

The Bible: Translations and Types

Languages of the Bible

Obviously, the Bible was not originally written in English, Italian or any modern language. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew with small parts in Aramaic. However, while Jesus most likely spoke Aramaic, most of the New Testament was originally written in Greek. Thus, all modern Bibles are translations of these original languages.

Methods of Translation

1. Literal translation. Attempts to keep the exact words and phrases of the original. It is faithful to the original text, but sometimes hard to understand. Keeps a constant historical distance. Examples: King James Version (KJV), New American Standard Bible (NASB).
2. Dynamic equivalent (thought for thought) translation. Attempts to keep a constant historical distance with regard to history and facts, but updates the writing style and grammar. Examples: New International Version (NIV), Revised English Bible (REB).
3. Free translation (paraphrase). Translates the ideas from the original text but without being constrained by the original words or language. Seeks to eliminate historical distance. Readable, but possibly not precise. Examples: Living Bible (LB), The Message.

Types of Bibles

Most translations are available in several different types of Bible. Here are just a few of the many different kinds of Bibles.

1. Traditional. Text only. Minimal footnotes.
2. Study Bible. Such Bibles usually have extensive footnotes and explanatory notes next to the columns of text. They may also have extensive cross references, a narrative commentary, and maps. (Some also have a cyclopedic index and/or a concordance—see Reference Bible.)
3. Reference Bible. Usually has a cyclopedic index (like an encyclopedia with a reference to the verse where the word or thought is used), a concordance (like a dictionary of common words with examples of their usage and verse references for each example), and maps.
4. “Place in Life” Bible. Has meditations and thoughts about issues of concern to people at a particular stage in life. There are versions of these Bibles aimed at men, women, sports players, recovering addicts, new believers, converted Jews, small group members, and many others.
5. One-Year Bibles. Divided into 365 readings for each day of the year, usually with each having a portion of the Old Testament, New Testament, Psalms, and Proverbs.
6. Pastor’s Bible. Includes protocol outlines and recommended verses for hospital visits, weddings, funerals, and other events. Often has answers to frequently asked questions.
7. Children’s Bible. Usually includes color drawings, maps, and simplified stories.
8. Parallel Bible. Has from two to eight translations side by side.
9. Chronological Bible. Entire Bible in one continuous story with narration to cover gaps and make everything flow. The four gospels are harmonized into one, for example, and the writings of the prophets are placed in the proper historical place in the books of history.
10. Other Specialty Bibles. The Serendipity Bible, The Quest, Key Word Bible, Leadership Bible, Hebrew-Greek Keyword Bible, “Here’s Hope” Bible, Serenity Bible, and many others.

My Personal Recommendation

For your main reading and study, use a dynamic equivalent translation (balanced between literal and paraphrase). Get one that draws upon newly-discovered sources (after 1966). The most widely used Bible today in the U.S. is the New International Version (NIV), which is a good choice. Select a type with good explanations, either a Study Bible or a Student Bible. Augment your main Bible with two or three others that appeal to you.

—David Ahl, 2015

Bible Translations Comparison Chart

Word for Word Translations	Reading Level	Description
Interlinear	12 +	The original Masoretic (Jewish) text in Hebrew and Greek. English translations available. Very difficult to read and understand. Need a concordance.
New American Standard (NASB)	11.0	1971, updated 1995. A revision of the American Standard Version of 1901. Formal modern English; somewhat difficult but more readable than KJV.
Amplified	11.0	1965. Modern English version from original Greek text. Has bracketed words and phrases to help explain more difficult and complicated passages.
English Standard Version (ESV)	8.0	2001. A literal translation that makes use of recently discovered sources. Easier reading than other word for word translations.
King James Version (KJV)	12.0	1611 (revised 1769). Draws heavily on Bishops Bible (1568) and on Geneva Bible (1560). Difficult to read and understand due to 17 th Century vocabulary and style. Uses no original or recently discovered sources.
New King James Version (NKJV)	9.0	1982. Taken directly from KJV but with more modern words. Choppy reading because it maintains 17 th Century sentence structure.
Revised Standard Version (RSV)	8.7	1952. A revision of the ASV of 1901. Further revision to New Testament in 1971. Widely accepted by both Protestant and Roman Catholic churches.
Holman Christian Standard (HCSB)	8.5	2004. Highly readable, accurate translation in modern English. Good balance between word-for-word and thought-for-thought called "optimal equivalence."
Thought for Thought		
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)	10.4	1990. Revision of RSV, still literal, but moves in the thought-for-thought direction. Language not updated but tends to gender neutrality and political correctness.
New American Bible (NAB)	6.6	1970 with updates to 1991. Clear, straightforward translation from the Greek. The first Roman Catholic Bible in modern American English.
New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)	7.4	1986. Revision of Jerusalem Bible (1966). Roman Catholic. Highly readable modern translation.

