



BIBLE FOUNDATIONS

How to Compare Bible Translations

Why Bible Translations Differ and How to Compare Them Responsibly

The Short Answer

Bible translations sometimes use different English words because translating from one language into another requires choices. The Old Testament was written primarily in Hebrew, with portions in Aramaic; the New Testament was written in Greek. Some translations stay closer to original wording and structure, while others give greater priority to natural contemporary English. Often several English renderings can faithfully communicate the same underlying text.

READ → COMPARE → NOTICE → INVESTIGATE → CONTEXT → CONCLUDE

Read the passage. Compare several translations. Notice meaningful differences. Investigate why they differ. Let context guide understanding. Conclude only what the evidence supports. Translation comparison should send the reader back to Scripture - not create anxiety about whether Scripture can be understood.

Nehemiah 8:8 · Psalm 119:18 · Luke 24:27 · Acts 17:11 · 2 Timothy 2:15 · 2 Timothy 3:16-17

Opening Memory Anchor

Compare translations to understand Scripture better - not to hunt for the wording you prefer.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

PART ONE

BEGINNER GUIDE

1. WHY ARE THERE SO MANY ENGLISH BIBLE TRANSLATIONS?

Languages do not correspond perfectly word for word. Translators make decisions about vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, idioms, figures of speech, measurements, culture, textual variants, reading level, and clarity. One translation may preserve original structure more closely; another may make the intended meaning easier to recognize. Neither difference automatically proves unfaithfulness.

Memory Anchor: Different wording does not necessarily mean different truth.

2. WHAT LANGUAGES WAS THE BIBLE ORIGINALLY WRITTEN IN?

The Old Testament was written primarily in **Hebrew**, with portions in **Aramaic**. The New Testament was written in **Greek**. Translation makes Scripture accessible to readers who do not know those languages. The question is not whether English reproduces Hebrew or Greek word order exactly, but whether it faithfully communicates the biblical text.

3. WHAT DOES 'WORD-FOR-WORD' VERSUS 'THOUGHT-FOR-THOUGHT' MEAN?

These describe tendencies, not rigid boxes. **More formal:** NASB, ESV, NKJV. **Balanced:** CSB, NIV. **More functional:** NLT. No major translation is completely word-for-word, and no responsible translation ignores the words. Every translation considers both original wording and how meaning can be communicated in English.

Memory Anchor: Translation always involves both words and meaning.

4. IS A MORE LITERAL TRANSLATION ALWAYS MORE ACCURATE?

Not necessarily. Literal wording can preserve details, but overly literal translation can obscure idioms and meaning. Accuracy is not simply counting direct English equivalents. A good translation communicates the original text faithfully, sometimes by preserving structure and sometimes by expressing the same meaning differently.

5. IS A PARAPHRASE THE SAME AS A BIBLE TRANSLATION?

Not exactly. A translation renders the biblical languages according to a defined philosophy. A paraphrastic rendering uses greater interpretive freedom. **The Message** is a well-known example. Paraphrases can help readers hear familiar passages freshly, but are usually best used alongside a standard translation for close study.

6. WHICH BIBLE TRANSLATION SHOULD I USE?

For regular reading, choose a reliable translation clear enough to read consistently. For close study, a more formal translation may expose details. For easier reading, natural contemporary English may help. For comparison, use somewhat different approaches - for example NASB/ESV, CSB/NIV, and NLT.

HOW CAN I TELL WHETHER A TRANSLATION IS TRUSTWORTHY? Prefer translations made from the biblical languages by qualified scholars, normally through a committee, with a published philosophy and transparent manuscript footnotes. A translation should communicate Scripture rather than reshape it to protect a predetermined doctrine. When uncertain, compare with several widely used independent committee translations.

7. WHERE CAN I COMPARE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS?

Useful side-by-side resources include **Bible Gateway**, **Bible Hub**, **Blue Letter Bible**, Bible apps, digital study software, and printed parallel Bibles. Tools save time, but convenience does not replace interpretation.

8. HOW SHOULD I COMPARE TRANSLATIONS?

READ → COMPARE → NOTICE → INVESTIGATE → CONTEXT → CONCLUDE. Read the whole passage; compare two or three additional translations; notice meaningful differences; investigate why they differ; read the surrounding paragraph, chapter, and book; conclude only what the evidence supports.

Memory Anchor: Notice the difference. Investigate the reason. Return to the context.

9. WHAT DIFFERENCES ARE ACTUALLY WORTH INVESTIGATING?

Focus on differences that may affect meaning: grammar, pronouns, theological terms, important word choices, phrases included or footnoted, verse numbering, or substantially different sentences. Minor differences such as 'said' versus 'told' often need no further investigation.

PART TWO

WANT TO GO DEEPER?

