

Which Bible Translation Should I Use?

by Ken Graham, II

Many questions have been raised regarding which Bible translations are the best ones to use. This question usually revolves around which translations are the most accurate. Some may argue that a particular version isn't good, while others may think that same version is the best.

How can you know which one is best to use? A number of different questions need to be asked before we can answer that. Questions like, who will use it? How will he or she use it? What will he use it for? Some Bibles make excellent light-reading Bibles. Some make good modern English children's Bibles. Some make good research Bibles. Some are closer to the original than others.

Depending on the purpose, several translations might be "best" for that use. It is not necessary to get yourself locked into one translation and then ignore all the others.

The question, "Which English Bible is most accurate, or closest to the original?" is another matter. This may be the question that many are really asking.

But to answer the question "Which English Bible is most accurate, or closest to the original?" we need to examine some information. All translations from other languages into English, are just that—*translations*. The Old Testament was originally recorded for us in the Hebrew language. The New Testament was first recorded in the Greek language. So we need to look at the texts of those languages.

The Old Testament

Many men have given their entire lives to the study of the history and accuracy of our English Bible. Many books have been written, and many controversies still exist. So I will attempt to summarize all of that in this article.

Most of our English Bibles today represent good to excellent translations of the Old Testament. The Hebrew Masoretic text of the Old Testament has been well translated and for the most part well presented in most Modern English Bibles. Few significant controversies exist in the translation from Hebrew to English for our purposes today. Most scholars agree that the Masoretic text is the one to use when translating the Hebrew Bible into English.

The New Testament

Most of the controversies in translation today revolve around the New Testament, so we will spend most of our time there.

For us to see what English translation(s) are most accurate or reflect the "original" the best,

we need to look at the various Greek copies that exist today. No originals (known as "autographs") of any of the New Testament books exist today. All that we have today are copies. The men who study these copies and try to determine which ones are the most accurate or closest to the original are called *textual critics*. And, regrettably, textual critics are divided in their opinions.

Greek Texts

Somewhere between 4,500 and 5,000 Greek manuscripts are known to exist today. Our task would be easy if they were all the exactly the same, but they are not. Each of these manuscripts was copied from some other manuscript, and so they all have different dates when they were made too. (We could also look at several thousand Latin texts of the New Testament but they were all translated from Greek texts originally, so that wouldn't be of much profit.) The Greek texts have been classified into different text families, and even these classifications vary depending on the textual critic who lists them.

The vast majority (approximately 4,500) of all these Greek manuscripts are of one major group called the *Byzantine family* or *Byzantine text type*. Most of them come from the area of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). Most of the earliest of these come from the fourth and fifth century A.D. There is a great deal of consistency between these many manuscripts and there are not many variants between them as compared to other types. Variants are simply differences in spelling, wording or phrasing.

Different scribes made each copy by hand. Sometimes a scribe copying these manuscripts made a "slip of the quill." Although in the vast majority of cases an error would have been caught, a few slipped by. But because we have many copies of this type (Byzantine) available today, we are able to compare them with each other and eliminate most errors. Several men have produced Greek versions of the Byzantine text attempting to take the most common reading (wherever there are variants) and have named it the *Majority Text*. It represents the most consistent reading of the majority of all the manuscripts of the Byzantine type.

However, in 1607 when the King James version began to be translated into English from Greek there was believed to be only one Greek Byzantine text used by the men doing the translating. Years before, a gentleman named Erasmus assembled his own Greek version of the New Testament from less than a half dozen

copies or exemplars of the Byzantine text type that he had available to him. The King James translators used Erasmus' version as their primary Greek reference. In fact, the King James translators used Greek, Latin and several previous English texts in the process of translating the King James version.

This is not to say that the King James Version isn't an excellent version of the Bible; it certainly is. Erasmus' Greek text has come to be called the *Textus Receptus*, Latin for *the Received Text*. But it is based on only a handful of Byzantine texts of the approximately 4,500 available today. So even it is not based on the best available Greek texts known to exist today.

