

# how to read the Bible

## for all its worth

*Giles Cattermole looks at different Bible versions*

*'The Holy Bible, as originally given, is the inspired and infallible Word of God...  
CMF doctrinal basis.*

### the basic tool - choosing a good translation

This series is summarised from Fee G, Stuart D. *How to Read the Bible for all its Worth* (3rd ed). Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2003

Most of us don't read Hebrew or Greek. So to read the Bible we need a good translation. For regular quiet-times and memorising verses, it's best to use one version we can become familiar with, and many churches also stick with one version for public use.

But for deeper study, it's good to use several versions, especially if they differ in their approach to translation. Why? Because although we believe the Bible as originally given is infallible, translators are not. Translating from one language to another inevitably involves a degree of interpretation by translators, as they struggle to be both faithful to the text, and understandable to the reader. If one translation appears to say something different from another, then at least one must be

mistaken. Sometimes footnotes give an alternative translation. Sometimes they don't, which is why it's good to compare translations.

How do these differences arise? To answer this, we need to consider the question of the text itself, and the theory of translation.

#### text

There are no original documents available today, handwritten by the Bible authors themselves. We rely on hand-produced 'manuscripts', copied repeatedly over many years, until printing presses made this process unnecessary and helped ensure uniformity. This is true of all ancient documents, and there are many more Bible manuscripts available than for any other text. The wealth of evidence means that there is a high degree

of certainty about the original text, even though no two manuscripts are absolutely identical.

The science of textual criticism relies on external evidence (to do with the quality and age of the manuscripts), and internal evidence (to do with the mistakes made by copyists). Sometimes though, scholars still can't agree. In these cases, many Bibles use the majority choice, but include the alternative reading as a footnote.

#### cattle or young men? 1 Samuel 8:16.

'the best of your cattle and donkeys' (TNIV) 'your finest young men, and your donkeys' (NKJV)

NKJV uses a mediaeval Hebrew text; TNIV here uses the Septuagint, a Greek translation from 250-150BC. The Hebrew for 'cattle' and 'young men' differ by one letter. The Septuagint was translated before the mis-copy, preserving the original 'cattle'. The error came later, affecting mediaeval Hebrew manuscripts, but not the Greek ones.

The KJV (AV) was the most widely used translation in the world, and significantly shaped the English language. However, for the NT it used a Greek version called the 'textus receptus', based on late manuscripts, which included many

copying errors (mostly trivial). Modern translations therefore attempt not just to update the language, but to use the most reliable ancient manuscripts.

## translation

This leads us to the theory of translation: how are words and ideas best transferred from the original language into English?

- Formal equivalence: keeping as close to the words and grammar of the original, as can be put into English. 'Literal' translation.
- Functional equivalence: using more natural English grammar, and idioms that mean the same thing as the original. 'Dynamic' translation.
- Free translation: trying to convey the ideas of the original with less concern about the actual words. 'Paraphrase'.

There are several issues aside from vocabulary and grammar that translators grapple with:

### 1. Weights, measures, money.

More literal versions transliterate the original word, such as Isaiah 5:10, 'a homer of seed shall yield but an ephah' (ESV). More free translations use terms used today: 'ten baskets of seed will yield only one basket of grain' (NLT). In both these versions, footnotes give the alternative.

| FORMAL (LITERAL) |      |      | FUNCTIONAL (DYNAMIC) |     |     | FREE (PARAPHRASE) |     |             |
|------------------|------|------|----------------------|-----|-----|-------------------|-----|-------------|
| KJV              | NASB | NRSV | NIV                  | NAB | GNB | JB                | NEB | LB          |
| NKJV             | NASU | ESV  | TNIV                 | NJB | REB | NLT               |     | The Message |

**2. Euphemisms.** Saul went into a cave, in 1 Samuel 24:3, 'to cover his feet' (KJV, following the Hebrew idiom), 'to relieve himself' (many modern translations), or 'to go to the bathroom' (LB).

**3. Wordplay and poetry.** In Amos 8:1-2 (NASB), Amos sees a basket of 'summer fruit', and God tells him that 'the end' has come to Israel. In Hebrew, the words for 'summer' and 'end' are pronounced nearly identically. Literal translations lose the subtlety. TNIV tries to capture some of the wordplay as Amos sees a basket of 'ripe fruit', and God tells him that 'the time is ripe'.

**4. Gender.** TNIV and other newer translations avoid the use of masculine pronouns where the original meaning is non-specific. ESV deliberately doesn't. When Jesus tells us who does not live by bread alone in Luke 4:4, the Greek word translated 'man' (NIV, ESV) or 'people' (TNIV, NLT) does not specify maleness. Avoidance of the masculine often pluralises, which in Luke 4 is probably trivial, but in Revelation 3:20, 'I will come in and eat with them...' (TNIV) the personal, one-to-one nature of the promise could be lost.

## summary

Don't choose a version simply because it's traditional or readable. It should be a faithful attempt to translate God's Word into your own language: both reliable and understandable.

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### TOP TIP

Use a dynamic translation (eg NIV, TNIV) for regular reading. More literal translations (eg NASB or ESV) will help you in further study to be closer to the words of the original language. Free translations (eg NLT, The Message) can also be useful for an overview or sparking ideas about the meaning of the passage.

### ABBREVIATIONS

**KJV/NKJV.** King James Version (aka AV, Authorised Version), 1611 / New KJV, 1982.

**NASB/NASU.** New American Standard Bible, 1960 / NAS Update, 1995.

**RSV/NRSV.** Revised Standard Version, 1952 / New RSV, 1991.

**ESV.** English Standard Version, 2001.

**NIV/TNIV.** New International Version, 1984 / Today's NIV, 2002.

**NAB.** New American Bible, 1970.

**JB/NJB.** Jerusalem Bible, 1966 / New JB, 1985.

**GNB.** Good News Bible (aka TEV, Today's English Version), 1976 / 2nd edition 1994.

**LB/NLT.** Living Bible, 1971 / New Living Translation, 1997.

**NEB/REB.** New English Bible, 1961 / Revised EB, 1989.