

How to Choose a Reliable Bible Version (Part 1)

This is the first article of two on choosing a good version of the Bible for use in personal study. The study has been prompted by the numerous questions I have been asked regarding which versions are the most reliable. The problem of choosing a Bible has been compounded in the past twenty or so years by the multitude of versions which continue to roll off the presses. At one time Bible versions were sought after on the basis of accuracy and faithfulness to the original languages, but now it seems that ease of reading, contemporary language (including slang in some versions), and even targeting a particular age group, or other segment of the population are the selling points. Since most Christians have never studied Koine Greek or ancient Hebrew, identifying a few solid rules of thumb should help. This installment, although not exhaustive, will examine some things to be avoided and the next will examine some important things to look for in choosing a reliable Bible version. Since this article is not being written on a general level, it will not cover the problem of choosing manuscripts. Read introductions, prefaces and forwards in various versions and consult trustworthy reviews to help with the following:

1. Avoid versions which are specific to particular denominations, or which target particular age groups or other segments of the population. The Bible, as it is faithfully translated from its original languages, is cross cultural and written on about a ninth grade comprehension level. The serious, diligent, literate student will experience little trouble in comprehension if he realizes that understanding the Bible's message is not an instantaneous occurrence, but will result only from patient, persistent, methodical study. Versions targeting youth are examples here. Denomination specific versions include the New World Translation and the Jerusalem Bible.

2. Avoid versions which identify themselves as paraphrases. This is the taking of a statement by one person and rendering it according to understanding of another person in an attempt to make it more readable, or understandable. Paraphrases make little effort to remain faithful to the original languages, relying rather upon the understanding of the paraphraser, hence they are subjective and unreliable. The Living Bible is an example of a paraphrased version.

3. Avoid versions which identify their dominant philosophy of translation as dynamic equivalence. This is a "thought for thought" approach; an attempt at taking a word or sentence in one language and rendering it into another language while preserving the perceived meaning of the original text, but making little or no effort to translate word for word. A similar objection to that of the paraphrase is warranted here, because "thought for thought" relates what the translator *thinks* the original writer *intended* to say, making the results subjective and more likely to be filtered and altered by the translator's theology. While all responsible translators recognize that a certain amount of dynamic equivalence is necessary, primarily due to differences in sentence structure and grammar, it is more desirable to (a) translate word for word, remaining as faithful to the original languages as possible, (b) using dynamic equivalence only where structure or grammar demand it, (c) translating what the original writer says, rather than what it is thought that he meant, (d) leaving the Bible student to make up his own mind as to the meaning. The New International Version is an example of this type of version.

4. Avoid versions which incorporate commentary. While commentaries and other study aids are useful in clarifying difficult passages, they should be kept separate from your Bible and resorted to only when a diligent study of the context and an examination of other texts relating to the same subject prove unfruitful. The danger of commentaries becoming crutches to the novice or lazy student is ever present, even more so when incorporated into a Bible version, which lends psychological credibility to them. The temptation to rely upon commentary rather than upon scripture, prayer, obedience and the student's own reasoning ability is often too great. Scofield, Ryrie and the NIV study Bibles are examples here. Versions which include links or references to parallel passages, or other occurrences of the same topic are not objectionable since they aid in topical and contextual studies.

Randall F. Matheny
PO Box 911, Warren, PA 16365