

3 The Bible - Versions

Unless you can read Hebrew or Ancient Greek, you depend on a translation when you read the Bible. Although in general these have been produced by well-meaning people who are well qualified to carry out the work, there is no perfect translation, for a number of reasons.

Our translations are based on several texts

The original Bible manuscripts have not survived, so translations have to be based on copies of copies, which are for the most part many generations removed from the originals. Copying by hand inevitably introduces errors, and there are small differences between the various texts available for translation. Recent discoveries, like the Dead Sea Scrolls, have sometimes explained what a difficult verse meant. At best, a translation can only be as good as the text from which it was translated, so that a faithful translation of an unreliable text can never produce an accurate Bible version.



Look at 1 John 5:6-8

This is a well-known example of a text which is not in early manuscripts, but appeared in the Latin Vulgate Bible. It appears in the AV and, disappointingly, the NKJV. Perhaps it was added by someone wishing to provide justification for the doctrine of the Trinity.

Authorised Version	Revised Version	New International Version
6 This is he that came by water and blood, [even] Jesus Christ; not by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is truth.	6 This is he that came by water and blood, [even] Jesus Christ; not with the water only, but with the water and with the blood.	6 This is the one who came by water and blood - Jesus Christ. He did not come by water only, but by water and blood. And it is the Spirit who testifies, because the Spirit is the truth.
7 For there are three that bear record in heaven, the Father, the Word, and the Holy Ghost: and these three are one.	7 And it is the Spirit that beareth witness, because the Spirit is the truth.	7 For there are three that testify:
8 And there are three that bear witness in earth, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.	8 For there are three who bear witness, the Spirit, and the water, and the blood: and these three agree in one.	8 the Spirit, the water and the blood; and the three are in agreement.

Interpretation

Sometimes a word in one language has no direct equivalent in another, and the translator has to choose the word which is closest in the particular context. Think of English words like 'stick', 'set', or 'fitter', each of which has several unconnected meanings. A translator has to study the context and try to work out which meaning is intended, and the translation will reflect his own understanding of the meaning of the text. This can of course be dangerous because the translator may not be right.



Look at Philippians 3:12-14.

Paul is talking about his single-mindedness in seeking the kingdom of God. How would you compare these versions? What did the translators of the NIV misunderstand?

Authorised Version

12 Not as though I had already attained, either were already perfect: but I follow after, if that I may apprehend that for which also I am apprehended of Christ Jesus.

13 Brethren, I count not myself to have apprehended: but [this] one thing [I do], forgetting those things which are behind, and reaching forth unto those things which are before,

14 I press toward the mark for the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus.

New International Version

12 Not that I have already obtained all this, or have already been made perfect, but I press on to take hold of that for which Christ Jesus took hold of me.

13 Brothers, I do not consider myself yet to have taken hold of it. But one thing I do: Forgetting what is behind and straining towards what is ahead,

14 I press on towards the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenwards in Christ Jesus.

J B Phillips

Yet, my brothers, I do not consider myself to have "arrived" spiritually, nor do I consider myself already perfect.

But I keep going on, grasping ever more firmly that purpose for which Christ grasped me. My brothers, I do not consider myself to have fully grasped it even now.

But I do concentrate on this: I leave the past behind and with hands outstretched to whatever lies ahead I go straight for the goal - my reward of being called by God in Christ Jesus.

Figures of Speech

Think about translating English expressions like 'I was pulling his leg', or 'I was running flat out' would not mean anything if they were translated directly into French or German. So in the case of the Bible, should the translator translate the words or try to express the meaning? For instance, 'house' is a term used in Hebrew to mean 'family', but it can be misleading.



Look at Exodus 1:19-21

Pharaoh instructed the Hebrew midwives to kill all male children, but they disobeyed him and let the children live. In this case it seems better to translate the word 'house' as family, although in others it would be a mistake, as in 2 Samuel 7:2, where the same

Authorised Version

20 Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and waxed very mighty.

21 And it came to pass, because the midwives feared God, that he made them houses.

New International Version

20 So God was kind to the midwives and the people increased and became even more numerous.

21 And because the midwives feared God, he gave them families of their own.

New King James Version

20 Therefore God dealt well with the midwives: and the people multiplied, and grew very mighty.

21 And so it was, because the midwives feared God, that he provided households for them.

Hebrew word is used. See how other versions translate this passage. Read 2 Samuel 7, and see how the word 'house' is deliberately used with different meanings. Look in particular at verses 12-13. How does this passage apply both to Solomon and to the Lord Jesus?

Style and Language

The translators of the Authorised Version based their work upon William Tyndale's translation and chose to keep his highly literary style. They tried, for instance, to avoid repeating the same word in a single passage, and at times they went to great lengths to disguise repetition in the Hebrew or Greek text by using a series of different English words to translate a single original word.



Look, for example, at Romans 4:3-6

The Authorised version, in the interests of English style, has avoided repeating the word 'counted', and used 'counted', 'reckoned' and 'imputeth', but in doing so it has confused the meaning and lost the emphasis that comes from the repetition in the Greek.

