

## **Bible Translation Day 2021**

### Characteristics of Good Bible Translations

Reading: 1 Cor 14:1-12

Back in 1966, the US Congress proclaimed that Sept 30 of each year would be marked as World Bible Translation Day. Today is the Sunday closest to that date, so today we are observing Bible Translation Day.

As it stands today, over 700 people groups have received the entire Bible in their language, and over 1500 have received the NT in their language. An additional 1200 people groups have parts of the Bible in their native languages. That's good, but it's not enough. Millions of people still today have not one verse of the Bible translated into their heart language. Our goal should be that the Bible is available to everyone on the planet in a language they understand.

We've had Bible translations in English from about 1380, when John Wycliffe produced the first complete English translation of the Bible. Since that time, there have been hundreds of English Bible translations, some very good, some fairly good, and some not so good.

How do we decide whether a translation of the Bible is very good, fairly good, or not so good? What characteristics should a good translation have? That's what I want to talk about today.

In a certain sense, we don't really have to worry about whether the translation we are using is good. For the most part, the translation you brought today or the one you use at home is probably just fine. If you are using one of the conservative Bible translations available today, you have a good one. So it's not something to be concerned about.

But let's set that aside for a moment, and just consider the questions—what are the characteristics of a good Bible translation? How do we decide if a translation is good or not? That's what we'll be considering this morning.

And it's good for us to consider these questions, because today, we have a multitude of versions and translations available, and we might wonder which of them is good, better, or best.

Before considering the marks of a good translation, let's consider the purpose of a Bible translation. The purpose of a Bible translation is to convert the Bible into languages other than those in which it was originally written.<sup>1</sup> The OT was originally composed mostly in Hebrew, and the NT was written in Greek. Most of us don't know how to read Hebrew and Greek, so we depend on English translations. The purpose of those translations is to convert the original documents into a form that we can read. Some translations do that very well, others do it fairly well, and some, unfortunately, do it quite poorly.

As we observe Bible Translation Day, let's consider several characteristics of good Bible translations.

- I. Good translations reflect the best original-language resources.
  - A. Our Bibles are translated from ancient languages—Hebrew, a little Aramaic, and Greek. It's important that our translations reflect those ancient MSS. The authority for the Word of God remains in the original language documents, and only secondarily in translations from them. Every translation is subject to correction and improvement to conform more closely to the sense and meaning of the original Hebrew and Greek words.<sup>2</sup>

The ultimate authority is not an English translation. The real authority remains in the original language documents, the ancient MSS of the Bible. If an English translation does not accurately reflect those ancient documents, then it's no good.

The London Baptist Confession of 1677, puts it this way:

The Old Testament in Hebrew (which is the native language of the people of God of old) and the New Testament in Greek (which at the time of the writing of it was most generally known to the nations) being immediately inspired by God, and by his singular care and providence kept pure in all ages, are therefore authentical [i.e., authoritative]; so as in all controversies of religion, the church is finally to appeal to them.

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<sup>1</sup> Britannica, The Editors of Encyclopaedia. "Biblical Translation". *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 20 Jan. 2017, <https://www.britannica.com/topic/biblical-translation>. Accessed 23 September 2021.

<sup>2</sup> Doug Kutilek, *As I See It*, v9#12.

In other words, what matters is how well a translation reflects the original language documents—the Hebrew and the Greek. We judge a translation by how closely it follows the ancient writings.

1. Back in the 1300s, John Wycliffe was the first to translate the entire Bible into English. But his translation was from Latin. *William Tyndale* was the first to translate the NT from the original Greek into English (1526).
  2. What would be better—translating from Latin into English or Hebrew and Greek into English? Obviously, we want a translation from the original language texts.
- B. The point is that the ultimate authority does not rest in any particular English translation, but in the original-language MSS. A translation is good only to the degree that it duplicates the original-language documents. You can't hold any one translation as the standard and evaluate other translations based on it. The basis of evaluation and comparison is always the original-language MSS—the Hebrew and the Greek. That's where God's word ultimately is preserved.

