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The Joys and Challenges of Choosing a Bible Translation

You are a new teacher who is assigned to teach a Bible class, and you need to decide which Scripture translation to use. Or perhaps you are an experienced teacher who was recently urged by a group of church members to use a different translation than the one you have been using. They adamantly declare that the version *they* use is the only reliable one.

The purpose of this article is to help you understand the development of Bible versions and become more aware of the challenges of translating the Scriptures, as well as to offer some

guidelines to help you choose the translation best suited for various situations.¹

The Journey of the Bible

People often refer to the Bible as a book, but it is really a collection of 66 “books,” letters/epistles, and documents by numerous writers. The writing of the original manuscripts stretched over some 1,500 years—the earliest material was probably written 1,400 to 1,500 years before Christ, and the last part of the New Testament, late in the first century A.D. Adding to those complexities is the fact that the Bible was written in three languages—

Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (portions of Daniel, Ezra, and some sentences in other books), and Greek (the New Testament). These languages have changed dramatically over the centuries. Bible translators thus face many technical challenges in producing a reliable version in modern vernacular. Some have also faced religious or political persecution. William Tyndale was put to death because of his work as a Bible translator, but he is not the only one. Other translators have been accused of heresy because they did not uphold certain theological po-

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sitions. Bible translating can be very dangerous work, and in a field where so much is at stake, teachers and administrators may be criticized for using a particular translation.

In addition to the difficulties listed above, translators face at least two other challenges.

First of all, *what* do they translate? There are no original manuscripts to use. You may have seen the original of your country's constitution at a museum, but no such documents exist for any biblical writings. The thousands of ancient manuscripts that have been discovered over the centuries contain varying amounts of material, ranging from a few sentences or words to several books. Many are incomplete, so Bible translators must compare different manuscripts and make choices about the most reliable wording.²

For many centuries, the question of choosing which manuscripts and Bible translations was not an issue—the decision was made by the controlling church, often backed by political leaders. Beginning in the fourth century, the Latin Vulgate translation³ was the accepted Bible although, until the start of the 1500s, few translations of this version had been made. Neither the Roman Catholic Church nor the Orthodox churches⁴ were willing to commission translations in the vernacular, and church leaders condemned as heresy any unauthorized translation of the Bible. Some of Wycliffe's followers⁵ worked on an English translation, but the Vatican vigorously suppressed the enterprise. Wycliffe's version was translated from the Vulgate, which itself was a translation from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek, and other Latin versions.

Martin Luther and William Tyndale⁶ did not wholly depend on the Vulgate; rather, they used biblical manuscripts in the original languages. The Dutch Catholic scholar, Erasmus, provided a Greek New Testament text based on available Greek manuscripts.⁷ His translation, referred to as the *Textus*

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Receptus, was regarded as the standard Greek text for many years, and was used by the translators of the *Authorized (KJV) Bible*. He translated the Old Testament from the Hebrew version known as the Masoretic Text, dating back to about the 10th century A.D.

The Dead Sea Scrolls,⁸ an extraordinary find in caves near the Dead Sea shortly after World War II, provided translators with manuscripts that were about a thousand years earlier than other available biblical manuscripts, but the scrolls were not made available to scholars until recently. Thus, because today's translators have access to better collections of manuscripts than their earlier counterparts, their translations are often closer to the original.⁹

The second difficulty that translators face is *how* to translate the available manuscripts. This challenge has to do with the characteristics of human language and can be described as a two-edged sword:

1. The translator must translate from ancient languages that still exist today but have changed over the centuries (Aramaic, Hebrew, Greek). How does the translator know what the writer meant two thousand or more years ago? Scholars learn more and more about these languages through

ongoing study and exposure to a variety of documents. Also, the discovery of ancient manuscripts helps to clarify the meaning of previously obscure words. Translators use the results of their study and the new information to revise current translations and produce new ones. Thus, as translators come to better understand the ancient languages, they can produce better translations.

