



WHICH BIBLE TRANSLATION?

A REVIEW OF FIVE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS



By Dr. Todd Beall

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Editor's Note: *The purpose for republishing this article is to give an irenic and scholarly presentation of the strengths and weaknesses of popular Bible versions.*

In this article we will review some of the more popular Bible translations used by evangelicals today: the King James Version (KJV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), the Living Bible (LB), the New International Version (NIV), and the New King James Version (NKJV). Our review will focus on 1) the translation technique used (formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, or paraphrase) . . . 2) the underlying text used for translation; 3) the accuracy of the translation; and 4) the readability of the translation.

KING JAMES VERSION

The KJV, first published in 1611, has been used by millions of English readers and is still the best-selling version today. Some individuals today regard the KJV as the one version inspired by God, and refuse to accept any other version as the Word of God. However, *no* human translation is free of errors, and the KJV is no exception. Many revisions of the 1611 KJV were made during the seventeenth century (correcting mistranslations, spelling errors, etc.) so that the KJV we now use is not identical to the 1611 version. In fact, since 1611, a printer's error was made in Matthew 23:24, where the verse reads "strain at a gnat" rather than "strain out a gnat": amazingly, this printer's error has not been corrected even in today's printings of the KJV.

The translation technique used in the KJV is formal equivalence. (Editor's Note: Formal equivalence is a word-for-word translation, translating the meanings of words and phrases in a more literal way, keeping literal fidelity.) Thus, the KJV is usually a faithful rendition of the text. It is based on the ben Chayyim (1524-25) edition of the Masoretic Text (MT) for the Old Testament, and the *Textus Receptus* (TR - derived largely from Erasmus' edition, which itself was based largely on several twelfth-century Greek manuscripts from the New Testament. Newer translations of the Bible have made use of the Leningrad Manuscript (A.D. 1008) for the Old Testament and numerous (over 5,000) Greek manuscripts not used in the preparation of the TR. Most modern translations (such as NASB and NIV) are based heavily on the relatively few early Greek manuscripts available (most notably, the fourth century uncials Sinaiticus and Vaticanus, as well as the Chester Beatty and Bodmer papyri), and use the Nestle-Aland critical text as their Greek text. Other scholars have argued, however, that the earliest manuscripts are not necessarily the best, and that the majority of manuscripts, though somewhat later, most probably represent the best text. Those scholars (admittedly in the minority) who believe that the Majority Text is superior have found themselves more closely allied with the KJV than with the other modern versions, because the TR is much closer to the Majority Text than the Nestle-Aland. In a nutshell, then, some will find the KJV inferior in the New Testament, because it is not based on the Nestle-Aland text, whereas others (including this reviewer) will find the basic text used in the KJV fairly good, since it is similar in most places to the Majority Text.

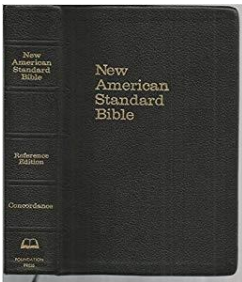
At once one of the major weaknesses and strengths of the KJV is its readability. The English language has changed considerably in the past three hundred and fifty years, and therefore many of the expressions used in the KJV are now obsolete.

For example, note "meteyard" (Lev. 19:35), "wist" (Josh. 8:14), "nitre" (Jer. 2:22), "sith" (Ezek. 36:6), "tabering" (Nah. 2:7), and "trow" (Luke 17:9). Some words have changed their meaning, such as "peculiar" (1 Peter 2:9), "conversation" (1 Peter 3:1), "prevent" (Ps. 119:147 - "I prevented the dawning of the morning") "suffer" (Matt. 19:14), etc. Verbal endings of *-eth* and *-est* only confuse the modern reader ("doeth," "sayeth," "goest," etc.), as do words such as "whither," "thereat," "therewith," "howbeit," "whereunto," etc. Such archaic language present difficulties in communication to many people today.

On the other hands, some reviewers of the KJV seem to overlooks its beauty of language. This beauty does not come from its archaic language, but rather from its style. The KJV from its inception was well suited for public reading. F.F. Bruce notes that the translators "had an instinctive feeling for good style" which manifests itself in highly rhythmical prose (*History of the Bible in English*, p. 109). An example is Isaiah 53:1 - "Who / hath believed / our report, / and to whom / is the arm / of the Lord /

revealed?” Similarly, Psalm 136:8 reads: “the sun / to rule / by day; / for his mer / cy endu / reth for e / ver.” To a large extent, modern versions do not measure up to the KJV in terms of its beauty of reading (combined with a faithfulness to the text).