**Trans:** A good translation reproduces the original documents in English. We value English translations, but we recognize that the final authority is not an English translation. Final authority rests in the original-language documents.

## II. Good translations are accurate.

- A. What do we mean by “accurate”? Accurate means that the English translation conveys the same basic meaning as the original language texts conveyed. A good translation is as close as possible to the meaning of the words in the original language.
- B. What would an *inaccurate* translation look like?
1. It would *add* meaning not intended by the original authors.
  2. Or it would *delete* meaning intended by the original authors.
  3. Or it would *change* the meaning intended by the original authors.
  4. Or it would *obscure* the meaning intended by the original authors.

If a translation adds to, takes away from, changes or obscures the meaning, it's not accurate.

- C. We must admit that it's virtually impossible to translate from one language to another perfectly, without any nuance of meaning being lost in the process. It's almost impossible to transfer meaning from one language to another with 100% accuracy. Something is almost always lost in translation. So we don't have unrealistic expectations of a translation, but we can expect a translation to be essentially accurate. A good translation conveys the essential meaning of the text; it adequately transfers the meaning of the words from one language to another.

There are some words or phrases in the original biblical languages that do not have an easy or direct English equivalent. **E.g.**, τι εμοι και σοι—“What have I to do with thee?”

- D. As we think about accuracy, we should consider to what degree a translation is literal.

1. A literal (or formal) translation seeks to translate word-for-word. Here's the original language word, and here is the English equivalent. The translators convert the original language into English as directly as possible.

No translations are *completely* literal; translators have to adapt the words so they make sense in the new translation. E.g., we are all familiar with the italicized words in the KJV.

2. A dynamic (or functional) translation seeks to translate in a thought-for-thought way. In this case, translators are not concerned so much about the words themselves as they are about the meaning of the words. So they look at the meaning of a phrase or a sentence, and they seek to convey that meaning in English. They are not worried about following the exact wording of the original; they just want to get across the meaning of the words.

3. Example: (Jer 6:14)

NKJV (literal/formal): “They have also healed the hurt of My people slightly, Saying, ‘Peace, peace!’ When there is no peace.”

NEV (dynamic/functional): “They offer only superficial help for the harm my people have suffered. They say, ‘Everything will be all right!’ But everything is not all right!”

In order to produce a dynamic translation, the translators have to interpret the text. They are telling you what they think it means. Thus, dynamic, thought-for-thought translations are very interpretive; they give you the meaning, the sense, not the words.

Literal translations give you the words, and you have to interpret them for yourself. Dynamic translations give you the meaning—or at least the translators’ interpretation of the words.

- E. My recommendation is that you use a literal Bible translation as your normal Bible for personal devotions and for church use. I think it’s best to have a literal translation, one that converts the original language documents into English as directly as possible. I want access to the original words of the text, and I want to interpret them for myself. That’s what a literal translation provides.

Essentially literal translations include the KJV, NKJV, NASB, ESV.

- F. But I also suggest that you consult a dynamic translation to help work through passages that might be hard to understand in a literal translation.

1. Literal/formal translations are more concerned with accuracy than they are with readability. If the Hebrew and Greek were obscure, the English in a literal translation will also be rather obscure. Literal translations don’t try to smooth things out or clarify what is rough or unclear in the original language.

2. Dynamic/functional translations tend to be easier to read. They are more concerned with readability than with accuracy. They intentionally smooth things out and make things as clear as possible. I think they sometimes sacrifice accuracy to do that. Sometimes I disagree with their interpretations.

**Illus.:** If you read commentaries, you'll often find that the commentator disagrees with the NIV's interpretive translation.

3. Still, if you are struggling to understand a passage in a literal translation, it can be helpful to consult a dynamic translation, such as the NIV or the NLT. You could think of these translations more like a commentary. These translations are very interpretive.

