

WHY ARE THERE SO MANY BIBLE TRANSLATIONS?

The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew and Greek, with a few small sections in Aramaic. So Genesis 1:1 looked similar to this:

בְּרֵאשִׁית בְּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת הַשָּׁמַיִם וְאֶת הָאָרֶץ :

And John 1:1:

Ἐν ἀρχῇ ἦν ὁ λόγος, καὶ ὁ λόγος ἦν πρὸς τὸν θεόν, καὶ θεὸς ἦν ὁ λόγος.

Strange, isn't it? Unless you have studied these ancient languages, you won't be able to read a copy of the original writings. Therefore, it's essential for us, as well as people all around the world, to have a translation in our own native language if we want to read and understand the teachings of the Bible for ourselves.

This need for translation goes back hundreds of years. After the time of Christ, the early church began to grow, especially among people in other cultures. Some could read the original works in Hebrew and Greek, but most could not. Thus, scholars from the second century onward translated the Bible into other languages like Coptic, Syriac, Ethiopian, and Armenian. Because of the prominence of the Roman Empire, a Latin translation became popular in the fifth century and remained the most widely used version of the Bible throughout the Middle Ages. But only the small minority of highly-educated scholars who knew Latin could read it.

In the fourteenth century, John Wycliff produced the first entire English translation of the Bible for his fellow English speakers. However, he translated from the Latin version itself. Thus, his was an English translation of a Latin translation of the original Hebrew and Greek writings. While helpful, the original meaning is often lost when translated through several languages. In the seventeenth century, the king of England authorized a number of scholars to produce the first full English version of the Bible translated directly from the original language manuscripts. Thus, in 1611, the Authorized Version or King James Version (KJV) appeared.

Since that time, scholars from other countries and cultures have translated the Bible into their own languages as well. Today, the Bible in whole or part has been translated into over 2,000 languages. In addition, there have been numerous new English translations of the Bible in the last several decades. Just walk into any bookstore and you're likely to be overwhelmed by an abundance of abbreviations – KJV, GNT, NIV, NAS, NLT, etc. – for each and every different translation. This raises a question. Why can't we just be satisfied with one version? Isn't it good enough for people who speak English?

One major reason for new translations has been the progress scholars have made with recent manuscript discoveries. Over the last few centuries, older and more reliable manuscripts of the Bible have been found that shed new light on the original documents. Thus today's translations are based on a greater and more accurate body of manuscript evidence than scholars had when they produced the KJV. This means we can be extremely confident that the Bible we read correlates with the original writings of biblical authors. Another reason for the appearance of new translations is that English itself has evolved and readers need a more understandable version. While the Shakespearean prose of the KJV may *feel* more traditional, eloquent, and sacred, it just doesn't represent the way most people talk and communicate in our culture today.

Translating the Bible from Hebrew and Greek into English is no easy task. Language translation is a tedious process, and linguistic scholars admit that no translation can ever *fully* convey exactly what the original language intended. For example, there are some grammatical expressions or words in Hebrew and Greek that simply don't have an English equivalent. Therefore, a vast knowledge of both cultures and the author's original intent is required to communicate the meaning across linguistic barriers. Nevertheless, biblical translation teams include the best scholars from a variety of religious traditions who work hard to produce accurate and readable versions for English readers. As a result, we can trust that the current English translations we read are faithful to convey the overall meaning of the documents' original intent.

Numerous translations exist because translation theories differ. Note some recent important English translations:

- *The Message* (2002) is more like a creative paraphrase that attempts to use modern idioms and language to evoke the same response the original writings would have had on their intended audiences.
- *The New American Standard Bible* (NASB, 1995) attempts to be as literal as possible by making fewer interpretive decisions. While some appreciate this approach, the text can feel a little more "wooden" and less readable.
- *The New Revised Standard Version* (NRSV, 1989) is often used by mainline Protestant churches.
- *The New International Version* (NIV, 1984) strives to achieve both accuracy and readability. The NIV is the most widely used contemporary English translation in the world.
- *Today's New International Version* (TNIV, 2005) is a recent update of the NIV reflecting advances in scholarship for increased accuracy and clarity.

As mentioned above, each of these translations is valuable. You may find that *The Message* is useful for getting a different and often fresh perspective. However, for primary reading and study, one of the other translations is recommended. Because of their accuracy, widespread use, and readability, any of these other four translations are sufficient for students of the Bible.