation, but more of a commentary for the Bible reader who is not concerned with accuracy but with readability and cultural relevancy. Below is a list and description of the major versions in this category:

- 1) Living Bible – 8<sup>th</sup>
- 2) New Living Translation – 6<sup>th</sup> and more gender neutral

4. WHICH BIBLE SHOULD I USE?

Below is a list of key questions that you should now be able to answer in deciding which Bible translation is right for you to use:

1. What is the purpose for which you intend to use the translation?
2. What family group of manuscripts
3. Which translation gives the most accurate rendering to the average Bible student?
4. Which translation is least influenced by the translator's interpretation?
5. Which translation of the remaining English Bibles is most readable?

## APPENDIX

### Dr. Robert L. Thomas' conclusion in his article, "Bible Translations: The Link between Exegesis and Expository Preaching"

It is time to answer the question of what type of translation is the best basis for expository preaching. For some preachers, the communicative effectiveness of a free translation or paraphrase is very important. This advantage should not be underestimated.<sup>57</sup> Yet if the ultimate goal of the expositor is to teach the meaning of his passage as the foundation for applications to his congregation's practical experience, he is seriously hindered if he uses a version with excessive interpretive elements. It is a copout to use a free translation or paraphrase under the pretext that all translations are interpretive. The fact must be faced that some versions are more interpretive than others, and a choice must be made in this light.

Upon encountering an interpretation different from his own, as he is bound to do,<sup>58</sup> the expository preacher must tell his listeners that the meaning is not what their Bibles say it is. This is a procedure quite different from explaining an ambiguous statement. It will assume the character of a reversal of what the translation says. This practice, when repeated too frequently, maximizes confusion and reduces pedagogical effectiveness.

The situation is analogous to teaching a subject in the classroom with a textbook that expresses viewpoints opposite to those held by the teacher. The class time is consumed with refutations of what the textbook teaches. Such an unsound teaching technique greatly diminishes the success of the learning process, especially in the situation where people are led to believe they hold an authoritative book in their hands. They have been taught that this is the "Bible," not a commentary on the Bible.

It is far more advantageous to use and encourage the audience to follow in a more literal translation, one the translator has transmitted from the original language in such a way as to give the church an accurate translation on which to do its own exegesis, and not one that subjects the church to limitations in the translator's understanding of what the text means.<sup>59</sup> It is the job of the expositor, not of the translator, to explain the meaning of the passage under consideration. When a servant of the Lord imposes on the people of God his personal interpretation, he is morally obligated to clarify his role, that it is one of an expositor, not a translator. In any work that is precisely called a translation, interpretation should be kept to a minimum. Otherwise, the role of the expositor is usurped, and the work becomes a commentary on the meaning of the text, not a translation into the closest equivalent of the receptor language.

Byington has reflected this view of translation:

To say in my own words what I thought the prophet or apostle was driving at would not, to my mind, be real translation; nor yet to analyze into a string of separate words all the implications which the original may have carried in one word; the difference between conciseness and prolixity is one difference between the Bible and something else. So far as a translation does not keep to this standard, it is a commentary rather than a translation: a very legitimate and useful form of commentary, but it leaves the field of translation unfilled.<sup>60</sup>

Commentaries are much needed, but it is a mistake to assume that a translation can function in that role without ceasing to be a translation. Preaching from an interpretive free translation or paraphrase is almost tantamount to preaching from a commentary, not from a translation. It is not the translator's job to mediate between God's Word and modern culture as the commentator or expositor does.<sup>61</sup>

This is why a strong consensus exists that free translations and paraphrases do not furnish English texts that are suitable for Bible study.<sup>62</sup> This is why the general recommendation to follow a literal translation for study purposes is widespread.<sup>63</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

While it must be granted that a sermon is not the same as a classroom lecture, it is still similar to it in that edification of sermon listeners takes place only when learning takes place. To this end, insofar as philosophy of translation is concerned, it is proposed that the best link between exegesis and expository preaching, the best textbook to use in public exposition of the Word, is a literal translation of the Bible, one in which the interpretive element is kept to a minimum.

The final choice of a translation must not be based on translation techniques alone. It must take into account historical origin, textual basis, theological bias, and usage of the English language also. Among these, however, the philosophy followed in the translation process remains a major factor for consideration in the choice of a version on which to base effective Bible exposition.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup>MacArthur, J. 1997, c1992. *Rediscovering expository preaching* (Pages 318-320). Word Pub.: Dallas

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