2. The translator has to deal with the changes that occur in the language into which the Bible is being translated. The focus of this article is English versions, but changes occur in all languages. The translator has to decide if the language changes are transitory or lasting, and if the words chosen will be understood by speakers of the language in different parts of the world. Thus, the translator not only has to be an expert on the original biblical languages, but also must have a thorough understanding of the modern vernacular.¹⁰

Types of Translations

With this background, we move to consider the kinds of translations that exist. In general, translations can be sorted into four categories, based on

the intent of the translator.¹¹

1. *Doctrinally or polemically motivated translations*: These translations are created to fill a doctrinal or polemical need or to defend a theological position. An example of such a translation is the Roman Catholic *Douay-Rheims* translation.

With his 1522 New Testament translation, Martin Luther initiated a pattern of providing a Bible in a modern language so that it could be understood by a broad group of readers.¹² These translations were popular, and many reprints were made. Many other languages followed, until the predominant Western church, Roman Catholic, could no longer ignore the Reformation movements or the popularity of the Bible translations. It reacted to the Protestant Reformation, in part, by convening the Council of Trent (1545-1563). About the same time, the Catholic Church also recognized organizations such as the Society of Jesus (Jesuits), which became a driving force in the Counter-Reformation. In part, the Catholic response was a recognition that the Latin Vulgate Bible was no longer sufficient. Thus, the Vulgate was translated into English as the *Douay-Rheims Version*. One of its goals was to uphold Roman Catholic doctrine.¹³

A contemporary example of a doctrinally or polemically motivated translation is the *New World* translation by Jehovah's Witnesses, who do not accept the eternal nature of Jesus Christ, believing instead that He was created. This translation reveals a gross misunderstanding of the Greek syntax. For example, the critical part of John 1:1 reads as follows:

KJV: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God."

New World: "In [the] beginning the Word was, and the Word was with God, and the Word was a god."¹⁴ In this translation, the phrase "... was a god" has no basis in the original Greek, reflecting instead the theological position of Jehovah's Witnesses.

Another example of doctrinal motivation is the translation of Revelation 1:10a. Most translations read, "I was in

the Spirit on the Lord's day . . ." (RSV). Two paraphrase versions¹⁵ interject the theological views of the authors. The Kenneth N. Taylor paraphrase states "It was Sunday . . .," and *The Clear Word* states, "One Sabbath morning . . ." In expressing their theological views, Taylor and Blanco (*Clear Word*) deviate from the original text. It does not always create a theological problem when the creators of doctrinally motivated versions follow such a practice, but too many readers regard such versions as exact translations, which they are not.

2. *Paraphrases*: Paraphrases are interpretations of the Bible. Depending on the theological orientation of the writer and the reader's theological perspective, the paraphrases may or may not be helpful for doctrinal study. The creation of Bible paraphrases can be compared to someone translating a lecture who states, "What the speaker really means is this . . ." When you hear that phrase, you are not getting a translation of the lecture but an *interpretation*.

Recently a church member told me, "I love using paraphrases because when I can't understand a passage, I can read a paraphrase of the Bible to discover the *real* meaning." Perhaps the translator actually did provide the correct meaning, but we must remember that it is an *interpretation*, not a *translation*. Paraphrases are like fast food—convenient but not always spiritually nutritious. Spiritual growth and comprehension of the biblical message require study, reflection, prayer, and the leading of the Holy Spirit.

Some Christians think that young people will find paraphrase versions easier to understand. However, these Bibles do not necessarily use "easier" or more succinct wording; in fact, they often use more words, and usually communicate the theological perspective of the writer.

Some versions, such as the *Good News Bible*, while using "easy English" vocabulary, are not paraphrases. Many

schools use the *International Children's Bible*, an edition of the *New Century Bible*. Although these two versions are translations, not paraphrases, their intent is to make the text easy to understand for children and non-native speakers of English.

3. *Dynamic translations*: Two examples of this type of translation are the *Good News Bible* and the *New English Bible*. The foreword in the *Good News Bible* says that it is a "... new translation that seeks to state clearly and accurately the meaning of the original texts *in words and forms that are widely accepted by the people who use English as a means of communication*."¹⁶ Furthermore, the publisher states that "it attempts in this century to set forth the Biblical content and message in standard, everyday, natural form of English." This is a translation rather than a paraphrase, with the emphasis being placed on readability.