Thought for Thought continued	Reading Level	Description
New International Version (NIV)	7.8	1978-1984. Completely new translation from oldest and best Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic sources. Accurate, smooth reading version in modern English. Most widely used Bible in USA. Today's NIV (TNIV, 2005) and revised NIV from Biblica (2011) are gender neutral versions of NIV.
Revised English Bible (REB)	7.5	1989. Revision of New English Bible (1970). More "literary" than NIV and more dynamic equivalence. Highly readable. Most widely used Bible in UK.
New Century Version (NCV)	5.0	1987. Revision of International Children's Bible aimed at young readers and those with low reading skills. Gender neutral version published 1991.
New Living Translation (NLT)	6.3	1996, updated 2004. Converts the paraphrased Living Bible to a thought-for-thought translation. Highly readable in vocabulary and language. Gender neutral. Does not use original or recently discovered sources.
New Int'l Readers Version (NIrV)	2.9	1996. Revision of NIV for early readers. Uses simple short words and sentences.
Good News Bible (GNB) formerly Today's English Version (TEV)	6.0	1976. Faithful translation draws on Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic sources. Very simple, readable version without jargon. Uses limited vocabulary.
Common English Bible (CEB)	n/a	2011. Fresh translation is highly readable but annoyingly politically correct and gender neutral. For example, "Son of Man" is translated as "human."
Contemporary English Version (CEV) aka "The Promise"	5.4	1995. Clear, simple English but with a mature style. Suitable for both children and adults.
Paraphrase Translations		
The Living Bible (LB)	6.3	1971. Paraphrase translation by Ken Taylor largely based on ASV of 1901. Modern language is very easy to read and understand. Also a Catholic version.
The Message	4.8	1991-2002. Paraphrase translation by Eugene Peterson using modern (1980s) American idioms. Easy to read but heavily criticized for scriptural deviations, altered meanings, informality, and lack of precision.

Chart assembled using material from Zondervan, the Thompson Chain Reference Study Bible, Wikipedia, and various Internet sources by David Ahl, 2015, www.BibleStudyMen.com.

Changes in Bible Translations through Time ~ Proverbs 18:24

Original Masoretic Hebrew (English translation from the Interlinear Bible)

A man [who has] friends must show himself friendly and there is a friend [that] sticks closer than a brother.

Wycliffe Bible (1395)

A man freendli to felouschipe schal more be a frend, than a brothir.

(A man friendly in fellowship shall be more a friend than a brother.)

Tyndale (1525) and Coverdale Bible (1535)

A frende that delyteth in loue, doth a man more fredshipe, and sticketh faster vnto him then a brother.

(A friend that believes in love does a man more friendship and sticks closer to him than a brother.)

Geneva Bible (1560)

A man that hath friends, ought to shew himselfe friendly: for a friend is neerer then a brother.

Douay-Rheims Bible (1582, from the Latin Vulgate. Revised 1750)

A man amiable in society, shall be more friendly than a brother.

King James Version (1611, revised 1769)

A man that hath friends must shew himself friendly: and there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.

Major shift in meaning and emphasis of the translations at this point.

English Revised Version (1881), American Standard Version (1901)

He that maketh many friends doeth it to his own destruction: but there is a friend that sticketh closer than a brother.

Revised Standard Version (1952)

There are friends who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

New American Standard Bible (1971)

A man of too many friends comes to ruin, But there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Living Bible (1971) Paraphrase translation by Kenneth N. Taylor.

There are "friends" who pretend to be friends, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

New International Version (1984 version)

A man of many companions may come to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

New International Version (2011 version)

One who has unreliable friends soon comes to ruin, but there is a friend who sticks closer than a brother.

Contemporary English Version (1995)

Some friends don't help, but a true friend is closer than your own family.

The Message (2002) Paraphrase translation by Eugene Peterson

Friends come and friends go, but a true friend sticks by you like family.

Common English Bible (2012) Gender neutral, politically correct translation

There are persons for companionship, but then there are friends who are more loyal than family.

Changes in Bible Translations through Time ~ John 12:25

Original Masoretic Hebrew (English translation from the Interlinear Bible)

The [one] loving the life of him loses it and the [one] hating the life of him in the world this to life eternal will keep it.

Tyndale (1525) and Coverdale Bible (1535)

He that loueth his life, shal lose it: and he that hateth his life in this worlde, shal kepe it vnto life euerlastinge.

King James Version (1611, revised 1769)

He that loveth his life shall lose it; and he that hateth his life in this world shall keep it unto life eternal.

New International Version (1984 version)

The man who loves his life will lose it, while the man who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Holman Christian Standard Bible (1999)

The one who loves his life will lose it, and the one who hates his life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

New International Version (2011 version)

Anyone who loves their life will lose it, while anyone who hates their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.

Open English Bible (2013)

A person who lives her life loses it; while someone who hates her life in the present world will preserve it for life through the ages.

Note progression: One / him — He / his — The man / his — One / his — Anyone / their — A person / her

Colossians 2:9-10

Original Masoretic Hebrew (English translation from the Interlinear Bible)

For in him dwells all the fullness of the Deity bodily and you are in him complete who is the head of all rule and authority.

King James Version (1611, revised 1769)

For in him dwelleth all the fulness of the Godhead bodily. And ye are complete in him, which is the head of all principality and power:

Weymouth New Testament or New Testament in Modern Speech (1903)

For it is in Christ that the fulness of God's nature dwells embodied, and in Him you are made complete, and He is the Lord of all princes and rulers.

