Which Bible Translations Are Best?

A veritable explosion in 20th-century Bible translations is occurring. Some are excellent. Some are tragic. Explained here is the way to choose good translations.

In the nearly five years since we last published an article on this subject, two new translations of the Bible have been completed.

The *New King James Version* — called the *Revised Authorized Version* — was published by Thomas Nelson in 1982. And a new translation of *The Holy Scriptures* was completed the same year by the Jewish Publication Society of America.

God, of course, speaks to us through His prophets and apostles. And we understand the words of the prophets and apostles, whose voices have been recorded in ancient languages, in translation. But who is to translate?

Translation not now a Church of God function

God could have sent holy scribes inspired to translate the words into modern languages for us. But He did not.

God, in effect, has decreed that uninspired men must translate His message.

In a very real sense God is testing the scholars of this world to see how careful they are in translating His Word. He is not now asking His Church to do scholarly translations. But He is testing us to see how careful we are in reading and choosing their translations of the Bible!

But why so many translations of the Bible?

Living languages change with the passing of generations. King James I of England did not speak the same style of English that U.S. President Abraham Lincoln spoke 2½ centuries later. And we do not speak in the style of either today. That is why the language of the *Authorized* or *King James Version* of the Bible seems archaic. And the language of the *Revised* or *American Standard Version* produced at the turn of the century seems too literal for easy reading.

Another reason for continued translating is the explosion in archaeological and linguistic knowledge. Even in Bible times Hebrew words changed. Moses and Jeremiah did not use Hebrew words with the same nuance of meaning. And Noah's vocabulary was so different that the kind of wood the patriarch used in building the ark is still obscure (Genesis 6:14).

Through archaeological discoveries and developments in linguistic skills it has become possible to recover the meaning of hundreds of words that were obscure to earlier translators.

Compare, for example, the muddy word-for-word translation of Isaiah 66:17 in the *Authorized Version* of 1611: "They that sanctify themselves, and purify themselves in the gardens behind one tree in the midst, eating swine's flesh, and the abomination, and the mouse, shall be consumed together, saith the Lord" with the vigorous rendering — based on translating meaning for meaning — in *The New English Bible* of 1970: "Those who hallow and purify themselves in garden-rites, one after another in a magic ring, those who eat the flesh of pigs and rats and all vile vermin, shall meet their end, one and all, says the Lord."

A major difference in style — a graphically clearer meaning! Is it any wonder that the present generation demands something more than the *King James Version?*

20th-century explosion in translation

It was 2¾ centuries before the English-speaking world recognized the need for revising the *Authorized Version* of 1611. But the resultant British *Revised Version* of 1881-1885 was itself revised in less than 20 years as the *American Standard Version*.

Then came the *Revised Standard Version* of 1946-1952. Its style was so modern — its textual changes so many — that it was vehemently attacked. Yet, looking back 35 years, it seems as if the *Revised Standard Version* — based on the old way of translating, with word-for-word correspondence — is formal and conservative.

To fill the need of modern language versions at different educational levels, scholars in Britain and the United States, with English-speaking colleagues from around the world, have produced eight major modern language versions in 30 years.

The Jerusalem Bible edited by Catholic scholars in Britain appeared in 1966. It is based on the new way of translating, meaning for meaning. *The New English Bible*, also based on the new way of translating, is a

Protestant British version that appeared in 1970.

U.S. Catholics issued *The New American Bible* the same year. It is based on the old way of translating, but uses a vigorous vocabulary. The *New American Standard Version* appeared about the same time, published for the Lockman Foundation.

The American Bible Society published in 1976 *Today's English Version.* Its simple English reads like a newspaper and is designed to reach millions of the lesser educated and those who speak English as a second language.

In 1978, the *New International Version* appeared. It is a transdenominational evangelical Protestant work, underwritten by the New York International Bible Society. The other two major modern translations were mentioned in the beginning paragraphs of this article.

This list does not include the dozens of partial or complete translations of the Bible accomplished by individual scholars in the last 100 years. Nor does it include the issuance of *The Holy Scriptures,* an earlier, major translation by Jewish scholars of the Hebrew Scriptures into English, published in 1917.

Choosing among many

In deciding among Bible translations, people usually ask, Which *one* should I choose?

