

The Bible indeed has many translations today. Of course, translations are necessary, given that the Bible's original languages are biblical Hebrew and ancient Aramaic for the Old Testament, and Greek for the New Testament, languages that few enough read and understand today. Indeed, by the time of Christ's earthly ministry, Jews had already translated the Hebrew Bible, the Christian Old Testament, into Greek, in a manuscript known as the Septuagint. Thus, when Christians first recorded the New Testament writings in Greek, which was the scholarly language of the day, they were able to share those writings along with the Old Testament Septuagint, also in Greek.

Early Christians were thus reading the Hebrew Bible, together with their own writings that leaders soon compiled into the Christian New Testament, all in Greek. Interestingly, the Greek in which Christians wrote the accounts that later leaders compiled into the New Testament was not the high Greek of the academies, in which scholars read Plato and Socrates, but a people's Greek, an ordinary Greek spoken in the homes, streets, and markets. Modern academic readers of high Greek scoffed at the New Testament's odd idioms in ordinary Greek until discovering other contemporaneous writings in ordinary Greek that confirmed the common idioms. The New Testament was a people's book, not a book of academicians.

Further translations beyond Greek have, of course, been wholly necessary. Jesus's great commission in Matthew 28:18-20 was for his disciples to go make disciples of all nations, teaching them to obey everything that Jesus commanded. Christians thus take as their goal that the Bible reach everyone in a language that they can understand. Bible translation is at the core of Christian proclamation and action. The International Bible Society estimates that the Bible is presently available in about 2,300 languages. The first significant Bible translation was Jerome's pope-commissioned Latin Vulgate, in the late fourth or early fifth century. The first book ever printed by press was Gutenberg's 1450's Latin-translation Bible.

How did the Bible first appear in English? Oxford theologian John Wycliffe was the first to translate significant portions of the Bible from Latin Vulgate into handwritten English, in the early 1400's. At the time, Bible translation was controversial. Popes burned Wycliffe follower John Hus at the stake for touting Bible reading in one's own language. They also had Wycliffe's bones dug up,

crushed, and scattered decades later for his translation offense. Yet in the late 1400's, Oxford professors Linacre and Colet continued Wycliffe's practice of sharing English translations with their students and congregants.

The great scholar Erasmus in 1516 then compiled a side-by-side Greek-to-Latin translation correcting plain errors in the Latin Vulgate. Martin Luther used Erasmus's work to translate the New Testament into German in 1522. William Tyndale, an outspoken translation advocate, escaped persecutors in England to join Luther in Germany, where Tyndale likewise used Erasmus's Greek-to-Latin work to translate the New Testament into English in 1526. Tyndale disciple Coverdale finished translating the Old Testament from Erasmus's Greek into English in 1535 for the first complete English Bible. English monarchs soon relented in their persecution of English translators, to sponsor their own English versions, including an earliest one, the Cranmer Bible or Great Bible, that Coverdale published for King Henry VIII in 1539.

The bigger challenge, though, is not just to accept a Bible written in one's own language, necessary enough for intelligible reading, but to choose among different translations in one's own language. The King James version with which many Christians are familiar is a 1611 translation by about fifty commissioned scholars. The King James version alone has around a billion copies in print, is the world's most-printed book of any kind, and was the standard English translation for about two-hundred-fifty years. In the 1880's, England published an English Revised version, following which Americans published a virtually identical American Standard version. Most today regard the 1971 New American Standard version as the most-accurate English word-for-word Bible translation, thus used widely in seminary study.

Word-for-word translations, though literally accurate and thus enormously valuable for scholarship, do not always read so easily. The 1973 New International version is an English dynamic-equivalent translation that seeks phrase-by-phrase rather than word-by-word accuracy. The New International version remains the all-time best-selling modern-English Bible version. A 2002 English Standard version bridges the gap between the New American Standard's word-for-word accuracy and the New International version's readability, gaining it current popularity. Other

translations deliberately move farther away from word-by-word or phrase-by-phrase accuracy to further increase readability, even tapping new idioms. Kenneth Taylor's 1971 Living Bible and Eugene Peterson's 1993-2002 The Message: The Bible in Contemporary Language are prime and deservedly popular examples.

With so many options now available, what is a responsible approach to translations? In a way, the questioner is right. Accuracy is hugely important. Don't let loose translations confuse precise meanings. Use word-by-word or close phrase-by-phrase translations for close readings and study. On the other hand, paraphrases may help keep the text fresh and accessible for casual or frequent reading. The Bible is useful both ways, for deep study but also for constant refreshment. And then, for memory work, consider a looser phrase-by-phrase translation, one that is readable and memorizable but avoids trendy current idioms. When used properly, multiple translations are a resource rather than a problem. Today is a very good time to read, study, memorize, and apply the Bible. Be glad that you did not live in Tyndale's age or an earlier age when no English translations were available.