

WHICH TRANSLATION IS MOST ACCURATE?

We are frequently asked, “Which translation is the most accurate?” Such a question usually produces a look of fear and frustration on our faces. The truest and most accurate answer is that it depends upon you and who you are.

Start from the beginning. The Bible was written in Hebrew, Koinee Greek and a smattering of Aramaic. In all probability you are not skilled in any of these ancient languages. Thus a translation must be obtained and one that you might effectively use. The entire process depends upon you and the English words and grammar that you have stored in your data bank (your mind). Of equal importance is the degree of precision you attach to a word and its definition. Some use a huge array of words and may be a bit of a fanatic about precisely what each means. Other people deal more in generalities and could care less if there are seven or eight differing words with impossible spellings used to describe a single concept such as “obfuscate.”

Ancient languages have the advantage of being - dead. That is to say they are not in general use and are not changing daily as is the case with English. Therefore a word used in the ancient languages has some consistent meaning. However, the downside is that there are no ancients alive today that can correct our guesses. So, one is stuck using a changing language to stand in for a dead language. To some degree it is like hitting a target while shooting from a moving platform.

Ancient languages are a bit more complex in their structure than English. We have had a lot of time to assign rules to cover situations that in English we go with the flow. Koinee Greek of the New Testament, for example, uses a somewhat different alphabet than English. It also uses a differing word order; word endings change with parts of speech and verb tenses, and in Koinee Greek there was no punctuation!!!! However, those are the translators’ problems and not yours.

So, what to do. Obviously if word order is different from English, a word for word translation becomes hopelessly nonsensical.

Permit us to insert an opinion here. We strongly believe there is no such thing as a perfect or universal translation. To suggest such suggests that all people have the same skills, interests, abilities and tastes. Let’s go back to that data bank idea. If some of the words or grammar used in a translation are not in your data bank, the translation is worthless. Either you shall be forced to learn additional words and their contextual meaning or find an interpreter to resolve your problem. Rather, it is more efficient for you to find a translation suited to your needs, not to those of someone else. I prefer the KJV (King James) when I am reading in English but admit to having at my side a dictionary - one that includes archaic meanings and derivations. For example: “In my Father’s house are many Mansions.” (Jn 14:2) has little to do with the concept you think of as a huge and luxurious mansion. Mansion in the year of the KJV’s birth, 1611, was a derivative of the French word manere meaning to remain or a resting place. (I should also tell you that the famous 1611 edition is available in one reprint model today and suitable only as a conversation item.) Today’s so-called KJV is about the fourth edition and is dated to the time of the Declaration of Independence. If it was good enough for George Washington, it is good enough for me!

The matter of Catholic versus Protestant translations comes up. There is no difference with the New Testament. Both Catholics and Protestants share the same books of the NT. However, the Catholic translations have the additional books of the Apocrypha (great reading) scattered through the Old Testament. In Protestant Bibles, when the Apocrypha is included (as it was in the 1611 KJV) it will be placed between the

Old and New Testament. The books of the Apocrypha were included in the ancient manuscripts from Alexandria but were excluded from manuscripts in Palestine. The Roman, Orthodox (who also include Psalm 151 and 3rd & 4th Macabees) and Episcopal churches include them while the remaining Protestants reject them as non-canonical. However, there is some good reading in them. A Catholic translation generally will include an imprimatur (a seal of approval for reading and study), but today many Protestant Bibles also include imprimaturs of the Roman Church.

A word about manuscripts - we don't have the originals. The closest we come is a small fragment of the Gospel of John dating to the turn of the first century. Therefore the translators deal with secondary manuscripts. Translators compare early manuscripts, of which there are hundreds, and compare them with quotations from the Early Church Fathers who had access to early manuscripts. There is special skill involved in this process and many translations will list what they call "variant readings."

There have been unchristian accusations against most modern translations by individuals with an agenda, or less than precise understanding of translations. The argument that "they leave things out" or "they are watering down the doctrinal meanings" are general gross inaccuracies. Certainly you are free to check any translation and question why the translators chose the words, grammar and punctuation they did. ANY INDIVIDUAL, with common knowledge and experience (data bank again) may compare translations and ask why the difference. There are justifiable reasons and any legitimate Bible Scholar will be able to deal with these for you. You may agree or disagree with the reasons, but all modern translations by credible publishing houses are dependable. Should anyone suggest otherwise to you, be careful of the advice you are receiving. It is thus bogus! There are, of course, situations where a translation may not be suitable. Using a New Living Translation for Liturgical Worship may not work. Handing a KJV to an adult with limited reading skills and experience with Christianity will result in probable poor results.

To the person looking for a translation, I will ask a few questions. "What non-Christian reading material would you most likely pick up to read first at home?" This would be a great indicator of reading skill and interest and personality type. Secondly, I would inquire as to the individual's profession which would indicate educational level and degree of structure in their life. Lastly, I would attempt to determine whether they are a numbers-type person with rigidity or creative type, with a flair to color outside the lines. This would permit a starting point. If skill levels seem low, the KJV is ruled out. If they color outside the lines, probably NASB is eliminated and I would present the selections from NIV to NLT. If they are structured people the NKJV and the NAS might work. If the education is high and literary skills good the NRSV or New Jerusalem might work well. Thus getting to know the individual is critical to the precise recommendation and proper selection of a translation.

A Bible, among other things, is a tool. It should fit well. Its fit is dependent on your data bank base. Be sure to check the yawn factor. That is, if you are yawning a significant amount during your reading, the tool probably doesn't fit. Read for comfort. Remember the brick test: Do the words, their construction, enter your mind and remain or do they bounce off as if your mind is a brick wall?

We suggest you start the process of elimination by describing yourself and MATCH THE FOLLOWING LIST:

KJV - Ancient and honorable. Many words unfamiliar to today's English and many word shifts in meaning. It is a favorite and fun to read but very demanding. Its for those of us who wish to appear smart and are really willing to work. Behind the scenes our confusion over the 1776 English may not be noticeable.

NIV - Most popular and designed for those who read the newspaper or substantial magazines. Quite average might be the best description

NLT - This is the deal for people who either tend to read less or color outside the lines.

NAS - Structured! Structured! Structured! Yawn! (For guys with red ties.)

NRSV - The choice of the student (takes inclusive language only to the technical limit). This is for the lofty minded and the techies.

The Message - Easy Rider reading and doesn't confuse the really tough parts.

Good News - For gray-haired types that otherwise would go for The Message.

NJB - This is a Catholic translation originally done by French Jesuits. Therefore, it is a translation of a translation and very well done. This is for literary types who are somewhat familiar with Episcopal structure.

Lastly, reading a Bible and savoring its fruits is a very personal thing. No one can understand for you. No one can feel and sense it for you. No one can picture the visions that you will enjoy but you. Select well, enjoy, and may you find God's most perfect communication and plan for which you were created!

Barry L. Colyer
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