This is the wrong question to ask! It is never wise to use just *one* translation. We should ask, instead, which versions or translations are the most carefully worded? Which the most effective for reading? Which preserve the original texts most accurately?

And then there is the cost of buying different translations. This is easiest to answer. If you cannot afford a new copy, go to a used bookstore. There are almost always different versions available inexpensively.

Now to the other questions. The most carefully worded Bible should be used for study, whenever possible. But that does not mean the most carefully worded Bible is always the most accurate textually or the most readable. Translation is an art, not an exact science. It involves style of expression and choice of text. Translators may be skilled stylists in language or excellent linguists, but not necessarily both.

So, which *Bibles* should we *first* choose? Notice the use of the plural — *Bibles.* Begin your reading or study with a minimum of two versions as a safeguard. You may — and should — add others as the need arises, having altogether perhaps seven or eight translations.

The wisdom of experience would require that, for older readers, the first two should be the *Authorized* and the *Revised Standard* versions. Both are issued in expensive and inexpensive editions. Concordances are available for both.

The *Authorized Version,* prepared during the reign of King James I, set the standard for style in the English language. It is still the most widely used for this reason. Younger readers may prefer to substitute the *New King James (Revised Authorized Version.)*

The *Revised Standard Version* of 1946-1952 is a careful translation. It is an authorized revision of the *American Standard Version,* published in 1901. The text from which it is translated differs significantly from that of the *Authorized* or *Revised Authorized Version.*

By contrast all other recent Bibles are completely new translations into modern English. They are not revisions, but fresh translations from the original languages.

Comparing translations for meaning

The worth of a Bible translation is to be found in its precision and accuracy of meaning. The most logical verses to use as a test are Genesis 1:1-2.

The beginning verses of any translation of the Bible reflect the character of the whole translation. Why? Because the first two verses of Genesis in Hebrew are so full of meaning, yet stated so succinctly! How a translator words these two verses reflects his biblical understanding as much as his knowledge of grammar.

In fact, the word construction in Genesis 1:1-2 is such that *two* translations are possible grammatically. But only one of the two translations gives a correct meaning. The other contradicts the plain statement of Isaiah 45:18: "For thus says the Lord, who created the heavens (he is God!). who formed the earth and made it (he established it; he did not create it in a chaos, he formed it to be inhabited!)."

With this excellent translation from the *Revised Standard Version,* let us turn, now, to the different versions, and see how the translators rendered the meaning of Genesis 1:1-2.

"In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth" is the wording of the *Revised Authorized* or *New King James Version* and most other versions.

Now see how verse 2 is rendered in the *Authorized Version:* "And the earth was without form and void." The *New American Standard Bible:* "And the earth was formless and void." The *Revised Standard:* "The earth was without form and void" — deleting *and* at the beginning of the sentence. The *Revised Authorized Version* reads similarly.

The Jewish translation of 1917, followed by the Catholic *Jerusalem Bible* and the *New International Version,* clarify the meaning further: "Now the earth was formless and empty." The use of the word *now* connotes a time distinct from "the beginning." The *New International Version,* in addition, footnotes the verb *was* indicating another possible translation: "Now the earth *became* formless and empty."

Each of these versions is a sound translation, essentially accurate, and in keeping with the revelation of Isaiah 45:18.

Now contrast the preceding with the following misleading interpretations.

"In the beginning, when God created the universe, the earth was formless and desolate" (*Today's English Version*). The Catholic *New American Bible:* "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth, the earth was a formless wasteland." *The New English Bible:* "In the beginning of creation, when God made heaven and earth, the earth was without form and void." The new Jewish translation: "When God began to create the heaven and the earth — the earth being unformed and void . . . ".

Each of these translations, though grammatically possible in Hebrew, is unsound and contradicts Isaiah

45:18. When left with a choice, these translations chose the wrong alternative because they assumed the creation began in chaos.

Two other widely used translations — James Moffatt's and Smith-Goodspeed's — similarly err in rendering Genesis 1:1-2 into English.

Now look at the New Testament — Mark 1:1. The *Authorized Version* reads, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." That is a correct translation. The *Revised Version* and the *Revised Standard* share the same wording.

