

# What is a Bible Translation?

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What is a bible translation and what should you expect from your bible? This article discusses the various translation philosophies and what to look for and the pitfalls to avoid in choosing a bible translation.

We may not think of it when we pick up our Bibles to read. But we are only reading a translation of the Bible. That is unless we are reading it in Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic. Different parts of the Bible were written in different languages depending on where, when, and to Whom it was written.

Let us consider the purpose of a bible translation. Ideally, the purpose of a translation is to convey the meaning of the original text into a different language in such a way as to bring about the same understanding as the first readers of the original would have. I said the “first readers of the original” to reduce the cultural distance from the original autographs.

Theoretically one could achieve the above stated purpose of bible translation using any of several methods or philosophies of translation. But some methods tend to work better than others because of the priorities and trade-offs required by different methods.

That said, there are differences of opinion as to whether it is most accurate to translate word-for-word or by thoughts. When it comes to my Bible, I lean heavily toward the word-for-word translations because it is easier to check the accuracy of the translation by comparing it to the text in the original language.

It is readily recognized that no translation is perfect, and this will become clearer later below. Translators may occasionally add a word into the translation to convey the meaning of the sentence. Sometimes the word is required just to make the English sentence proper. Other times the word is drawn from nearby context and make the sentence easier to understand. Occasionally the original language implies a word the writer expects the reader to insert themselves, so the translator must insert the word for us. It is only fair that the translators let us know whenever they insert a word. They usually show this using brackets around the word or more commonly *italicizing* the word so we know exactly which words were in the original language. The preface of your bible should tell you how they show this.

I like to look at the italicized words to see why it is there and the effect it has on the sentence. First, I ask if the sentence makes sense without it. If it makes sense without the italicized word, I then want to know if it changes the meaning of the sentence. I also like to ask how the italicized word got there. Did it come from the context? Was it implied by the sentence structure or a word in the original language? The worst-case scenario would be if the translator just added words to the text and wrote things not in the original language document - i.e. The Passion Translation.

Another way bible translations are imperfect is when there are no equivalent words in the target language to carry the whole meaning of the word in the original language. The translators can not invent words to use because we would not know what they mean. So, the translators must pick the best word from among those available. The translation process loses something when they must pick a “best” word instead of the perfect word. This is why I look up the original words to learn their meaning.

I have already mentioned word-for-word translations. To truly get one of these you would need an interlinear which shows the original language with the English. Notice the strange word order in the clip from John 1:6. It is difficult to read it with any speed.

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6	Ἐγένετο	ἄνθρωπος,	ἀπεσταλμένος	παρὰ	θεοῦ,
	came <sub>2</sub>	a man <sub>1</sub>	sent	from	God
1	ὄνομα	αὐτῷ	Ἰωάννης·	7	οὗτος ἦλθεν εἰς μαρτυρίαν
	the name	to him	John	this one	came for a witness

The next step from the interlinear are translations using a word-for-word translation philosophy. They are referred to as “formal-equivalent” translations. These are the most accurate ones that use proper English sentences. I have not seen another type of Bible translation improve on this accuracy and that is coming from someone who compares it to the original languages and looks up the meanings of the words in Greek, Hebrew, as well as English. I did not say Aramaic because it has been a long time since I have studied in the first part of the Book of Daniel. An example of a “formal-equivalent” translation is the New American Standard Bible.

Translations using a thought-for-thought translation philosophy are referred to as “Dynamic or functional-equivalent” translations. These tend to take more liberties and their word choices tend to be less precise. By less precise I mean they do not come as close to sharing the same definitions as the original language words.

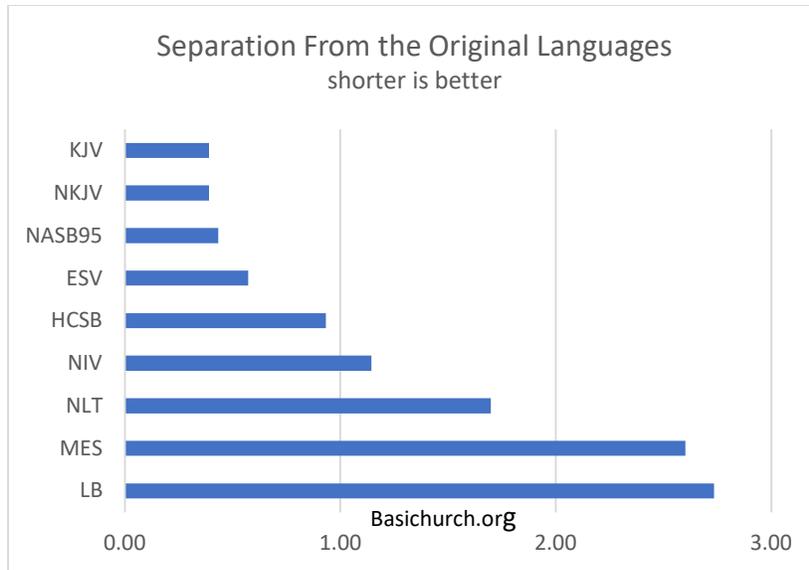
Although every Bible translation has some element of interpretation in it, dynamic-equivalent bibles have considerably more interpretation in them than formal-equivalent translations. They read smoother than the formal-equivalent translations and may be an appropriate choice if one desires to speed read through the Bible. But they have limited usefulness when studying the bible. An example of a “dynamic-equivalent” translation is the New Living Translation.

Some translation say they use “optimal-equivalence.” This is somewhere between formal-equivalence and dynamic-equivalence.

The paraphrase bibles are more of a rewrite of the bible than a translation of the bible. They try to rewrite the bible in a way that gets the thoughts across to the reader with great ease of reading. The greater concern for them is readability, accuracy comes second. These typically make the bible accessible to people with lower reading levels or English learners. They have their place among less fluent English readers. The greatest problem with using these is that a person tends to stay with the first bible translation they pick up. A person should graduate themselves to a more accurate translation each year or as their reading skills improve. We should eventually all become students of the bible rather than just readers. This is the only way to protect yourself from false teachers or doctrine. There are plenty of them out there! An example of a paraphrase is The Message.

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The chart above shows how close some of the most popular bibles are to the original languages of the bible. Note that even the best ones, as good as they are, lose something in translation. That is why it is necessary to compare it to the original words to truly know what the bible says. The message becomes richer once a person looks at the meaning of the original words. Still the better translations serve most people very well. Check my “How to Study the Bible” series of articles.

I recall someone asking about a bible. I have forgotten which one. Was it a paraphrase or not? Then they noted that it was called a “translation” and assumed that meant it was not a paraphrase. Some publishers are starting to use the word more loosely, perhaps for marketing purposes. The claim of “translation” or “translation” in the title does not necessarily mean anything anymore.

One example that deserves its own article is The Passion Translation. It has many words in italic font. Most, and I mean MOST of these italicized words have no business there because nothing supports them despite the explanation the front. There may be a hidden teaching woven into The Passion Translation, but no one seems to have figure it out yet.

Another thing to watch out for are bibles translated with a bias. This would be any bible produced by a single denomination, a single author, or an off shoot from mainstream Christianity. Most people are aware the Jehovah Witnesses produced the New World Translation. There are also a number of Bibles targeting Messianic Christians.