

A PASTOR'S PERSPECTIVE on English Translations

“Reading a Good Translation” by Aaron Peer

What translation a believer should use is often a touchy subject in churches. Let's think this through carefully. I want to start with a foundational point. *Every translation is an interpretation of the text.* Translators have to address many issues before he or she even begins the process. English translation reflects thousands of choices that a team of scholars has made on your behalf. This interpretation is unavoidable. These choices are necessary because we are separated from the world of the Bible not only in its original language, but also its culture, time, and geography. Therefore, some interpretive work needs to be done to communicate across these barriers. Generally speaking, translators choose from one of three different philosophies. Each one has a different opinion on how many of interpretative choices they should make for the reader.

The first philosophy is **formal equivalence**. Such translations try to get *as close as possible to the original*, making *as few choices as possible*. These translations are often called **word-for-word** translations. The KJV, NAS, and more recently the ESV are examples of this type of translation. They seek to use similar words and grammatical constructions, interpreting just enough to make the text understandable in English. This philosophy puts a substantial amount of faith in the reader. Translators believe the reader should bridge the gap and make the choices rather than the translator. For instance, the KJV says that Adam knew his wife Eve. Someone who knows the original setting of the Bible knows that this is a euphemism for sexual relations, but the original meaning might be lost on a new believer. Therefore, this type of translation is good for someone who knows the ancient world fairly well.

The second philosophy is **dynamic equivalence**. These translations attempt to put the *original meaning* of the text into *understandable language*. These translations are often called **meaning-for-meaning** translations. The NIV and the TNIV are examples of this philosophy. They attempt to bridge the gap, while still retaining many words and phrases from the original. The interpretive choices make the translation more removed from the exact wording of the text, but also make it easier to read and understand. Therefore, this type of translation is good for reading in public or just for devotional reading.

The final philosophy is **paraphrase** or **free translation**. These translations try to *eliminate the need for readers to make choices at all*. These translations are often called **paragraph-for-paragraph** translations. The Message and the Living Bible are examples. This type of translation is good for non-believers who have no biblical background or believers who don't know the ancient world very well. It can also be a fresh perspective for more mature or knowledgeable believers as well. Basically, free translations end up being very readable and vibrant commentaries on the text.

So back to our original question: *Which translation should we use?* Well, they all have their value. Your reason and circumstance may serve as the best guide to choosing. If you are studying deeply, maybe the ESV or the NAS is best. If you are reading or reciting the text in public or just want to casually read it in devotions, the NIV would be a good option. And if you are looking for a fresh perspective or are handing a Bible to a non-believer or new Christian, perhaps the Message would be a good choice. In any case, what is most important is that you read the Bible.

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