For the most part, there are few variants between the King James (*Textus Receptus*) and the Majority Text. Regrettably, only two reputable English Bibles printed today are based on the *Textus Receptus*—the King James Version and the New King James Version.

Sadly, there are no recognized English translations of the Majority Text in existence today. This is a disappointment, and a few scholars have called for such a translation to be made. Certainly one would think that the most reliable and accurate English version would be made from the Majority Text, since it is the best Greek text, but this is not the case. This leaves us with the next best thing—the King James and the New King James versions.

But we are not finished. One more major problem needs to be discussed. There are several ancient manuscripts in Greek that do not belong to the Byzantine family of texts. The most important ones are called the *Alexandrian text type* because most come from Egypt or the Sinai.

Three of them are very old, dating from as early as the third century A.D. Most textual critics feel that because these are the oldest copies known, they should be considered "more original" than any of the Byzantine text types.

At first we might be inclined to agree. But if we consider this carefully, several questions arise. Is older always better?

What about the care and discipline of the scribes who did the copying? Copyists followed strict standards in Asia Minor, but archaeological evidence indicates that the discipline of copying in Egypt was not strict. There were fewer scribes, less structure and copies were not handled, maintained or destroyed properly. Also we find that there are many variants between the three most complete Alexandrian manuscripts that we have today. So it is

clear certain liberties (or laxities) in copying were allowed rather than faithful, precise, to-the-letter reproduction.

In addition, we find that thousands of words are missing from the Alexandrian text types of the New Testament when they are compared to the Byzantine text types. We could say much more, but my conclusions are that the Alexandrian text types have been edited and are not as reliable as the Byzantine text type. But I am in agreement with only a few of this world's textual critics. Most textual critics feel that because the Alexandrian text type is older it must be better or more accurate. Many feel that the church edited and added to the Byzantine text type manuscripts. Of course, no proof of this has ever been found or shown.

So where does this leave us in our search for the most accurate English version, the one closest to the original? If you look into the front of most English Bibles they will tell what Greek text they are based on. Today, sadly, most modern translations come to us from the Alexandrian text type because this is where most

scholars have chosen to go. As I stated before, the only two translations not based on the Alexandrian texts today are the King James and the New King James translations. So for your research and study, these are probably the best translations to use.

However, the numbers of variants of any real significance in the New Testament between the Alexandrian text type and the Majority Text or the Textus Receptus are relatively few in an overall sense. These variants involve less than one tenth of 1 percent of the text of the New Testament. The numbers of variants that actually affect the meaning (not just spelling) of the text are very few. And many of these are not a significant change in meaning.

God is ultimately responsible for His Word. He chose to preserve it in Hebrew and Greek. No single English translation preserves the essence of God's thought completely. In moving from any language to another, something is lost. But in the process of examining several translations, we can grasp more of it than by simply reading one. And God has seen to it

that we have several English translations from which to obtain understanding; each with different uses and purposes. God's Spirit will guide the true believer into understanding the essence of His Word.

So for simple reading of the Bible, feel free to explore other translations. The King James and New King James provide a good base for study and research. I find that the New International Version is an excellent children's Bible, in modern English they can understand. I also like the New Revised Standard Version for the English it uses. For those in Great Britain the Revised English Bible has excellent English.

It's a good idea to have several translations available so you can gain perspective on the meaning of some verses. The Amplified Bible tends to add a lot of extra words to amplify the meaning, so it is a helpful source. *The New Testament From 26 Translations* is also an excellent reference to grasp more of the subtle meanings lost in translating from Greek to English. Learn to use them all—when each is appropriate—and enjoy the Word of God.

Differences in Bible Versions

More than 60 English versions of the Bible are available. We can divide them into three broad types: word-for-word, meaning-by-meaning and paraphrased. Most Bibles explain, on their introductory pages, which approach was used in preparing that particular version.

The word-for-word versions most accurately follow the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek texts. Generally speaking, the King James Version and its modern counterpart, the New King James Version, are word-for-word translations. They are readily found in most bookstores.

