

by ***Adam Hellyer***

It should go without saying that reading the Bible is important. But, for those of us who cannot read the original Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek, we rely on Bible translations for our daily dose of the Word. The full Bible exists in 670 languages, and portions of the scriptures in more than 3300 languages. In English alone, there are more than 100 translations to choose from. How then can we know that when we read the Bible in our mother tongue, that we are really getting to grips with the pure, Spirit-breathed Word of God?

It's said, the best Bible is the one you read, and to a certain extent this is true. Certainly, a Bible in your hand is worth two on your shelf. But not all Bible translations are created equal. There are two ways of looking at Bible translations. One way is by considering the translation philosophy. Categorising this way there are four main types: word-for-word, formal, dynamic, and paraphrase.

Word-for-Word

The only truly word-for-word translation is an *Interlinear* Bible. These display the original Hebrew or Greek text line by line with the best translation of each word shown beside. This is the closest a non-Greek or Hebrew reader can get to reading the original. Of course, due to massive differences in how grammar and syntax work between languages, an interlinear is not an easy read. It is useful for an in-depth study of the text, but no good as an everyday reading Bible.

Formal

One way of translating the Bible is the *Formal Equivalent*, sometimes mislabelled as word-for-word. These attempt to translate each word of the original text into the closest equivalent word in the new language, allowing for differences in grammar and syntax. This is not an exact process. Some words don't have semantic meaning at all, they simply serve a grammatical function. Some words in the original language can have multiple meanings in English, depending on the context and grammar. Likewise, multiple words in the original might translate into just one English word, like the four Greek words all translated as 'love' in English. So, there is still a measure of interpretation required in this form of translation.

Some ancient Hebrew or Greek words have no modern equivalent. When this happens, either the closest approximation is used, or a new word is created. Working through all these challenges, *Formal* translations attempt to be transparent by allowing readers direct access to the words and phrases of the original. Modern, *Formal* translations are really quite readable. A good formal translation (*English Standard Version (ESV)*, *New American Standard Bible (NASB)*, *New King James Version (NKJV)*) is the best to use as a study Bible.

Dynamic

Another translation philosophy is that of *Dynamic Equivalent* or “thought-for-thought” (CSB prefers *Optimal Equivalent*). Many passages will still be translated *Formally*, but in certain places, rather than render into English every word the Bible authors wrote, these translators choose to capture what they believe the Bible authors meant. Where the original contains idioms or references that appear to depend on cultural or historical context, these translations try to help the readers by translating them into modern, culturally neutral or relevant terms. This may be as simple as rendering measurements or weights in modern units, or it may mean idiomatic expressions being replaced with modern phrases. Where passages could appear ambiguous, *Dynamic* translations may seek to remove this apparent ambiguity by adding words that provide clarity. Sometimes these added words are italicised to make clear they are added, but some translations make no distinction.

The inherent danger in *Dynamic* translations is the necessity for interpretation. How do you provide clarity, beyond what is written, without moving into commentary? Simply put, you can't. But *Dynamic* translations are not bad. They attempt to be transparent by allowing readers direct access to the thoughts and ideas of the original in modern, relevant language. A good *Dynamic* translation (*Christian Standard Bible (CSB)*, *New International Version (NIV)*, *New Living Bible (NLT)*) can be great to use as an everyday Bible.

Paraphrase

In 1971, after watching his children struggle with other available translations, Kenneth Taylor produced the *Living Bible (LB)*, his own paraphrase of an existing English translation. *Paraphrases* are not really Bibles at all. The words of scripture are not translated from the Hebrew and Greek, rather, the ideas are reimagined in colloquial, familiar language.

Where a *Dynamic* translation flirts with commentary, a *Paraphrase* dives in with both feet, being almost entirely commentary. They are often the work of a single man, meaning they are prone to theological and stylistic bias. A popular modern *Paraphrase* is *The Message* (ironically abbreviated to *MSG!*). Unrecognisable from the original Hebrew and Greek, the *MSG* is, in the words of one critic, “extremely idiomatic, to the point of losing a lot of the meaning in the original.” *Paraphrase* Bibles may be enjoyable to read, because they provide such a fresh take on the familiar, but they are not really Bibles, so should not be used as an everyday or study Bible. With simple-to-read *Dynamic* translations, like the *NLT* or *CSB* available, there is really no need for a *Paraphrase*.

Amplified

Unique amongst translations is the *Amplified Bible (AMP)*. Neither word-for-word nor thought-for-thought, each verse contains many variants, and reads like a preacher who just discovered the Greek lexicon! As we've said, the original language can have multiple meanings in English, the *AMP* presents everything it might say, without helping you know what it does say. In the time before the internet it was a useful study aid, bringing a broader view to ambiguous verses. But since the accessibility to multiple translations has increased through excellent apps like the *YouVersion*, and sites like [BibleHub](#) and [BibleGateway](#), the need for the *AMP* has faded out.

Parallel Examples

All the above exist on a spectrum of sorts. No two translations are completely alike. But, to demonstrate what we have been talking about here is the same verses in a Formal, Dynamic and Paraphrase translation:

Psalm 1:1-3 - *ESV* - Formal

“Blessed is the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked, nor stands in the way of sinners, nor sits in the seat of scoffers; but his delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he meditates day and night. He is like a tree planted by streams of water that yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither. In all that he does, he prospers.”

Psalm 1:1-3 - *NLT* - Dynamic

“Oh, the joys of those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or stand around with sinners, or join in with mockers. But they delight in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night. They are like trees planted along the riverbank, bearing fruit each season. Their leaves never wither, and they prosper in all they do.”

