

## Choosing the Right Bible

With so many Bibles available, how can you know which one is best for you?

**A**s a pastor, people often ask me, "Which Bible is the best one available?" The promotional literature for different translations and Bible formats describes the merits of each and often includes quotes and endorsements from well-known Christian leaders. Though the abundance of choices available can be confusing, it is possible to find just the right Bible for you by reducing the process to two basic issues. First, you must select the translation you want to read. Second, you must choose a format.

### Choosing a Version

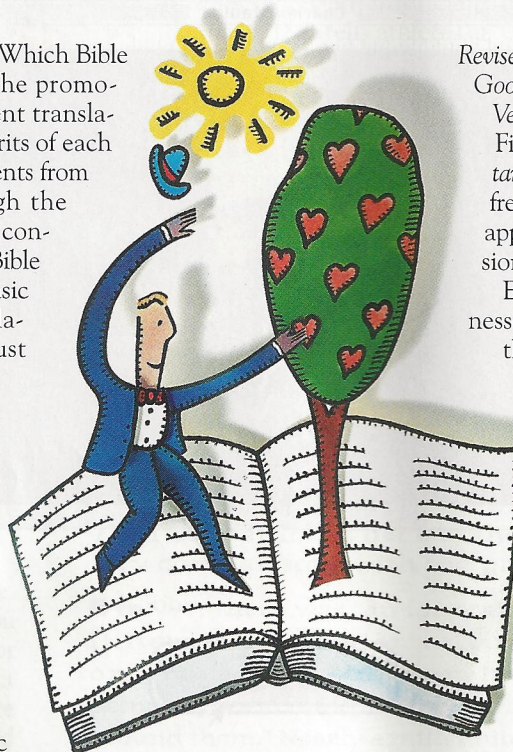
To select the best Bible for your needs, you need to know the differences between the various translations or versions. The Scriptures were originally written in Hebrew (most of the Old Testament), Aramaic (a few parts of the Old Testament), and Greek (the New Testament). The vast differences between these biblical languages and English have given birth to three basic theories of translation: formal/literal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, and free translation. In their book *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth*, scholars Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart define these translation theories (p. 35).

**Literal:** The attempt to translate by keeping as close as possible to the exact words and phrasing in the original language. . . . A literal translation will keep the historical distance intact at all points. [Historical distance means that the specific terms for weights, measures, money, and idiomatic phrases are retained even though they are not a part of contemporary English.]

**Free:** The attempt to translate the ideas from one language to another, with less concern about using the exact words of the original. A free translation, sometimes also called a paraphrase, tries to eliminate as much of the historical distance as possible.

**Dynamic Equivalent:** The attempt to translate words, idioms, and grammatical constructions of the original language into precise equivalents in [our] language. Such a translation keeps historical distance on all historical and most factual matters, but "updates" matters of language, grammar, and style.

Each translation method is represented by a number of popular versions. The *King James Version*, *New King James Version*, *Revised Standard Version*, and *New American Standard Bible* are all literal translations. The *New International Version*, *New Revised Standard Version*, *New Living Translation*, *New Century Version*,



*Revised English Bible*, *New Jerusalem Bible*, and the *Good News Bible* (also known as *Today's English Version*) are dynamic equivalent translations. Finally, *The Living Bible*, Phillips' *The New Testament in Modern English*, and *The Message* are free translations. While the versions using each approach have broad similarities, specific versions vary in wording within each category.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Generally the more free the translation, the easier it will read because its focus is on our language. However, the likelihood of incorporating an idea not present in the mind of the original writer increases. Literal translations tend to be more wooden in their wording, but are beneficial for specific word studies because of their attention to formal accuracy. However, literal translation can also render a text more difficult to read and make understanding the message more ambiguous. Dynamic equivalence translations try to incorporate the best of both the free and the literal approaches.

### What did the New Testament authors do?

When the New Testament writers quoted or alluded to the Old Testament, they had to use some form of translation because they were writing in Greek, not Hebrew. Sometimes they did their own translation of the Hebrew text. Most of the time they quoted the Septuagint, which was the Greek translation of the Old Testament that was used during New Testament times.