NEW AMERICAN STANDARD BIBLE



The NASB, published in its entirety in 1971, represents a revision of the American Standard Version of 1901 (ASV). It was translated by a team of theologically conservative scholars whose aim was to produce a literal translation (“true to the original Hebrew and Greek” and “grammatically correct”) in contemporary English (“understandable to the masses”).

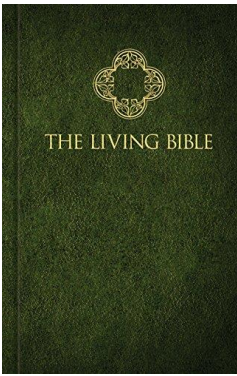
Most scholars would agree that the first goal of the NASB translators has been fulfilled. The translation has been called “the most literal, word-for-word translation on the market today” (*Christianity Today* [April 22, 1983] 13). When the NASB departs from a literal rendering of the text, a marginal note usually gives the literal translation. Particular attention was spent on the translation of Greek verbs in the New Testament.

When the present tense is used to describe a past event (the “historical present”), the translators use an English past, but mark the verb with an asterisk to alert the reader that the verb in Greek is actually present tense. To distinguish between the aorist and the imperfect tense (the latter, indicating continuous action in past time), the NASB uses the English past continuous (“he was going”). Often, the imperfect is translated in the NASB with an inceptive nuance (“They began questioning Him,” Mark 9:11). This nuance is quite proper in many cases, but many feel that the NASB has given too many imperfects an inceptive nuance. For example, consider Acts 3:5; Gal. 2:12; Luke 15:32; Matt. 20:17; and Mark 9:24.

The Old Testament text used for the NASB is Kittels third edition of *Biblia Hebraica*. The Dead Sea Scrolls are also utilized, especially in Isaiah. For the New Testament, the twenty third edition of Nestle’s critical text is utilized in most cases (see discussion above regarding critical vs. Majority text).

In my opinion, the main problem with the NASB is in the second objective: producing a readable version in contemporary English. Perhaps because of its literalness, the NASB does not read well. For example, consider Mark 4:2-3: “And He was teaching them many things in parables, and was saying to them in His teaching, ‘Listen to this!’” (for further examples, see J. Lewis, *The English Bible: From KJV to NIV*, pp. 193-97). The Old Testament fares better in this regard than the New Testament. As S. Kubo and W. Specht observe, “its stilted and nonidiomatic English will never give it a wide popular appeal” (*So Many Versions?*, p. 230). However, its literal approach to the text is commendable and it is thus eminently suitable for serious Bible study.

LIVING BIBLE



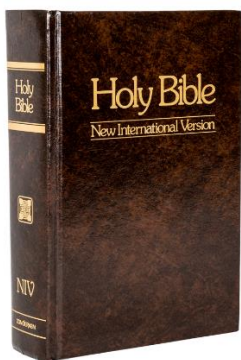
The LB is a paraphrase (not strictly a translation) completed by Kenneth Taylor in 1971. (Editor's note: A paraphrase is a restatement of the meaning of the writer or speaker using different words, especially to achieve greater clarity.) The LB was originally written to communicate the Scriptures to his own children, who did not understand the KJV he was reading to them. It is not based on Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, but rather on the English ASV of 1901. Widely publicized by Billy Graham and others, the LB has fast become a best seller.

Evaluated according to its original purpose, the LB succeeds admirably. It takes complicated passages of Scripture and renders them in good, contemporary English.

For example, the difficult verse Eph. 1:5 is rendered in LB: "His unchanging plan has always been to adopt us into His own family by sending Jesus Christ to die for us. And He did this because He wanted to!" The problem comes when people accept LB as a translation and not a paraphrase. In many places Taylor's paraphrase contains debatable interpretations. For example, the 'sons of God' of Gen. 6:2, 4 become "the evil beings from the spirit world" - a possible interpretation, to be sure, but not the only one. Often the LB is much too expansive, as in Amos 1:1, which says simply, "The words of Amos, who was among the shepherders from Tekoa" (NASB). LB has: "Amos was a herdsman living in the village of Tekoa. All day long he sat on the hillsides watching the sheep, keeping them from straying."