Psalm 1:1-3 - *MSG* - Paraphrase

“How well God must like you— you don’t hang out at Sin Saloon, you don’t slink along Dead-End Road, you don’t go to Smart-Mouth College. Instead you thrill to God’s Word, you chew on Scripture day and night. You’re a tree replanted in Eden, bearing fresh fruit every month, Never dropping a leaf, always in blossom.”

In the Hebrew, the words “walk”, “stand” and “sit” are present. These are faithfully translated in the *ESV*, do not appear clearly in the *NLT* and are completely missing from the *MSG*. The *MSG* also adds words (e.g. “Eden”), replaces “prosper” with “blossom”, and takes an idea about people who are bad influences, and turns them into places: “Sin Saloon”, “Dead End Road”, “Smart-Mouth College”.

Now an example from the New Testament:

John 3:16 - *ESV* - Formal

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 - *NLT* - Dynamic

“For God loved the world so much that he gave his one and only Son, so that everyone who believes in him will not perish but have eternal life.”

John 3:16 - MSG - Paraphrase

"This is how much God loved the world: He gave his Son, his one and only Son. And this is why: so that no one need be destroyed; by believing in him, anyone can have a whole and lasting life."

The *ESV's* "so loved", follows the *KJV* tradition, but is a little ambiguous. Both the *NLT* and *MSG* interpret the "so" as "so much", but it is more accurately understood as "thus", or "in this way". The *ESV* and *NLT* both have "eternal life", which is accurate. But the *MSG* has the much weaker "a whole and lasting life". This implies long lasting, not eternal. It also does not sound like this is anything other than a good version of our natural life.

One last example:

Isaiah 53:1 - *ESV* - Formal

"Who has believed what he has heard from us? And to whom has the arm of the LORD been revealed?"

Isaiah 53:1 - *NLT* - Dynamic

"Who has believed our message? To whom has the LORD revealed his powerful arm?"

Isaiah 53:1 - *MSG* - Paraphrase

"Who believes what we've heard and seen? Who would have thought God's saving power would look like this?"

The Hebrew says "arm", just like the *ESV*. The *NLT* adds "powerful", to help us understand what "arm" means. The *MSG* decides that this is a passage about "God's saving power", even though that phrase does not appear in the Hebrew text. As with Psalm 1, the *MSG* is deep into commentary, with no attempt at actual translation, it is simply not a Bible.

Missing Verses

The other way to categorise translations, is not by translation philosophy, but by the source material. There are rumours spreading across the internet about translators removing verses from modern translations. But the truth is not as sinister as it sounds. No Bible is ever translated from the original documents. The original letters of Paul, or gospel of John have perished long ago. What we have, as with any ancient text, is bits and pieces of copies of copies, compiled into source documents. The bits and pieces used to translate the *KJV* were compiled into a document called the *Textus Receptus*, this was the best source document we had for several hundred years. The *King James (KJV)* and *New King James Version (NKJV)* are translated from it.

However, as archaeologists continued to recover more and more ancient manuscripts, the amount of

material to work from increased remarkably. At the time of the *KJV*, the oldest Greek manuscripts were from 1000 years after Christ. Today, we have manuscripts from as early as 100 years after Christ, much closer, by age, to the source material. This means, today we have a better picture of what the original looked like than they did in 1611. These older documents were compiled into a *Critical Text* which translators used for the *English Revised Version (ERV)* and *American Standard Version (ASV)*. Further discoveries updated the *Critical Text*, giving us the source document for the *NIV*, *NASB*, *ESV*, and practically every other modern English translation.

These advances mean there will be differences between older and newer translations. However, this is because the newer translations are actually working with older, more authentic source documents. Often, differences between the source documents get mentioned in footnotes, or placed in brackets in a modern translation. Remarkably, despite what we now know, no orthodox doctrine of the Christian Church is undermined by any of these differences. God has truly preserved His Word.

King James Onlyism

The best-selling English translation of all time is the *KJV* of 1611, revised in 1769. The *KJV* is a remarkable work, that has profoundly shaped English literature. But, while a good translation, the *KJV* is not perfect. Back in 1611, there were some 500 Greek words that had never been seen outside the Bible; some even claimed these were “Holy Spirit words” that only appeared in the Bible. Today, over 400 of these words have become known outside the Bible, giving modern translators a much better idea what they truly mean. In other places the *KJV* simply made mistakes, like in Acts 12:4, where the *KJV* reads Easter instead of Passover. Easter was not a festival in New Testament Jerusalem!

Yet, some believe the *KJV* is “inspired”, the same way the original scriptures were; that only the *KJV* truly represents the scriptures. This is not so. Firstly, there is no precedent within scripture for a single English translation to be seen as the “inspired” Word, over any other faithful translation. Second, we know the *KJV* to be flawed. Third, we know the *KJV* was translated from the relatively recent *Textus Receptus*, compared to the more ancient *Critical Text*. The *KJV* is a good Bible, but it is not the only Bible and it is not even the best Bible in English.

A Bible You Can Trust

Reading the Bible is important, having a Bible you can trust equally so. If you are a strong reader, then a *Formal* translation would be best for you. Try an *ESV*, *NASB* or *NKJV*. If you struggle with reading, or have English as a second language, you may do better with a *Dynamic* translation. Try an *NLT*, *NIV* or *CSB*.

Remember, the point of reading the Bible is to do what it says. James wrote, “*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves. For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror. For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like. But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his*

doing.” James 1:22-25



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