**Trans:** Accuracy is a very important quality for a good translation of the Bible. We want to have direct access to the words God originally inspired. However, accuracy is not enough, because...

### III. Good translations are understandable.

1 Corinthians 14:7–9 *7 Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make a distinction in the sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? 8 For if the trumpet makes **an uncertain sound**, who will prepare for battle? 9 So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue **words easy to understand**, how will it be known what is spoken?*

This passage is referring to speaking or preaching the word, but the principle is the same for Bible translations. God communicates to us clearly. God's word, whether spoken or read, should be clear and understandable. Translations of God's Word should *not* "give an uncertain sound;" they should be "easy to understand."

- A. God intends His people to understand, accept, and obey His Word.

Neh 8:8 *So they read in the book in the law of God distinctly, and gave the sense, and caused [them] to understand the reading.*

One of the most important characteristics of a Bible translation is that it communicates clearly to the reader or hearer. You should be able to read the words of a translation and understand them without too much difficulty.

B. God communicated clearly and understandably.

Communication of God's message should be "easy to be understood" (1 Cor 14:9).

The original biblical languages were the common languages of the original audiences. The Greek of the NT is "koine," i.e., common, the language of the marketplace. The NT was written in a form of language that average people could read and understand. So if that were true of the original language MSS, it should be true of the translations we use today.

**Quote from the translators of the KJV:** But we desire that the Scripture ... may be understood even of the very vulgar. (i.e., common, average, even those not well educated)

**Quote:** The [KJV] translators set out to produce an easy to read and interesting Bible.... The key concern for the KJV translators was to have a good English translation, capable of being read by all.<sup>3</sup>

We may stumble over some of the wording in the KJV today, but when it was written, it was accessible and understandable to almost anyone who could read English. It was the vernacular, the vulgar/common style of reading and writing at the time. Average people could read and understand the KJV.

William Tyndale famously remarked that he hoped that the common plow boy would be able to read the word of God in his own tongue.

**Likewise,** Erasmus, the scholar who compiled the GNT used by the KJV translators, said: "I [desire] that even the lowliest women read the Gospels and the Pauline Epistles. And I [wish] that they were translated into all languages so that they could be read and understood not only by Scots and Irish but also by Turks and Saracens."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Tania Fenwick, "The King James Bible and the Importance of Textual Criticism," ed. Bryant G. Wood, *Bible and Spade* 24, no. 1–4 (2011).

<sup>4</sup> Desiderius Erasmus, "The Paraclesis," in *Christian Humanism and the Reformation: Select Writings*, ed. John C. Olin (New York: Harper & Row, 1965), 96.

Many scholars of the English language recognize the KJV as the pinnacle of English writing. The KJV has had more influence than any other work of the English language, including Shakespeare. To people in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, the KJV sounded very natural. But, of course, the KJV is over 400 years old, and the English language has changed drastically since the KJV was first published in 1611.

The Bible, as God's written Word, should aid edification, not hinder it. If a translation seems obscure and hard to understand, it's not really aiding the reader's edification. *Edification requires understanding.*<sup>5</sup> A good translation is understandable to the common reader. A good translation does not present the reader with unintelligible language.

**Trans:** A good translation is understandable, clear, and natural.

IV. Good translations are acceptable to a wide variety of Christians.

A. Theoretically, a Bible translation may be produced from the best original-language MSS, be accurate and understandable, but still not be accepted by many Christians. That is, Christians don't like it; they don't buy it; they don't use it personally or in church.

B. As I've mentioned, there are over 100 English translations available. How many of them are in use today? There are only about 20 English translations that people commonly use. That's still a lot of translations, but many translations—even some good ones—never gained wide acceptance and use by Christians or by churches.

One of the marks of a good translation is that many Christians appreciate it and use it personally and for church.

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<sup>5</sup> See Mark Ward's book *Authorized: The Use and Misuse of the King James Bible* (Lexham Press, 2018).