Again, if considered more as a commentary than a translation, the LB can be used with profit. Unfortunately, many are using it as the Word of God without bothering to check with other versions or the original languages. As J. Lewis aptly states, "the person who is unable to make detailed comparison of the paraphrases with the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek statements can never be certain that he is not being misled" (*The English Bible: From KJV to NIV*, p. 260).

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION



The NIV was produced in 1978 by a team of international scholars of conservative persuasion. Their goal was to produce an accurate translation that would be useful both for private study and for public worship. The NIV has been widely acclaimed in its brief history and has gained increasing acceptance among conservative readers.

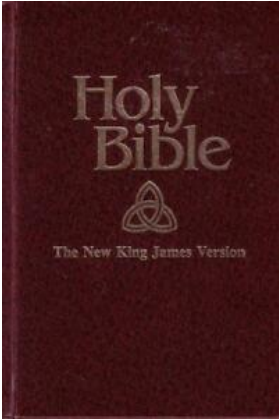
The NIV is not a word-for-word translation, but rather represents more a thought-for-thought, or dynamic equivalence translation (Editor's note: Dynamic equivalence is a sense-for-sense translation, translating the meanings of phrases or whole sentences, with readability in mind.) This means that there will be a greater element of interpretation in this translation than in the KJV or NASB, though not nearly as much as the LB.

The text underlying the NIV is similar to that of the NASB: Kittel's *Biblia Hebraica*, supplemented occasionally by the Dead Sea Scrolls and the versions, forms the basis for the Old Testament, while Nestle's text is the basic text used in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, the NIV resorts to

the Septuagint more often than the NASB, but not appreciably. A note indicating a departure from the Hebrew Masoretic Text is usually given.

In terms of style and readability, the NIV deserves high marks overall. It is one of the first translations which is faithful to the text and yet written in contemporary English. It is an excellent Bible for children, and in this reviewer's opinion, replaces the need for the LB since the NIV is just as readable and yet far more accurate than the LB. Yet its literary quality does not measure up to the KJV (though it is vastly superior to the NASB), and its theory of translation sacrifices literalness for thought "equivalence." Hence, its use as a study Bible is questionable, unless checked with other, more literal, versions.

NEW KING JAMES VERSION



The NKJV, published in 1982, was produced by a team of scholars whose goal was to update the language of the KJV while preserving its "majesty and rhythm." It is thus not an entirely new version, but follows closely the KJV in every detail. This is at once the great strength and weakness of the work.

Like the KJV, the NKJV is a literal translation. The Old Testament used is the 1077 Stuttgart edition of *Biblia Hebraica*; but the New Testament text inexplicably goes back to the TR, used by the KJV. This decision was apparently the publisher's, who wanted to ensure that the NKJV would be essentially the same as the KJV. But why include such passages as Acts 9:5b-6a and 1 John 5:7b-8a, which have no genuine manuscript support, simply

because they occur in the TR? This is the major weakness of the NKJV. The publishers should have used the Majority Text as the base for the NKJV, since it at least has some scholarly support behind it. A commendable feature of the NKJV is the inclusion of major New Testament variants from the TR by using the sigla (i.e. "symbol") "NU-Text" for the critical Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament . . . and the (symbol) "M-Text" for the Majority Text. At least this permits the reader to correct the deficiencies of the TR by substituting the appropriate reading in the notes (depending on one's text-critical viewpoint). The NKJV is to be commended for putting these textual notes in the New Testament. It is the only English translation which contains such a detailed textual comparison. I wonder, however, how many readers will pay attention to these notes.

In terms of style and readability, the NKJV retains almost all of the beauty of the KJV without its outdated language. In addition, "Thee" and "Thou" are uniformly replaced by "you," even when referring to God. These decisions help the NKJV to be eminently readable for today.

The basic problem with the NKJV is that the revisers did not go far enough. There are many places where the NKJV slavishly follows the KJV when a better translation is possible. And the translators should have used the Majority Text as their textual base rather than the Textus Receptus. Overall, however, the NKJV succeeds in retaining the good features of the KJV (literalness and readability) while updating the language into more readable English. It will be appreciated especially by advocates of the KJV and scholars who prefer the Majority Text over the critical text for the New Testament textual base. Despite its major flaws, it is this reviewer's translation of choice because of its literalness and readability. It is a Bible suitable both for public reading and private study.

Dr. Todd Beall served for many years as Associate Professor of Old Testament and Theology at Capital Bible Seminary.

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