

A Discussion of Bible Translations and Biblical Scholarship

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Most biblical scholars consider the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) to be the all-around best translation. Although there are a few other decent translations available these days, this one is fairly “literal” while maintaining a natural English style, and is the most accurate over all. “Literal” basically means translated “word for word” as much as possible. The guiding principle of a “literal” translation is “As literal as possible, as free as necessary.” The current and more correct scholarly terminology is “formal equivalency.” The other major philosophy of translating used to be known as “dynamic” but is now called “functional equivalency.” While every translation is an interpretation, “dynamic” or “functional equivalence” translations more freely paraphrase the Hebrew and Greek, proceeding “thought for thought” rather than “word for word,” often turning a few words in the source language into many in the target language. Sometimes this is necessary due to the unique idioms found in different languages, but it increases the risk that a translator will intentionally or unintentionally introduce his or her biases into the translation. In practice; it has also reduced the range of possible meanings found in the original. More literal translations, technically known as “formal equivalence” translations, are preferred by most biblical scholars.

Also, there is a difference between academic Study Bibles that have a lot of explanatory footnotes and other helps pertaining to historical and literary issues, and most other Study Bibles on the market. Most are devotional Study Bibles, a type that concentrates on doctrinal and/or personal and spiritual matters. If you choose to purchase a Study Bible for biblical studies and related courses at Missouri State, you will benefit most from one that mainly concentrates on the kinds of issues that will be encountered in academic courses. How an academic approach to the Bible affects your spiritual life is beyond the scope of a religious studies course in a state university, though I am happy to discuss such issues through email and during office hours.

The ranking below is not intended to suggest that you should read only one translation, the NRSV. Serious academic Bible study always involves comparing several good translations. But I am suggesting that if you care about accuracy in translation—reading something close to what the authors actually said as opposed to what some translators wish they had said—you should use one of the higher ranked choices as your everyday Bible.

Best Choice for Serious Bible Study:

The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). The NRSV is an extremely accurate translation, faithful to the earliest and best manuscripts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament (HB/OT) and the Greek New Testament (NT). It is fairly literal and is the translation most often quoted by a wide variety of biblical scholars (Evangelicals, Catholics, Mainline Protestants, Jews, secular historians, etc.) in the top academic publications. It uses gender inclusive language where the grammar and/or context supports it. If you want it in a Study Bible edition, the best choices are *The HarperCollins Study Bible* (2nd ed.) or *The New Oxford Annotated Bible* (3rd ed.). Both try to present the best of historical-critical biblical scholarship in an objective way. The more concise and economical *Access Bible* from Oxford is also a good academic Study Bible.

Acceptable Second Best Choices for Serious Bible Study:

1) **The Revised Standard Version (RSV).** The RSV is an excellent fairly literal translation, but it is often gender inaccurate and retains some of the 17th century English of the King James Version.

2) **New English Translation (NET).** The NET Bible is an excellent fairly literal internet-based translation that attempts to be gender accurate. It includes thousands of helpful study footnotes that are mostly very scholarly, though sometimes reflecting a conservative Christian bias.

Acceptable Third Best Choices for Serious Bible Study:

The following translations are fairly accurate, but clearly betray doctrinal biases here and there. E.g., some mistranslate a few passages in the HB/OT to “Christianize” them. Also, most Study Bible editions of these translations are very biased toward some particular theological viewpoint and cannot be recommended for academic use, e.g., the *Zondervan Study Bible*.

1) **The New American Bible (NAB)**. The NAB is a fairly literal translation commissioned by the Catholic Church.

2) **The New American Standard Bible (NASB)**. The NASB is popular with many fundamentalist and ultra-conservative Christian scholars because it is *extremely* literal, even to the point of not sounding very natural at times. Strangely, however, even when the Greek original is grammatically gender inclusive, and would have to be translated that way to be literally accurate, it often uses masculine pronouns instead.

3) **The English Standard Version (ESV)**. The English Standard Version was published by some fundamentalist and ultra-conservative Christian scholars who were dissatisfied with the inaccuracies of the New International Version (see below) and other dynamic/functional equivalency translations, but also unhappy with the excessive literalism of the NASB. Their solution was to revise the RSV, which they mostly liked since it was fairly literal and in the KJV stylistic tradition, but “correct” the places where an accurate translation of the Hebrew and Greek had made the RSV unpopular with many conservative Christians. Since most of these types of “corrections” are in the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament portion, I consider it acceptable for a New Testament course.

Unacceptable for Serious Bible Study:

The following translations have serious shortcomings of various *sorts*.

[I'll add that I still personally refer to these versions, but for serious Bible Study Mark Given, the author of this article, contends that these are essentially unacceptable].

1) **The King James Version (KJV) or The New King James Version (NKJV)**. The KJV was a great literal translation in its day, but that day was the 17th century! Many earlier and more accurate biblical manuscripts were discovered afterwards and most modern translations—including those produced by very conservative Christians—are based on them. The NKJV updates some of the 17th century language, and I like its literalness, but most of the time it relies on the same late and less accurate manuscripts that were available to the KJV translators in the 17th century.

2) **The New International Version (NIV)**. The NIV was the first moderately “dynamic” translation to achieve immense popularity, especially among Evangelicals. It has its merits, but the departure from literal translation theory allowed some phrases and sentences of the Hebrew and Greek to be more paraphrased than translated. This contributed to several inaccurate and misleading translations. Dissatisfaction with the NIV among some fundamentalist and other very conservative Christian scholars was one of the reasons they brought out the ESV (see above).

3) **Today's New International Version (TNIV)**. The TNIV is a real improvement on the NIV (see above). Although it is still a little too periphrastic from time to time, some of the highly questionable renditions have been corrected, and it attempts to be gender-accurate. However, it still has problems. As a specialist in Paul, the mistranslations in Galatians alone are serious enough to make it impossible for me to recommend this translation in good conscience.

4) **All mainly “dynamic/functional equivalency” versions (TEV, CEV, NLT, Amplified, The Message, etc.)**. These versions, to varying degrees, often read more like paraphrases or commentary than translations. The least objectionable are the American Bible Society's TEV (Today's English Version) and the CEV (Contemporary English Version). More serious problems are found in the NLT (New Living Translation). Most troubling, according to Given is *The Message*, because of its poor accuracy.