The Catholic *New American Bible* effectively reads, "Here begins the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God." *The New English Bible* has the same effective wording. These are all direct and correct translations of the original Greek.

Contrast these with the following interpretations: "The beginning of the gospel *about* Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (*New International Version*). "The beginning of the Good News *about* Jesus Christ, the Son of God" (*Today's English Version*). These translations imply the book of Mark is Mark's good news *about* Jesus Christ. This is a total error.

Mark wrote about the good news Jesus brought — the message *of* Jesus Christ that the Father delivered to Him for mankind. That good news is about the Kingdom of God that is about to break into world affairs to bring peace to the earth. That good news includes the proclamation that Jesus is the Messiah, but it is much more. It is consequently wrong to translate Mark 1:1 "*about* Jesus Christ."

Granted, the grammar of the Greek *Iesou Christou* allows for both *of* and *about* as possible translations. But the more natural meaning is *of* — and Mark 1:14 proves that *of* is the only proper translation. For we read in the *New International Version* what that Gospel is:

"After John was put in prison, Jesus went into Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God. 'The time has come,' he said. 'The kingdom of God is near. Repent and believe the good news!' " (Mark 1:14-15). The Gospel of the Kingdom of God is the good news Jesus brought. It was not Jesus' message about Himself or Mark's message about Jesus!

Because of the way Mark 1:1 is translated, we put the *Revised Standard Version* ahead of the *New International Version* for accuracy.

Comparing translations for style

Style and meaning are both essential in a great translation. The *Authorized Version*, thought to be very modern in its day, possessed lasting stylistic qualities. It shaped English literary expression for two centuries. But changes in pronouns and verb endings, not to mention sentence structure variations through the impact of modern advertising, have required new 20th-century translations.

The *Revised Version*, completed at the close of the 19th century and noted for its accuracy of meaning, was quickly outdated in style. It used archaic verb endings and pronouns that had long since fallen into disuse in daily speech.

The *Revised Standard Version* removed both archaic verb endings and pronouns, except in addressing the Deity. The *New King James Version* even modernized pronouns referring to the Deity.

No other modern-language version is more forceful than *The New English Bible*. But what it gains through style and clarity it often loses in precision and accuracy. It is a reading Bible, but never one's first choice as a study Bible.

In this it parallels the modern English Catholic *Jerusalem Bible* and the James Moffatt translation. Both are excellent Bibles for reading and for comparison, but always as secondary study aids.

The *Jerusalem Bible* wonderfully translates Matthew 24:22 thus: "And if that time had not been shortened, no one would have survived." The Scotsman Moffatt translated: "Had not those days been cut short, not a soul would be saved alive." For nearly 60 years the Moffatt translation has stood the test of effectiveness.

In choice of expression the *Revised Standard Version* is more traditional and less clear: "And if those days had not been shortened, no human being would be saved." The word *saved* is a correct translation, but the meaning is not as clear as "saved alive" or "survived."

Compare these translations with the less-than-fortunate attempt of *Today's English Version* ("The Good News Bible"): "But God has already reduced the number of days; had he not done so, nobody would survive." Not every modern-language version succeeds equally! This oversimplified "Good News Bible" is hardly more successful in other passages.

Among the better modern-language translations by single scholars — we call these "translations" rather than "versions" — is William F. Beck's *The New Testament in the Language of Today*, published in 1963. A Lutheran translation, it has properly been characterized as "a refreshing translation in simple, precise English."

Two other modern-language Bibles have gained vogue. One, *The Amplified Bible*, was published in 1965. It is an attempt to present various possible translations within the English text — hence the title *Amplified*. The result is a translation that is redundant, tedious and too often not accurate. Example: "In the beginning God (prepared, formed, fashioned) *and* created the heavens and the earth" (Genesis 1:1). That is not a valid method of presenting a translation.

The second, *The Living Bible, Paraphrased*, was completed in 1971. It is a readable paraphrase in idiomatic present-day English, but it is not a translation. It is full of imaginative details not supported by the biblical text. It cannot be relied upon! And it should not even be compared to legitimate translations.

Far better to spend some time with Ferrar Fenton's translation of the Bible or Richard Weymouth's or Kenneth Wuest's translations of the New Testament. Or to read *The Modern Language Bible* (a new and improved edition of the Berkeley translation).

