



**“How to Choose the Right Bible Translation”**  
**Pastor’s Choice Series**

**Introduction**

The Bible is the most influential collection of writings in the history of the world. It’s the best-selling book of all time (around 100 million copies sold annually.)

Wycliffe Global Alliance (2021):

- 7378 known languages in the world today – 717 have an entire Bible translation, and 1582 have a complete New Testament, which means that 7 billion people on the planet have at least some part of the Bible in their own language.
- But that leaves almost a billion people with no Scripture in their native tongue. (3883 languages waiting for the word of God to be translated.)

We have over 100 translations of the Bible in English!

- Which translation is the best?
- How do I know which one to choose?
- How do I know if the Bible is reliable? (cf. Mt 24:35; Isa 40:8)

**Hebrew Old Testament**

Originally written in Hebrew, with five short passages in Aramaic.

Today we don’t possess any of the autographs – the original documents – of the Old or New Testament, because they have long since disintegrated over time.

But we possess thousands of ancient manuscripts, versions, and quotations that have preserved the inspired words of the original documents.

- Ketef Hinnom Scrolls – oldest surviving text from the Hebrew Bible (c. 650 BC). Contains Numbers 6:24-26.
- By the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, the canon of the Old Testament was complete, because that’s when the Septuagint – the Greek translation of the Old Testament – was finished.
- Dead Sea Scrolls – discovered in 1947 in caves at Qumran. Included portions of every book in the Old Testament except Esther (c. 250 BC - AD 50). Complete scroll of Isaiah from 100 BC. It was 1000 years older than our previous manuscripts and was 95% identical. The other 5% was mainly due to spelling variations.

**Greek New Testament**

Approximately 5800 Greek manuscripts containing part or all of the New Testament:

- 100 papyri (c. AD 125 - early 8<sup>th</sup> century)
- 266 uncials (c. 4<sup>th</sup> - 14<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- 2795 minuscules (c. 5<sup>th</sup> - 10<sup>th</sup> centuries)
- Rest are lectionaries (Scripture readings used for worship in the early church)

In addition, we have about 10,000 manuscripts of the Latin Vulgate... and 36,000 quotations from the early church fathers between 100-300 AD.

The New Testament is the best attested document in ancient history (more manuscripts and earlier manuscripts than any other book from the ancient world!)

Two main “families” of Greek manuscripts:

1. Byzantine Manuscripts
  - About 86% of all the manuscripts
  - Widely read and distributed throughout Mediterranean
  - Only 6 manuscripts are earlier than the 9<sup>th</sup> century AD
  - Quoted by Church Fathers as far back as 2<sup>nd</sup> century
  - Basis for the “Textus Receptus” and King James Version of 1611
2. Alexandrian Manuscripts
  - About 200 manuscripts
  - Limited to the region of Alexandria, Egypt
  - By far the oldest (e.g. 50 papyri prior to AD 350)
  - About 6500 differences with the Byzantine Majority Text
  - Basis for virtually all modern Bible translations

What do we do when manuscripts have differences/variations?

### **Textual Criticism**

Textual criticism: the science and art of reconstructing the original text of a document.

Somewhere between 5-10% of the New Testament has variations in wording. Conversely, 90-95% of the words in the New Testament are not even in question!

- 99% of all textual variations have no impact on meaning. No doctrine of Scripture ultimately rests on a disputed passage.

Vast majority of variations are “insignificant changes” such as spelling differences, slight changes in word order, etc.

Principles for determining the original text:

1. Prefer the reading attested by the oldest manuscripts.
2. Prefer the reading supported in widely separated geographical areas.
3. Prefer the reading supported by the greatest number of text types.
4. Prefer the shorter reading.
5. Prefer the more difficult reading.
6. Prefer the reading that accords best with the author’s style and vocabulary.
7. Prefer the reading that best fits the context and/or author’s theology.
8. Prefer the less harmonious reading in parallel passages.

### **Translation Philosophy**

Two main theories/approaches:

1. Formal Equivalence – strives to translate the words of the original language as literally as possible in English. Called “essentially literal” or “word-for-word” translations. (E.G. NASB, ESV, NKJV)

2. Dynamic Equivalence – more concerned about conveying meaning than adhering to the exact words of the original text. Communicate Scripture in a phrase-for-phrase or thought-for-thought manner, making the Bible easier to read and understand. (E.G. NIV, NLT)

Every translation falls somewhere on the spectrum between literalness on the one extreme and readability on the other.

Illustration of Romans 8:27 – compare NASB, NIV, NLT, and the Message

## **Conclusions**

### **1. The primary goal of translation should be faithfulness to the words of the original text.**

- The words are important because the words themselves are inspired by God and chosen by the biblical authors for a reason (2Tim 3:16-17; 2Pet 1:21; 1Thes 2:13).
- Should translators change words or get rid of them to make the Bible simpler and easier to understand? Ezra did not do this. He explained the text and gave the sense, so the people could understand what was being read (Neh 8:1-8). God has given the church pastors and teachers like Ezra (Eph 4:11-12). Believers should learn how to study and interpret the Bible correctly for themselves (2Tim 2:15).
- Translators are not supposed to be authors who add their own thoughts and ideas to the Bible... or editors who decide what to change... or interpreters who give us their opinions and tell us what to think. But dynamic equivalent translations do this by default – they mingle translation with interpretation and mix the translator’s words with God’s words, so readers don’t even know which words are part of the inspired text.

### **2. Choose an “essentially literal” translation as your primary Bible.**

- Study from a “literal” translation such as the ESV, NASB, or NKJV.
- Learn how to read the translator’s notes at the bottom to get information about textual variations in the manuscripts.
- Read the Preface at the front of a Bible before you pick your translation. Make sure you understand what their particular translation philosophy is, and where they land on the spectrum of literalness and readability.
- Invest in a Study Bible. It will have wonderful notes, commentary, cross references, charts, maps, and valuable information on the historical background of each book.

### **3. Use more than one translation depending on what your needs are.**

- Dynamic equivalent translations can be wonderfully refreshing for devotional reading. Different translations can provide wonderful insight and perspective on Scripture.
- Different translations may be suitable for different needs – like evangelism, or Scripture memory, or children’s ministry.
- We should be thankful we have so many good translations to choose from, in light of the fact that 3883 languages around the world have no Bible in their native tongue.

#### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

1. What is your favorite English translation of the Bible, and why? Do you often use more than one translation? After hearing this message, are you considering choosing a different translation for your primary Bible?
2. How certain can we be that our Bibles are reliable, and that God has preserved the original words of Scripture for us?
3. What do you think of textual criticism and the principles for determining the original reading of a text?
4. Which translation philosophy do you believe in – formal equivalence or dynamic equivalence? Please explain your reasoning.