Authorised Version	New International Version	English Standard Version
3 For what saith the scripture? Abraham believed God, and it was counted unto him for righteousness.	3 What does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was credited to him as righteousness."	3 For what does the Scripture say? "Abraham believed God, and it was counted to him as righteousness."
4 Now to him that worketh is the reward not reckoned of grace, but of debt.	4 Now when a man works, his wages are not credited to him as a gift, but as an obligation.	4 Now to the one who works, his wages are not counted as a gift but as his due.
5 But to him that worketh not, but believeth on him that justifieth the ungodly, his faith is counted for righteousness.	5 However, to the man who does not work but trusts God who justifies the wicked, his faith is credited as righteousness.	5 And to the one who does not work but believes in him who justifies the ungodly, his faith is counted as righteousness,
6 Even as David also describeth the blessedness of the man, unto whom God imputeth righteousness without works,	6 David says the same thing when he speaks of the blessedness of the man to whom God credits righteousness apart from works:	6 just as David also speaks of the blessing of the one to whom God counts righteousness apart from works:

Sometimes modern language can convey the meaning of the original much more clearly, as in Numbers 31:38.

Authorised Version	New International Version
And the beeves were thirty and six thousand; of which the LORD'S tribute was threescore and twelve.	36,000 cattle, of which the tribute for the LORD was 72;

On other occasions the desire to use modern language can destroy the dignity and meaning of the original, as in the terrible NEB rendition of Psalm 22.

Authorised Version	New International Version	New English Bible
16 For dogs have compassed me: the assembly of the wicked have inclosed me: they pierced my hands and my feet.	16 Dogs have surrounded me; a band of evil men has encircled me, they have pierced my hands and my feet.	16 The huntsmen are all about me; a band of ruffians rings me round, and they have hacked off my hands and my feet.
17 I may tell all my bones: they look and stare upon me.	17 I can count all my bones; people stare and gloat over me.	17 I tell my tale of misery, while they look on and gloat.
18 They part my garments among them, and cast lots upon my vesture.	18 They divide my garments among them and cast lots for my clothing.	18 They share out my garments among them and cast lots for my clothes.

Corrections

The quality of the Hebrew text is amazingly good, and it is very rare that there is any difficulty in working out what was originally written. Very occasionally, however, there do seem to be errors. One of these rare examples occurs in 1 Samuel 13:1.

Hebrew text	Authorised Version	New International Version
Saul was one year old when he began to reign, and he reigned two years over Israel.	Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, ...	Saul was [thirty] years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel for [forty-] two years.

The AV translators tried their best to make sense of the original text, even though commentators tell us that the words could not mean what the Authorised version says.

The NIV translators on the other hand, tried to work out what the original text might have been, and they indicated this by including the words 'thirty' and 'forty' in brackets. They worked out what to put by looking at passages like Acts 13:21 and 2 Samuel 2:10.

Acts 13:21 'And afterward they desired a king: and God gave unto them Saul the son of Cis, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, by the space of forty years'.

2 Samuel 2:10 'Ish-Bosheth son of Saul was forty years old when he became king over Israel, and he reigned two years.'

Dimensions, Quantities, Times, Titles and Values

Translators have to decide whether to convert

- distances from stadia into miles,
- lengths from cubits into metres,
- volumes from hins into litres,

- money from shekels into pounds sterling (or simply into the more timeless day's wages),
- titles from Satrap into District Officer,
- weights from talents into grams,
- time from Jewish or Roman time into western times.

and so on, or whether to leave well alone? Again it depends whether the main objective is to make the text easy to understand or to provide an English version as close as possible to the original.



Where do you think the priorities should lie:

- producing a translation with a good grammatical style?
- conveying the meaning accurately? or
- using words that are easy to understand?



What conclusions would you draw?

What do you think is the best approach to choosing, and using, Bible Translations?

Some English versions in common use today

King James Version 1611 (KJV), also known as the Authorized Version (AV). A revision of William Tyndale's translation, much loved for the beauty of the language, but sometimes hard to understand.

New World translation 1961 The Jehovah's Witnesses own translation.

Revised Version 1884 (RV) A revision of the KJV using older and more reliable texts, notably Codex Sinaiticus and setting out also to eliminate inconsistencies of KJV while retaining its style and language. Probably the most accurate translation.

The Jerusalem Bible 1966 A Catholic translation into modern English.

English Standard Version 2001 (ESV) A revision of the RV using modern language. Probably the most accurate of the modern translations.

New King James Version 1982 Seeks to retain the character of the KJV. It uses 'You' with a capital 'Y' when referring to God or Jesus.

New International Version (NIV) 1978 Shows admirable respect for the inspired word, but occasionally betrays an evangelical bias.

The Message Bible A version which aims to get across the meaning without closely following the original Hebrew or Greek. A good read but not recommended for serious study.

Do you try to read the Bible every day?