Holman Christian Standard Bible (1999)

For the entire fullness of God's nature dwells bodily in Christ, and you have been filled by Him, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

The Message (2002) Paraphrase translation by Eugene Peterson

Everything of God gets expressed in him, so you can see and hear him clearly. You don't need a telescope, a microscope, or a horoscope to realize the fullness of Christ, and the emptiness of the universe without him. When you come to him, that fullness comes together for you, too. His power extends over everything.

New Living Testament (2004)

For in Christ lives all the fullness of God in a human body. So you also are complete through your union with Christ, who is the head over every ruler and authority.

Translation Problems ~ The Lord's Prayer ~ Matthew 6:9-13

“And forgive us our _____, as we forgive _____.”

The Lord's Prayer appears in Matthew 6:9-13 and Luke 11:2-4. There are some differences between the two versions with Matthew's being slightly more expanded. There are also differences in the various Bible translations, the main one being in the line about forgiveness.

In that line, Matthew and Luke diverge slightly. Matthew states a request for debts to be forgiven in the same manner as people forgive those who have debts against them. Luke, on the other hand, makes a similar request for sins to be forgiven. The word “debts” does not mean financial obligations but implies failures to obey God and to love one another, in other words acts of omission, of not doing what we should do. In contrast, “sins” is generally understood to mean acts of commission, of doing what we should not do. Interestingly, the first five commandments lay out what we should do (obligations or debts) while the last five tell us what we should not do (sins or trespasses).

The difference between the forgiveness word used by Matthew and Luke probably arises from the fact that in Aramaic, the original language of the prayer, the same word is used to mean both debt *and* sin. So we see that Jesus was actually saying that forgiveness applies to both debts *and* sins.

Where did the word “trespasses” come from? It is *not* in any modern Bible, yet millions of people have learned the line as, “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.” When the Lord's Prayer began to be translated into English, different words were used. Wycliffe (1395) used “debts,” while Tyndale (1526) used “trespasses.” When the Book of Common Prayer was first published (1549), “trespasses” was used, and as such became the standard word used in many liturgies (Roman Catholic, Anglican, Lutheran, Episcopal, etc.). Also added at this time was the closing, “For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever.”

Other more recent Bible translations in an effort to deal with the sins/debts word have come up with several solutions. The most widely used word is “wrongs,” while some Bibles don't use any word at all. Here are some translations of that line:

Book of Common Prayer: “and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us.”

King James, ASV, NIV etc: “and forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.”

Living Bible, NLT: “and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.”

Today's English: “Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us.”

Contemporary English: “Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.”

The Message: “Keep us forgiven with you and forgiving others. “

The Lord's Prayer ~ Contemporary English Version (CEV)

Our Father in heaven, help us to honor your name.

Come and set up your kingdom, so that everyone on earth will obey you, as you are obeyed in heaven.

Give us our food for today.

Forgive us for doing wrong, as we forgive others.

Keep us from being tempted and protect us from evil.

Amen

Translation Differences ~ The Lord's Prayer ~ Matthew 6:9-13

King James

9 Our Father which art in heaven, Hallowed be thy name.
10 Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done in earth, as it is in heaven.
11 Give us this day our daily bread.
12 And forgive us our debts, as we forgive our debtors.
13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil:
(Added) For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever. Amen.

Book of Common Prayer (Catholic, Anglican, Episcopal, Lutheran)

Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name.
Thy kingdom come. Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread,
and forgive us our trespasses, as we forgive those who trespass against us,
and lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil.
[For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory, for ever and ever. Amen.]

New International Version

9 Our Father in heaven, hallowed be your name,
10 Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven,
11 Give us today our daily bread,
12 Forgive us our debts, as we also have forgiven our debtors,
13 And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

The Living Bible

9 Our Father in heaven, we honor your holy name.
10 We ask that your kingdom will come now. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.
11 Give us our food again today, as usual,
12 and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.
13 Don't bring us into temptation, but deliver us from the Evil One. Amen.

New Living Translation

9 Our Father in heaven, may your name be honored.
10 May your Kingdom come soon. May your will be done here on earth, just as it is in heaven.
11 Give us our food for today,
12 and forgive us our sins, just as we have forgiven those who have sinned against us.
13 And don't let us yield to temptation, but deliver us from the evil one.

Today's English (Good News)

9 Our Father in heaven: May your holy name be honored;
10 May your Kingdom come; may your will be done on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us today the food we need.
12 Forgive us the wrongs we have done, as we forgive the wrongs that others have done to us.
13 Do not bring us to hard testing, but keep us safe from the Evil One.

New Century Version

9 Our Father in heaven, may your name always be kept holy.
10 May your kingdom come and what you want be done, here on earth as it is in heaven.
11 Give us the food we need for each day.
12 Forgive us for our sins, just as we have forgiven those who sinned against us.
13 And do not cause us to be tempted, but save us from the Evil One.
[The kingdom, the power, and the glory are yours forever. Amen.]