The translation work of the Septuagint demonstrates a great deal of variety. Some places are quite wooden and formal while others are very free and actually include material that is nowhere present in the Hebrew text. It is interesting to note that this is the work most often used when New Testament authors quoted the Old Testament.

### Choosing a Format

Once you have chosen a version, you can then focus your attention on the formats in which that version is available. The amount of studying you intend to do should guide you as you consider the features you need.

•**Study Tools.** Most study Bibles today offer a number of helpful features to help you understand the biblical texts better.

•**Study Notes.** Many study Bibles come with some kind of notes within the text or at the bottom of the page. You'll want to compare the amount and nature of the notes. Do they have a good combination of explanation and application? Both are necessary

to properly obey God's Word. In addition you'll want to evaluate introductions to each Bible book discussing issues such as author, date, recipients, theology, and important or challenging passages.

**Cross-reference Systems.** These list other passages that are related to the text you're reading. They may be found along the outside columns of the text or between columns of text. Most cross-reference systems enable you to find quickly verses that the author of a book is quoting.

Some Bibles also have topical systems for cross-referencing. These Bibles have a separate reference section in the back that lists other passages that address a certain subject, such as anger. If you want to do comparative study on different topics, you may want to consider a study Bible that includes some sort of topical reference system.

**Concordances.** Many Bibles also contain a concordance. A concordance is an alphabetical index of the principle words found in the biblical text and the passages in which they're located. Concordances enable you to find familiar passages for which you don't know the reference. If you know one or two words in a particular verse, you can look up those words in a concordance and find the reference. Concordances are also very helpful for topical studies. Even if you have a separate exhaustive concordance, it's helpful to have primary references included in your Bible.

**Maps.** The events of the Bible occurred in real places in the context of real cultural situations. Maps can help you develop a better geographic understanding of biblical lands. Maps are sometimes included within the text and sometimes located at the back of the Bible.

• **Target Audience.** A number of Bible formats target a specific group of readers, such as men, women, seniors, or teens. These Bibles will often include devotionals to help that particular group understand and apply the Bible to its unique needs.

• **Size.** If you simply want a Bible to read, you probably don't need study tools that will make it larger and bulkier. However, even many smaller Bibles include limited study features such as center-column cross-references, a few maps, and even a very limited concordance.

• **Readability.** The enhanced reference materials included with many Bibles have unfortunately resulted in smaller print. You should scan a couple of pages to evaluate how readable the text is. A growing number of study Bibles are available in large-print formats.

Consider also whether the extra features interfere with readability. Study notes,

cross-references, and testimonials can actually make the Bible less readable if they are poorly integrated into the text. Make sure that the format is not overly distracting.

• **Red-letter Editions.** The practice of putting Christ's words in red originally developed from those who considered His words "more inspired." While we know that "all Scripture is God-breathed," having Christ's words in red can be helpful to see the flow of Gospel passages at a glance.

• **Other Features.** Cover composition and indexing are other features you'll want to consider. Bibles come with leather, hardbound, or softbound covers. Leather (and imitation leather) covers generally last longer and wear better than their hard- and softbound cousins. They are also more expensive. If you know that this Bible will be your primary study Bible for many years, a leather cover may be worth the investment.

Indexed Bibles have recessed tabs with the names of the books of the Bible on them. These tabs make it easy to look up any book in the Bible quickly.

### Read it!

Selecting the right Bible can be confusing because of the abundance of options. But once you've selected a Bible, the most

important thing is to regularly read, study, pray, and meditate over the truths God has given us to guide our lives. ♦

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You may make up to 15 copies of this study to share with your friends or small group.

This article appears also in the book, *Discipleship Journal's Best Bible Study Methods*, published by Navpress, 2002. This book also includes articles by best selling author Rick Warren and accomplished evangelical scholars John Kohlenberger and Clinton Arnold.