- C. On the other hand, popularity does not *guarantee* that a translation is good.
1. For example, the Septuagint is the translation of the OT into Greek. It was the Bible of the apostles and of the early church. But LXX has significant inaccuracies; in places, it's a very loose translation. It's more like a paraphrase in some places.
  2. The Latin Vulgate was the main version used in western civilization for about 1000 years, but it had many weaknesses and problems.
  3. More recently, Kenneth Taylor's paraphrase, *The Living Bible*, became hugely popular in America in the 1970s. But the LB is *not* an accurate translation; it's a free paraphrase done by one man. So the fact that a version of the Bible is popular doesn't make it good.
- D. Still, one of the marks of a good translation is that a wide variety of Christian people accept it. There is agreement among believers that certain Bible translations are good, and those are the translations that remain in publication and in wide use among Christians.
1. The KJV has been in constant publication since 1611. Millions and millions of copies of the KJV are out in the public and are used by Christians around the world. The KJV is still the most widely used translation of the Bible in the world.
  2. Other translations are gaining popularity. Today, the top-selling translation is the NIV, followed by the KJV, the NLT, the ESV, and the NKJV. These translations and a few others are acceptable to the majority of English-speaking Protestant Christians. People buy them, read them, memorize them, and use them in church.

E. Acceptability of a translation changes over time.

1. In the 1500s, the most acceptable English translation was the Geneva Bible. That's the Bible that the Puritans and the Pilgrims carried.
2. From the 1600s to the mid-1900s, the most acceptable translation for English speakers was the KJV. The KJV is still widely acceptable. Even those who prefer other translations still acknowledge the KJV as a monumental work of English translation.

It's not widely known that there was a good bit of hesitancy to accept the KJV when it first came off the press. People liked the Geneva Bible and were reluctant to give it up. The KJV became popular and widely used about 50 years after it was originally published. It gained wide acceptance over time and as it was revised. Up until recently, the KJV was the version used by most Protestants.

3. In our day, the NIV is very common and acceptable with many evangelicals; it's the #1 Bible sold today. The NASB and the ESV have become quite popular among conservative evangelicals. Many fundamentalists today are using the NKJV and the ESV is gaining popularity. And of course the KJV is very well acceptable for most people.
4. A Bible translation may be very good in a number of ways, but if it's not acceptable and used by many Christians, it's not a very good translation.
5. In fact, we should avoid translations that do *not* gain a wide acceptance within the Christian family. E.g., the NWT—from the JWs.

What are the characteristics of good Bible translations?

- ✓ They translate from the original language documents—the Hebrew and the Greek. The standard for judging a translation is how well it reproduces the original-language documents. True biblical authority resides in the ancient MSS.
- ✓ They translate accurately, conveying the sense of the original words. A good English translation gives us the very same info that the original readers had.
- ✓ They translate clearly, in an understandable way. The original materials were plain and understandable, and that’s what a good English translation provides. *There is no edification without understanding.* The translation should be easy to understand. If the language is obscure and awkward, it’s going to be of limited value. Read a translation you understand, not one that you stumble and trip over.
- ✓ They translate acceptably. A good number of Christian people accept the translation and use it personally and in church. A good translation sounds like the Bible, and the people of God recognize it as an accurate record of God’s word.

Do we have such translations available to us in English today? Yes, we are very blessed to have several good English translations available to us, both older, traditional translations and newer, modern-language translations. It’s a blessing to have access to translations that are word-for-word and those that help us understand the sense of the language.

My recommendation for a literal translation is the KJV, the NKJV, the NASB, or the ESV. These all provide an essentially word-for-word translation of the original language MSS. They give us the original words translated into English.

If you want to consult a dynamic, interpretive translation, the NIV or the NLT may be good options if you think of them more as commentaries than as proper translations. I’m not exactly recommending these versions, but they may be helpful in some cases. And be aware that they are “gender neutral.”

But the most important thing about having a good translation is that you read it, study it, memorize it, and obey it. Cf. James 1:22