In 1970, while I was researching at the American Bible Society (publisher of the *Good News Bible*), I was invited to attend a ceremony where the society presented the 20 millionth copy of the New Testament to one of their major donors—James Cash Penney, the founder of the department store chain. At the ceremony, we were told that, originally, one of the purposes of this translation was to provide an easy-to-read translation for the large immigrant population in the United States. As an immigrant myself, I thought this was a positive goal. Soon after the version went on sale, the society found that it was also very popular with non-immigrant Americans!

What is the quality of this translation? Two experts state that, "The GNB is an honest attempt by skilled translators to clothe the message of the Bible in language that is simple, plain, and meaningful to modern people."¹⁷ The same authors point out that in this translation, for example, instead of referring to "deacons," the text refers to "church helpers," and "Antichrist" is translated as "enemy of Christ." Some readers may be surprised at these expressions, but the words used throughout the translation are easy to comprehend.

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Another feature of the *Good News Bible* is its simple, but appealing, line drawings. This version has also been very well received in other languages. In the German version, *Gute Nachricht fuer Sie*, a line drawing of Mary carrying the baby Jesus shows a determined and protective young woman cradling her newborn in her arms.

4. *Formal or conventional translations*: The focus of these translations is on using the best manuscripts available¹⁸ and translating the text faithfully. However, the translators recognize that some expressions (such as ancient measures, money values, etc.) may not be easy for modern readers to understand and thus provide modern equivalents.¹⁹

Another characteristic of formal or conventional translations is that they are usually created in collaboration by groups of individuals. The *King James Version*,²⁰ for example, was translated by some 50 scholars, and the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV) was revised by a group of 30. This approach holds each translator accountable to the group and generally results in a better translation. Usually, though not always, the groups represent various religious denominations; thus, individual attempts to advance a particular doctrinal view are more likely to be challenged by the group. This provides a system of checks and balances that helps ensure the authenticity of the translation.²¹

A number of Bibles fall into this category: the *King James Version* (KJV) and the *New King James Version* (NKJV), the *American Standard Version* (a revision of the KJV), the *New International Version* (NIV), the *Revised Standard Version* (RSV), and the *New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV).

Choosing a Translation

How should an educator choose a translation for study purposes and for classroom use? I suggest you consider the following points:²²

1. No matter which translation you choose, there will be those who will disagree with you. While some individuals are certain that the translation *they* use is the best, the reality is that no *one* translation is superior for every purpose. Remember, Bible translation is often fraught with danger (remember Tyndale), and your choice may be challenged.

2. For study and classroom presentations, choose a translation rather than a paraphrase or doctrinally motivated version. In the "Formal or Conventional Translations" section of this article, you will find references to several quality translations.

Should you ever use paraphrase versions? Yes but use them cautiously, as commentaries, not as a basis for doctrine. As you read, continually compare the passages to the text of a formal or conventional translation. Jack J. Blanco, in his preface to *The Clear Word*, writes, "This is not a new translation but an interpretive paraphrase of the

Scriptures. It is not intended for in-depth study or for public reading in churches."

3. Read the introduction to the translation. In it, you will find the following information: whether it was created by one person or many, which approaches were used, and what the goals of the translators were. This is probably one of the most helpful ways of choosing a translation.

4. Realize that even the best translations will contain passages that are difficult to understand. Use several translations to determine the consensus of the translators. Serious study of the passages takes time—the "fast food" approach does not provide true understanding. Because Bible versions are the Word of God, they are worthy of research, reflection, and a request for guidance by the Holy Spirit. When teachers discuss secular books in their classes, they often spend considerable time discussing the meaning of a passage. Surely, we should take time to discuss the meaning of God's Word as well.

5. You may want to consult guides that categorize translations and make recommendations. However, some guides contain a built-in bias, so you should seek to identify the individual or group that created them (however, this may be difficult, as many guides do not provide this information). A helpful source is the Kubo and Specht book mentioned in this article, which gives a reliable analysis of various translations. The Internet contains numerous guides, but all too often they are either promotional or polemical or contain a bias that may not be immediately evident. If you visit <http://www.cokesbury.com/FreeDownloads/BibleTransGuide.pdf>,²³ you will find a short, helpful guide. Whatever source you use, remember that it is only a guide; use your God-given critical thinking faculties to aid in decision making.

