

English Bible Translations: Making Some Sense of the Possibilities

By Bob Young

Recently, I was asked to write something about available English Bible translations. It is not possible to say something about every available English translation, so I will comment on the most popular translations. Because I recently received a question about the Lexham English Bible (LEB), I will also comment briefly on that work.

Today a vast number of different translations (versions) of the Bible are available, many electronically. One who is serious about reading and studying the Bible has more resources available than ever to make a good, informed decision about what translations to use. While it may be true that one can read almost any translation to learn what to do to go to heaven, that does not mean that all translations are created equal or are of equal value or accuracy.

I recognize that one may wish to read from different versions to grow in one's knowledge of the Word. I try to read the Bible—at least the New Testament—from a different version each year. Nevertheless, it is generally best to choose one Bible for serious Bible reading and study. What Bible should that be?

For preachers, the ideal is to work with the original language texts. That means Hebrew for the Old Testament and Greek for the New Testament. I am increasingly concerned about the number of quotations I hear in sermons from various English versions. I am concerned because in some cases the quotation from a popular version does not reflect the true teaching of the passage cited. I believe one reason for the increase in quotations from a wide number of Bible versions is that preachers lack of ability or the commitment to spend the necessary time to study and clearly understand the text. Some preachers wrongly assume that modern versions with modern language illustrate the meaning of words or the meaning of a verse. The best way to understand and communicate the meaning of a verse is to work with the original texts. Also, preachers will be best served to use in preaching the translation or translations that are most familiar to their congregation. This allows them to explain difficulties and to encourage the majority of the members to participate in the study or sermon.

Bible translations can generally be placed somewhere on a spectrum that moves from very (woodenly) literal, to some level of equivalency (with various “stops” from formal to dynamic), to the literary freedom reflected in paraphrases. In selecting a Bible for general use, one factor to be considered is the translation theory used in developing the translation. There are strengths and weaknesses in translation approaches, and one can easily research and understand the options (keywords related to translation theory: literal, formal equivalence, dynamic equivalence, paraphrase). Serious Bible study will usually be best served by a translation that exists toward the more literal end of the spectrum. For effective Bible study, one is seeking consistency of word usage. Other factors include overall accuracy and translational or doctrinal bias. The latter factor is usually mitigated when there is a committee of translators with good translational skills from a variety of religious backgrounds.

Statistics are available for the top 10 best selling Bibles in the U.S. for 2012.¹ Of the top 10, #9 is the Spanish 1960 Reina Valera. Depending on whether one measures sales volume by units or dollars, #10 is either New International Reader's Version (NirV) or The Message (MSG). The top five are the New International Version (NIV), King James Version (KJV), New Living Translation (NLT), New King James Version (NKJV) and English Standard Version (ESV). The next three (#6-8) include the New American Standard Bible (NASB), Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB), and Common English Bible (CEB).

- The NLT claims to be a new translation, but is really more accurately a reworking of Kenneth Taylor's paraphrased "The Living Bible" from the 1970s.
- The NIV seeks dynamic equivalence and maintains a high level of popularity, despite its weaknesses, translation inaccuracies, and the controversy surrounding it. It seems to be the general favorite, and its position is augmented by the inclusion of the Reader's Version in the top 10 based on unit sales.
- The KJV and NKJV, along with the ESV, are more literal (formal equivalence). The ESV claims to stand in the same translation lineage as the KJV, ASV, NASB, RSV, and NRSV. While the ESV continues to increase in popularity, it has not been able in over a decade of existence to replace the KJV or NKJV which are its main competitors in the formal equivalency group.
- The NASB has been around a long time and was updated in 1995. It is widely regarded as the most literally translated of 20th century English Bible translations.
- The HCSB is a product of numerous scholars, primarily Baptist, and the efforts of LifeWay publishers. It is hard to tell to what extent its popularity stems from its distribution system in a major denominational group. It would perhaps be even more popular with more marketing and general awareness of its existence.
- The CEB was completed in 2011. It seeks to provide a "common English" comfortable to at least half of all English readers. It was sponsored by an alliance of mainline denominational publishers (Disciples, Methodist, Presbyterian, Episcopal, United Church of Christ). A part of its popularity may be explained by its proclaimed position as a mainline translation.

Some of the decision concerning what English translation to use is personal preference. I did most of my Bible memorization in the KJV 40-50 years ago. I preached for 20 years from the KJV, but eventually moved to the NIV because a majority of my church members were using the NIV. More recently, I have a growing appreciation for the ESV. I appreciate and enjoy the NASB, but never adopted it as my personal preference.

¹ **2012 – Based on Dollar Sales**

New International Version-1, King James Version-2, New Living Translation-3, New King James Version-4, English Standard Version-5, Holman Christian Standard Bible-6, New American Standard Bible-7, Common English Bible-8, Reina Valera 1960-9, The Message-10

2012– Based on Unit Sales

New Living Translation-1, New International Version-2, King James Version-3, New King James Version-4, English Standard Version-5, Common English Bible-6, Holman Christian Standard Bible-7, New American Standard Bible-8, Reina Valera 1960-9, New International Readers Version-10

The Lexham English Bible

The Lexham Bible claims that it is not designed to be your primary translation but rather to complement your primary translation. Published by Logos Bible Software, it gives a literal rendering to help the student see the original text and to work with difficult texts, idioms, and grammatical issues. The translation started with an interlinear text. It is relatively literal and closely follows the original, showing the path from the original text to formal translation. It is readable, probably more so to those who are accustomed to reading and studying a more literal translation.

The Lexham Bible is an excellent tool for students whose Hebrew or Greek has gotten a little rusty since it provides helpful hints and reminders. It is most likely appreciated by those who have some awareness of the original languages or are motivated to study more deeply. I doubt that it will soon become a widely accepted and widely read English version in the lineage of literal translations.