

Comparing Bible Translations: Conclusions

Most Recommended Translations

New American Standard Bible

While no translation is perfect, the NASB is the best overall version widely available. It barely edges out the ESV, primarily because it is slightly more literal. More than any other modern version, the NASB avoids restructuring the text or interpreting passages for the reader. The NASB also makes concordance a priority, but does not go overboard in doing so. Its textual decisions are in accord with the best manuscripts. The Updated Edition is consistently contemporary in its language but maintains a good balance of reverent formality and natural readability. The NASB is a conservative translation and thus upholds the central teachings of the Bible. This version's layout is helpful and creative, with its indications of historical presents and a combination of paragraph and verse-by-verse format. One improvement for future printings would be separating the footnotes from the abundant cross-references.

English Standard Version

The ESV has the same general strengths as its cousin, the NASB: it is a conservative, literal translation from the oldest manuscripts, presented in contemporary English. The ESV handles difficult textual decisions slightly better than the NASB, and the real paragraph format may also make it more attractive to some people. It is, however, somewhat less literal than the NASB, and occasionally is too interpretive. The editors have done an excellent job of retaining the best of the RSV while ridding it of its liberal biases. The ESV is theologically the strongest version out there. It would be nice, however, to see pronouns referring to God capitalized.

Holman Christian Standard Bible

The Old Testament of the HCSB has not yet been released, but the New Testament makes a strong showing. This is the first collaborative attempt at a fresh, literal translation in quite some time. Its creators have succeeded at producing a Bible that reads like the NIV but is significantly more literal. As such, the HCSB gives more attention to verbs, conjunctions, and sentence structure than free translations, and also translates words the same way as often as possible. Yet it is also easy to read and has perhaps the best balance of English style. It is bolder than the NASB or ESV in its exclusion of unsupported popular readings, yet it is still a solidly conservative translation. It is not without its quirks, however: awkward renderings pop up from time to time, and there is considerable KJV influence in familiar passages. But some of the idiosyncrasies may be worked out when the entire Bible is completed.

Other Good Translations

Revised Version

The RV ranks as the best "older" translation. It makes somewhat better textual decisions than the ASV and conveys a stronger, more conservative theology. This version is about as literal as the NASB and generally does an excellent job communicating the nuances of the original language without sounding wooden. The primary drawbacks to the RV are the Elizabethan English and occasional "Britishisms," but for KJV users who prefer the older style and the stately feel, I heartily recommend the RV as the best balance between tradition, accuracy, and responsible scholarship.

International Standard Version

This lesser known translation does surprisingly well. While it has a delightfully free and original style, it is concordant enough and stays close enough to the text to be classified as a literal translation. Its textual base is somewhat eclectic, but its theology is strong and it does a good job of conveying the original feel of Scripture. There is, however, a slight tendency to undertranslate, and an incomplete attempt at gender-neutral translation. Its introduction makes much of the fact that it is a totally new translation, but it shows considerable influence from the KJV in familiar passages. The most interesting feature of the ISV is its practice of rendering Greek poetry with English rhyme and meter. The resulting word choices sometimes seem forced, but not as often as one might expect.

New International Version

The NIV is the most popular and one of the most conservative Bible versions. Its textual decisions are very good, slightly better than those of the NASB, and it balances literalness with readability to produce what many seek in a translation. This balance is not perfect, however, as the NIV sometimes oversimplifies the text--missing the nuances of verbs, deleting conjunctions, and often undertranslating. As an "international" version, it avoids regionalisms and may be read with equal delight across the English-speaking world. For those who find the NASB too stilted, the NIV is the highest-rated choice among the ten best-selling translations, and it is much better than either of its two revisions, the NIV and TNIV.

American Standard Version

The ASV is the most literal translation that does not carry the word *literal* in its name, and as the American revision of the KJV, has spawned a number of descendants: the RSV, NRSV, ESV, and NASB. Overall, it does the best job of conveying the author's intent. But it is not as adept at noticing verb tense, mood, and voice, as the higher-scoring versions, and its closeness to the KJV limits its ability to maintain concordance. The ASV is mostly Alexandrian in its readings and is generally of evangelical origin. However, the influence of the less conservative translators on the committee has left the ASV remarkably weak in supporting the deity of Christ. Reading the ASV can be difficult,

since it is quite wooden in places and is in Elizabethan English. Its rendering of the Lord's name as Jehovah was a bold step from which modern translators have retreated, and this may have played a role in the ASV's lack of popularity. You won't see the ASV on store shelves, but the fact that it is not copyrighted means you can find it on most Bible software.

William's New Testament

This little-known translation stands apart from other early versions in its readability and boldness in textual decisions. This boldness leads to a bit of excess in omitting disputed texts (such as the "Western non-interpolations"). The style and philosophy are fairly experimental, resulting in little deficiencies here and there. Most notable is its attempt to explain or avoid doctrinal terms, though its explanations are too often bland. Nevertheless, it is the easiest-to-understand translation from the early twentieth century, and comes from a generally conservative translator, making it the best translation by an individual.