Comparing translations for textual differences

A Bible translation may be accurate, but that does not necessarily make the translation correct. For the correctness of the reading is still dependent on the kind of text type chosen for translation.

For example, the scholars under King James who prepared the *Authorized Version* "translated out of the

original [Hebrew and Greek] tongues and with the former translations diligently compared and revised." But when the *Revised Version* was prepared, a whole new world-view of the Greek text of the New Testament had occurred.

The *Authorized Version* relied heavily upon the traditional Greek New Testament text in circulation in Byzantium — the area of Greece and Asia Minor. But a significant number of passages derived from the Latin text of the New Testament were ill-advisedly retained because people were familiar with the Latin Bible, not the Greek, before the 15th century.

Over the past four centuries large numbers of early New Testament manuscripts and fragments with many variant readings have been discovered in Egypt and elsewhere in the Mediterranean world. Modern scholars prefer to use them for study of the text of the New Testament because of their age. The Greek-speaking church in Asia Minor and Greece has over the centuries maintained a standard New Testament text. The differences are major.

The Greek manuscripts in circulation in Greece and Asia Minor — the areas where Paul preached and to which Paul and Peter and John wrote — preserve major passages of the New Testament not found in early manuscripts from Egypt and elsewhere. These passages include, for example, John 7:53 to 8:11, the account of the woman taken in adultery; Mark 16:9-19; Luke 22:19-20, the Passover account; 24:12, Peter's visit to the tomb; and Acts 18:21 and 24:6-8.

These six passages, which in the Greek Church are regarded as Scripture, are only a small part of the story. Altogether, the *Revised Standard Version,* following manuscripts from Egypt, deletes about 85 other passages, placing them in footnotes.

In addition it deletes more than 650 words, phrases or sentences without any indication in footnotes. The *Revised Standard Version* also includes more than 430 textual variations from the standard text found in the Greek Byzantine world of Greece and Asia Minor.

It is inconceivable that the Greeks, among whom Paul preached and to whom Peter and John also wrote — these Greeks, who kept the Passover for centuries on the 14th of Nisan — could be mistaken about their New Testament that they read each week.

And it is inconceivable that the Hellenized Egyptians — who were among the first to abandon the Sabbath and adopt Sunday, who abandoned Passover on the 14th of Nisan and adopted a Sunday-morning communion — it is inconceivable that these people carefully and accurately preserved the New Testament without alteration!

Let's put the two major text types to a test. The *Authorized* or *King James Version* and the *Revised Authorized* or *New King James Version* preserve the reading in Mark 1:2-3 of the manuscripts in circulation among the Greeks to this day. The *Authorized Version* reads: "As it is written *in the prophets,* Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee. The voice of one crying in the wilderness. Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight."

All other modern English versions, with one exception, adopt the manuscript reading of Egypt, popularized in the last century by Brooke Westcott and Fenton Hort. It reads, in the *Revised Standard:* "As it is written *in Isaiah the prophet,* 'Behold I send my messenger before thy face, who shall prepare thy way; the voice of one crying in the wilderness: Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.' "

Which is correct? Is it written in "Isaiah the prophet" or "in the prophets"? Look at the footnote in the *Revised Standard Version.* Mark 1:2 is a quote from Malachi 3:1; Mark 1:3 is from Isaiah 40:3.

The *Authorized* or *King James Version* is correct. The Greek-speaking Church has preserved this text correctly. The quotations are "written in the prophets" — Malachi and Isaiah. Only one of the two quotes is from Isaiah.

A hasty or ignorant scribe thought he could improve Mark's text. He recalled that the quote in verse 3 is from Isaiah, so he hastily assigned the entire quotation to what is "written in Isaiah the prophet." He was wrong. He tampered with the text.

This example is strong reason for not discarding the *King James Version.*

Modern-language translations alone are not sufficient. They may be excellent translations, making outdated expressions clear. But they must be compared with the English text of the *Authorized* or *King James Version* and the *Revised Authorized* or *New King James Version.*

And for the Old Testament, it would be valuable to compare modern language translations by Christian scholars with the 1917 version of *The Holy Scriptures* by Jewish scholars, rather than their more recent translation. □