The Joy of Reading the Word of God

Choosing a translation is only the first step in using the Bible. Studying the Word of God under the guidance of

the Holy Spirit is necessary for spiritual direction and development. Before you discuss the Bible with others, its message must become a part of your life. Take your translation, or better yet *translations*, and travel back, in your imagination, to the time the original was written. Ask yourself these questions: What was God's message then? What is His message for me today? How can I help my students to understand and apply the Word of God? ☞

This article has been peer reviewed.



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and guest lecturer. Currently, he is completing an advanced degree focusing on Slavic Bible translations that were done in Germany during the Reformation era. Additionally, he presented a paper at the Society of Biblical Literature on the King James Version and is editing and writing (with 10 other authors) a forthcoming book on the KJV to be published by Pacific Press.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. A number of Bible publishers have created study Bibles for their translations. Space limitations do not allow for an evaluation of study Bibles in this article.
2. A related topic is the Biblical canon—in other words, how the materials that currently form a part of our Bible were chosen for inclusion. For a helpful discussion, see John C. Peckham, “The Biblical Canon: Do We Have the Right Bible?” *Ministry* 80:6 (June 2008):16ff.
3. At the time the Vulgate was translated (end of the fourth century), Latin was used extensively. A thousand years later, few lay people and not even all priests could read it.
4. The Orthodox churches did not use the Vulgate, but neither did they use a translation in their contemporary languages.
5. While we refer to Wycliffe as a Bible translator, in reality his students did the translating.
6. Luther's New Testament was published in 1522, Tyndale's in 1526. Luther became a hero (though persecuted by some); Tyndale, whose

translation eventually formed about 80 percent of what was the King James Version, was put to death because he dared to translate the Bible into English.

7. In some instances, he relied on the Latin Vulgate; nevertheless, his Greek text was a major advance. Only when he did not have a Greek text did he use the Latin text and translate it back into Greek.
8. The Dead Sea Scrolls, which date from between 150 B.C. and 70 A.D., contain 972 texts from the Old Testament, with materials from every book except Esther, as well as non-biblical manuscripts.
9. The Bible societies are a major source of translations and also of Bible editions in the original languages.
10. Translation of gender pronouns is also a challenge, but that is another study.
11. My goal is to provide descriptive categories though they may not always match the terms used by translators.
12. Wycliffe was earlier, but his followers used the Vulgate, and the English in his translation was rather difficult to understand because it followed the Latin pattern.
13. Recent Roman Catholic translations such as *The Jerusalem Bible* depend more on original manuscripts.
14. Italics supplied.
15. Paraphrase versions will be discussed in the following section.
16. Italics supplied.

17. Sakae Kubo and Walter F. Specht, *So Many Versions? Twentieth-Century English Versions of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1983), p. 197. Though dated, it is an excellent source. In spite of the favorable comment about the *Good News Bible*, I would not suggest that it be used as a primary version for study or teaching.
18. This is a challenging process because even the oldest manuscripts are copies of copies. We do not have the original editions of any of the manuscripts.
19. The current money equivalents in some translations are often only guesses, and of course, monetary values change over time.
20. Though a new translation, the translators used Tyndale extensively.
21. The KJV, for example, was a work of the Church of England, though the translators included both “mainline” and Puritan scholars.
22. A recent promotional article about a recording of *The Clear Word* states, “Now you can listen to the distinctly Seventh-day Adventist translation . . .” (Beth Michaels, “MPC3s> *The Clear Word* Read by Lonnie Melashanko,” *The Columbia Union Visitor* [May 2011], p. 6.) This paraphrase was done by an individual and is not an “official” Seventh-day Adventist Church version. Furthermore, as Blanco writes, it is not a translation, but rather an “interpretative paraphrase.”
23. Posted by Cokesbury, a United Methodist publisher (May 24, 2011).

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