

Bible Translations

Things to keep in mind

1. Biblical texts were not written in English. The OT was written in Hebrew and some Aramaic; Septuagint (LXX) was a Greek translation of the Hebrew. The NT was written entirely in *koiné* (common, Hellenistic) Greek.
2. We have no original manuscripts (“autographs”). For OT, the oldest, most reliable mss. date from the 10th and 11th c. C.E. Now we also have the Dead Sea Scrolls. For NT, thousands of fragments, partial, and complete mss.; oldest complete dates from 4th c. CE. Many textual variations.
3. Virtually all translations are made from text “editions.” Specialists in textual criticism sift through the variations in all the mss. and use a number of criteria to determine what is likely the original reading. Through this long and laborious process they produce an edition of the Old or New Testament. Our translations are thus not from a single manuscript.
4. St. Jerome produced the Latin “Vulgate” – early 5th c. This became the standard text of Western Christianity through the Middle Ages and Renaissance.
5. Attempts to translate into English as early as 9th c. but first complete by Wm. Wycliffe in 14th c. from the Vulgate. In 1526-36, Wm. Tyndale translated into English directly from Hebrew and Greek. Various others followed, often dependent on Tyndale.
6. Catholics produced the Douay-Rheims translation of the Vulgate, 1582-1610. Remained the RC standard in English until mid-20th c. (= CCD version).
7. King James Version or Authorized Version (1611) revised earlier English translations, esp. the 1568 “Bishops’ Bible” with consultation of Hebrew and Greek texts. Initially included Apocrypha, but eventually removed because of mainly Puritan objections. Remained the Standard, with some updates and revisions, into the 20th c.
8. Revised Standard Version (National Council of Churches) – 1946-1952. New Revised Standard Version – 1989: updates and esp. gender-neutral language. Legacy from Tyndale through KJV to NRSV.
9. Following Pius XII’s 1943 *Divine Afflante Spiritu*, American bishops authorized a new translation from original languages. *The New American Bible* published in 1970. Major revision in 1986 with further revisions in 1991 and 2010. Other revisions coming. This is the authorized American RC version used in the Liturgy. See *The Catholic Study Bible*.
10. The *Bible de Jérusalem* (1956) produced by French Catholic Scholars from original languages. English *Jerusalem Bible* (1966) used originals but influenced by the French. A favorite among British and American Catholics. A new French edition in 1973; in English the *New Jerusalem Bible* in 1985.
Translation always a challenge, always an interpretation, always imperfect.

Theories of translation:

formal equivalence (word-for-word);
dynamic equivalence (thought-for-thought);
recently, optimal equivalence (seeks to combine the two).

What's the "Best" Translation?

Some criteria (taken from ME Boring, NT Intro):

1. Is it based on the oldest and best manuscripts?
2. Is the Language contemporary? But ... how contemporary?
3. Is it produced by committee commissioned by major, responsible reps of the ecumenical Christian community?

Further Criteria (taken from NIDB):

1. Comprehensive enough to avoid needless explanatory expansion?
2. Reveal original intent of the author?
3. Reader's response equivalent to original hearer's?
4. Good style for public reading?
5. Allows for interpretive ambiguities?

NRSV – New Revised Standard Version (1989) – American Mainline Protestantism with ecumenical orientation. Tries to be very close to original grammatically; gender-inclusive; archaic expressions eliminated. This is the standard text in English-speaking biblical scholarship. Several good Study Bibles: I recommend the New Interpreter's Study Bible (Abingdon Press); excellent Introductions and notes by ecumenical scholars. There are others.

NABRE – New American Bible Revised Edition (1990, 2010) – American Roman Catholic translation with ecumenical orientation. Official text of American RC church. Also close to original language and structure. See especially *The Catholic Study Bible*, 3rd ed., Oxford U. Press, 2016; 2nd edition, 1990. Excellent Reading Guides, Introductions, and notes. There are various others.

NJB – The New Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday, 1985. Related to French Catholic translation. Useful notes and cross-references. Elegant language; great for comparison to more "literal" translations.

NIV – New International Version – 1973-1978. Extremely popular among Evangelical Christians. The work of conservative evangelical scholars. Resistant to gender-neutral language. Many different study bible editions geared to various demographics.

CEB – The Common English Bible – 2010. A Protestant "response" to NIV. Each book the work of a single translator, then reviewed by colleagues, reviewed for reading level (7th grade), and readability. Inclusive, readable, contemporary.

ESV – 2001 – "essentially literal" translation/revision based on the RSV. Growing popularity.

KJV and NKJV – elegant language but not always based on best textual tradition

The Message – paraphrase