How trustworthy is the King James or the New King James Bible? Other manuscripts discovered since the King James Version was translated show it to be extremely reliable. For instance, when the King James Version is compared with what was found in the Dead Sea Scrolls, "the King James Bible is 98.33 percent pure" (Norman Geisler and William Nix, *A General Introduction to the Bible*, 1974, p. 263).

In the New Testament the sheer bulk of thousands of copies (4,500 to 5,000 Greek manuscripts) means that many minor variations among the manuscripts will be found. About 98 percent of the known Greek manuscripts agree with the basic text of the King James Bible. Even the variations that do exist rarely affect the basic meaning in the remaining 2 percent of those manuscripts. The preservation and transmission of the text of Scripture has been done remarkably well.

The Old Testament books are equally trustworthy. Although a few textual errors are to be found in some of the manuscripts used in translating the King James Bible, comparisons with other Bible versions can easily clarify most problems.

As an expert on textual criticism remarked, "if any book from ancient times has descended to us without substantial loss or alteration, it is the Bible. The Bible is the best-attested book from the ancient world! This has prompted Sir Frederic Kenyon to say: 'The number of manuscripts of the New Testament, of early translations from it, and of quotations from it in the oldest writers of the Church, is so large that it is practically certain that the true reading of every doubtful passage is preserved in some one or other of these ancient authorities. This can be said of no other ancient book in the world'" (Neil Lightfoot, *How We Got the Bible*, 1963, p. 120).

The accuracy of a version is obviously of utmost importance. To establish sound doctrines the first choice of versions should be a more-literal edition such as the New King James Version or New American Standard Bible.

What about the meaning-to-meaning versions? They, too, can be valuable, as secondary sources, to put the Scriptures into more-understandable wording. For instance, the New King James Version of Romans 8:5-8 reads: "For those who live according to the

flesh set their minds on the things of the flesh, but those who live according to the Spirit, the things of the Spirit. For to be carnally minded is death, but to be spiritually minded is life and peace. Because the carnal mind is enmity against God; for it is not subject to the law of God, nor indeed can be. So then, those who are in the flesh cannot please God."

The New International Version, a meaning-to-meaning translation, has: "Those who live according to the sinful nature have their minds set on what that nature desires; but those who live in accordance with the Spirit have their minds set on what the Spirit desires. The mind of sinful man is death, but the mind controlled by the Spirit is life and peace; the sinful mind is hostile to God. It does not submit to God's law, nor can it do so. Those controlled by the sinful nature cannot please God."

The latter explains Paul's point more clearly for most readers, although the former is a more-direct translation of the original language. So, when the text is not clear, many times a modern meaning-to-meaning translation can help. The Revised English Bible, Good News Bible and Jerusalem Bible are other popular meaning-to-meaning translations.

Paraphrased Bibles, such as The Living Bible, can be useful. The Living Bible can be described as an interpretive translation. Its goal is to make the Bible easily understandable. Caution is necessary in working with this text, however, because the authors exercised poetic license to transform some basic terms according to their own religious ideas. Paraphrased versions can be consulted to better grasp the story flow but should not be used to establish doctrine. They should be considered poor sources for accurately determining the meaning of any text.

Which version of the Bible should you buy? The King James Version, although both accurate and popular, is increasingly difficult to understand simply because the English language has evolved considerably over the nearly 400 years since its publication. The meanings of some of its words have changed over time. Many readers find the archaic language distracting and difficult to follow. Publications produced by the United Church of God most often use the New King James Version, which, while retaining much of the beauty of the original King James wording, is more readable and is still usually faithful to the original text.

Modern translations like those mentioned above are helpful for comparing and clarifying the meaning. Many people find a parallel Bible, which contains two or more versions side by side on the same pages, to be helpful.

Regardless of the Bible version you choose, it should be considered an investment in which a little more expense up front will pay off in the long run. Consider buying a version with wide margins that will allow you to add notes from your personal study over the coming years. Although more expensive, a higher-quality leather-bound Bible will last years longer than a hardbound or paperback volume and should become a lifelong companion.

—Mario Seiglie