Translations with Limited Use

Weymouth, the New American Bible (**NAB**), and the New Revised Standard Version (**NRSV**) are all high-quality translations whose primary drawback is unorthodox theology. (Weymouth also uses Elizabethan English in prayers.) Were it not for this and its move toward gender neutrality, the NAB would rate as highly as the NASB. Also worth a look are translations by **Darby** and **Montgomery**, which while not stand-outs, are still responsible. The New International Reader's Version (**NiRV**) employs too much paraphrase and too simple an English style for use by adults, but may be an ideal introduction for children just beginning to read.

Mediocre Versions

The Revised Standard Version (**RSV**) is excellent except for an apparently deliberate liberal bias--readers would be better off using the recent revision, the ESV. The New Jerusalem Bible (**NJB**) suffers a similar weakness, along with a haphazard translation philosophy. Several conservative translations--Estes's Better Version (**TBV**), the New King James (**NKJV**), and Green's Literal Translation (**LITV**)--are hurt by poor textual decisions and repetition of mistaken or outdated renderings in the King James. The New Century Version (**NCV**) has a few ingenious renderings but has been surpassed by the NiRV and has little usefulness for adults, despite its popularity--and my initial interest in it. The New Living Translation (**NLT**) is in large part simply a repackaging of the Living Bible, with poetry set off, better textual decisions, and gender neutrality. Its smoothness and readability do not mitigate the fact that it misses so much of the meaning of the text. Much the same can be said for Today's New International Version (**TNIV**), which makes slight improvements on the NIV's already excellent textual decisions but goes gender neutral, adopts some questionable egalitarian readings, and is startlingly inattentive to verb forms, in which category it ties for last with the Message.

Translations Not Recommended

Advances in understanding the text of the New Testament, as well as changes in the English language, have made the Geneva Bible (**GEN**), King James Version (**KJV**), and **Young's** Literal Translation far obsolete. Their rating is lower for the fact that, while the most formally literal, none of them pay enough attention to the nuances of grammar and syntax. The 21st Century King James Version (**KJ21**) might have outdone the NKJV if it had been more consistent in updating the KJV's archaisms and correcting more obvious errors such as *Easter* in Acts 12:4. God's Word (**GW**) is pretty much average despite several impressive renderings, but it falls below the Mediocre category because of an inconsistent attention to meaning and by the fact that it is mostly gender-neutral. The Jerusalem Bible (**JB**) combines liberal tendencies with free and relatively careless translation; the NJB is a considerable improvement, though I would still recommend the NAB as the best Catholic translation. The Amplified Bible (**AMP**) all too often fails in bringing out the meaning of the text but instead imposes assumed meanings on the text; it does not help that the AMP is the most difficult translation to read. The Cotton Patch Version (**CPV**) helps to drive home the racial implications of the gospel message, but does not work as a Bible for general use--not that it was ever intended to.

Back to the Drawing Board...

There are a few translations that get a failing grade. The Living Bible (**LB**) and the Message (**MES**) stand out as examples of how not to do a paraphrase: textual decisions are all over the place, and some verses are rewritten to fit the translators' presuppositions. While these versions are conservative in origin, the translators seemed not to realize the theological implications of many of their renderings, and had little regard for meaning when exchanging old idioms for new ones. All the other truly bad translations suffer from serious theological bias. The most extreme examples are the New World Translation (**NWT**) and the Inclusive New Testament (**INC**). Without its doctrinal adjustments, the NWT would be one of the best translations available; as it is, the NWT is deliberately misleading and should be avoided. The New English Bible (**NEB**) went out on too many limbs with regard to text, translation, and style. The Revised English Bible (**REB**) is only slightly better. Phillips' New Testament in Modern English (**PME**) is the non-evangelical counterpart to the LB, and is far too free, though highly quotable. **Moffatt** goes so far as to rearrange whole passages and accepts higher-critical scholarship as a matter of course; his version is also too academic to be accessible for his intended readers. The most surprising entries (for me, anyway) were the Good News Translation (**GNT**), which has recently had a revival of popularity among evangelicals, and its brother the Contemporary English Version (**CEV**), both updates of the TEV. In their freedom they pass over the meaning of the text nearly as much as the NLT, are more liberal than the RSV, are fully gender-neutral, and take extraordinary liberties in restructuring and explaining the text.

Note:

I recently mused whether I was giving too much weight for literal translation (10%) when computing the overall scores for different versions. I redid the calculations without considering how literal the translations were. Surprisingly, this made little difference. The NIrV moves up to just below the NIV, and the NAB, GEN, KJV, and Young drop considerably. Otherwise, all the versions reviewed would remain in the categories I've assigned for them. I do not believe this means it is impossible to produce a free translation that is faithful to the original text. But it does suggest that "dynamic-equivalency" translators might be more concerned with communicating what they think the Bible *should* say, rather than what it actually says.

See: <http://faith.propadeutic.com/questions.html> for these other topics.

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