

## Reliably Translated

Since the original Bible documents were probably written in Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek, how do we know that the English Bible we have today is a reliable translation of the original languages? And to further complicate the matter, since there are many English versions of the Bible, how can we know that any one of them contains an accurate translation? Which one is best?

Spoiler alert: I think that there clearly are better English Bible versions that one could read and some English Bible versions that are best avoided. (Read on in this section to find out more.) But I also think one should consider that if God is God and one is truly seeking to know Him and about Him, that God can inform that person's mind so that the truths about Him will be revealed no matter which English version of the Bible is being used (with some exceptions).

The first thing to know about Bible versions is which Hebrew or Greek manuscripts the text is based on. For the Old Testament, the Hebrew text usually used is the Masoretic text (early manuscripts prepared by Hebrew scribes known as the Masoretes). While there are older manuscripts, the oldest complete Masoretic text is found in the Leningrad Codex which is dated to approximately 1008 AD. A current scholarly edition is found in Biblia Hebraica. Old Testament Bible translators may also make use of the Septuagint, a translation of Hebrew manuscripts into Greek made between 130 and 285 BC. While there are older manuscripts, the oldest virtually-complete copies of the Septuagint are Codex Sinaiticus and Codex Vaticanus, each dating to approximately 350 AD.

For the New Testament there are two primary texts used as the basis for our English translations: the received text (Textus Receptus) and the critical (as in carefully analyzed) text. The received text originates with a Greek edition of New Testament manuscripts made in 1516 by Erasmus. It was based on the content of the majority of the Greek manuscripts available at the time. To this day, the received text has more manuscript (in number) support than the critical text. The critical text is based on older and fewer manuscripts and may be subject to revision as additional manuscripts are discovered and scholars continue their work.

It must be stated that differences in text between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint or the Textus Receptus and the critical text have no bearing on Christian doctrine but do explain some of the differences you will find in your English Bibles.

The second thing to know is the translation method used. When translating the Hebrew or Greek into English, two basic approaches are used: word-for word (formal equivalence) and thought-for-thought (dynamic equivalence). In the former, the translators take a Hebrew/Greek word and try to find the best English word to use as a translation while still giving attention to sentence structure and grammar. In the latter, translators work to understand the thought the writer intended to convey and how that thought would be expressed in modern English while still giving attention to the words used and their English equivalents.

(A third approach sometimes used is the "paraphrase". This is not really a translation method as it may not be based on an examination of the original languages but may be a paraphrase of an

existing English translation. In paraphrasing, the author attempts to clarify a passage but may, due to his/her misunderstanding of the passage, completely miss the point. If the original translation upon which the paraphrase is based is faulty, then, in the paraphrase, you would have a misunderstanding of a mistranslation. Further, with a paraphrase, it might just be the author saying, “This is what it means to me.”)

So which Bible is best?

Let’s start with what it might be best to avoid.

First, denominational distinctives might have some influence on the way Bible passages are worded. Therefore, it is probably best to avoid a version published by a particular denomination. Two Bible versions that fall into this category are the New World Translation (Jehovah’s Witnesses) and the Inspired Version (Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, commonly known as Mormon).

Second, it might be best to avoid a version “translated” by a single person. In this case, you would be relying on that one person’s ability to understand the original languages AND to interpret the passage correctly AND to translate it into understandable English, all while free of any doctrinal bias. In some cases, the work may not be a translation at all but rather paraphrase of some other English version. Bibles that were produced by a single person include The Message (Eugene Peterson), The Living Bible (Kenneth Taylor, not a translation but a paraphrase based largely on the American Standard Version), and The New Testament in Modern English (J. B. Phillips). Each of these versions may have some value but more so as a commentary rather than a translation.

Now for some Bibles you might use.

- New King James Version (NKJV). A word-for-word translation. The Old Testament is based on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based on the Textus Receptus.
- Modern English Version (MEV). A word-for-word translation. The Old Testament is based on the Jacob ben Hayyim edition of the Masoretic text. The New Testament is based on the Textus Receptus.
- New American Standard Bible (NASB). A word-for-word translation. The Old Testament is based on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based on the Nestle-Aland critical text.
- English Standard Version (ESV). A word-for-word translation. The Old Testament is based primarily on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based primarily on the Nestle-Aland critical text.
- New International Version (NIV). A thought-for-thought translation. The Old Testament is based primarily on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based on the Nestle-Aland critical text.
- Today’s English Version (TEV) also known as the Good News Bible (GNB). A thought-for-thought version. The Old Testament is based primarily on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based primarily on the 3<sup>rd</sup> edition of *The Greek New Testament* published by the United Bible Societies.

- New English Translation (NET). A thought-for-thought translation. The Old Testament is based on the Masoretic text found in Biblia Hebraica. The New Testament is based on the Nestle-Aland critical text.

Each of the above was done by a team of scholars and is based on original-language text. You can use Wikipedia to find individual articles on these and other versions of the Bible.

For your own study, choose any one or perhaps two of the above, one word-for-word and one thought-for-thought. Comparing Bible versions is often the best way to fully understand what God wants to communicate. Fortunately there are internet sites where you can access these versions and even read them in parallel. Online sites include:

- Bible Hub. <https://biblehub.com/>  
Bible Hub allows readers to have multiple versions of the Bible in parallel. In addition, versions are available in many foreign languages including Spanish, French, German, and Chinese. Also available is the Textus Receptus and the Westcott-Hort critical text of the New Testament.
- Blue Letter Bible. <https://www.blueletterbible.org/>
- Bible Gateway. <https://www.biblegateway.com/>
- Parallel Bible. <https://www.biblestudytools.com/parallel-bible/>

For more information on Bible versions, see:

- Why So Many Versions? <https://bible.org/article/why-so-many-versions>
- Not Just Another Book. <https://notjustanotherbook.com/biblecomparison.htm>
- List of English Bible Translations.  
[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List\\_of\\_English\\_Bible\\_translations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_English_Bible_translations)
- You Can Always Use One More Translation, or Why I Read the NIVNKJVESVNLTNASBMSGKJVCSBNET Bible.  
<https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2019/05/you-can-always-use-one-more-translation-or-why-i-read-the-nivnkjvesvnltnasbmsgkjvcsbnet-bible/>