INTERMEDIATE

10. WHAT DOES RESPONSIBLE TRANSLATION COMPARISON LOOK LIKE FROM START TO FINISH?

Consider **Romans 12:2**. ESV/NASB use 'Do not be conformed to this world'; NIV says 'Do not conform to the pattern of this world'; NLT expresses the idea as not copying the world's behavior and customs.



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

READ: Romans 12:1-2 urges believers, in view of God's mercies, to present themselves to God and live transformed lives. **COMPARE:** All preserve the contrast: do not be shaped by the present world/age; be transformed through renewed minds. **NOTICE:** 'conformed,' 'pattern,' and dynamic explanatory wording differ. **INVESTIGATE:** the Greek behind 'world' here relates to an *age*, helping explain renderings such as world, age, or pattern of this world. **CONTEXT:** Paul contrasts formation by the present age with transformation according to God's purposes. **CONCLUDE:** the English wording differs, but the central meaning remains stable. The difference was noticed, investigated, controlled by context, and not made to carry more than the evidence supports.

11. CAN DIFFERENT TRANSLATIONS REVEAL MORE THAN ONE ASPECT OF A WORD?

Yes. Greek *sarx* is often translated 'flesh,' but context can point to physical flesh, human existence, ancestry, weakness, or fallen human orientation. Comparing translations can reveal a question worth investigating, but it does not mean every possible sense is present at once. Context determines meaning.

12. WHAT IF ONE TRANSLATION SEEMS TO SAY SOMETHING DIFFERENT?

Do not assume contradiction. Possible reasons include English style, grammar, semantic range, idioms, ambiguity, or manuscript evidence. Compare additional translations and footnotes; consult a study Bible, dictionary/lexicon, or reliable commentary if needed. Translation comparison identifies the question; context and evidence help answer it.

13. WHAT DOES IT LOOK LIKE WHEN TWO TRANSLATIONS MAKE DIFFERENT REASONABLE CHOICES?

Galatians 2:16 includes a debated Greek construction rendered in discussions as either **faith in Jesus Christ** or **the faithfulness of Jesus Christ**. This is a genuine interpretive question, not simply one side knowing Greek better. The larger passage still centers justification on Christ rather than works of the law. Hold the precise grammatical conclusion with the confidence the evidence warrants.

14. WHY DO SOME BIBLES HAVE VERSES THAT OTHERS PUT IN FOOTNOTES?

This involves **textual criticism**: evaluating ancient handwritten witnesses to determine the earliest recoverable wording. Most variants are small; some are more noticeable, including Mark 16:9-20, John 7:53-8:11, Acts 8:37, and the longer wording associated with 1 John 5:7-8. Translations may print, bracket, or footnote these passages. A footnote about manuscript evidence is transparency - not a reason for panic.

15. DO TEXTUAL VARIANTS MEAN THE BIBLE CANNOT BE TRUSTED?

No. Manuscript differences are real and should not be hidden, but their significance should not be exaggerated. Most make little or no meaningful difference. Major Christian teachings - Christ's deity, death and resurrection, salvation by grace, sin, God's holiness, resurrection, and the Gospel - do not depend on pretending variants do not exist.

16. DO I NEED TO KNOW HEBREW AND GREEK TO UNDERSTAND THE BIBLE?

No. Biblical languages are valuable but not required for faithful reading. Comparing reliable translations can alert English readers to difficult words, grammar, idioms, or ambiguity. Original-language tools can help, but looking up a Greek word is not a substitute for grammar and context.

17. DOES THE KING JAMES VERSION USE A DIFFERENT BIBLE?

The KJV was produced in the early seventeenth century using manuscript resources and printed Greek texts then available. Additional, including older, manuscripts later became available, so modern translations sometimes make different textual decisions. This does not make the KJV worthless or modern versions dishonest. Some Christians argue the KJV is uniquely authoritative; that claim should be distinguished from simply preferring it. Inspiration concerns Scripture as given through the biblical authors, not one later English translation.

18. IF TRANSLATIONS DIFFER, HOW CAN SCRIPTURE STILL BE TRUSTWORTHY?

Use three categories: (1) **different English wording, same basic meaning**; (2) **different reasonable interpretations of the same original wording**; (3) **different underlying manuscript readings**. This avoids two errors: pretending every translation says exactly the same thing, or concluding that because translations differ nobody knows what Scripture says.

19. SHOULD I BUILD A DOCTRINE ON THE WORDING OF ONE TRANSLATION?

Usually not when the argument depends on wording unique to one translation. Compare versions, read context, determine whether the wording reflects a translation choice, investigate the underlying term if necessary, and compare other passages. The authority belongs to Scripture, not a familiar English phrasing.

20. WHAT DOES TRANSLATION COMPARISON GONE WRONG LOOK LIKE?

A common mistake is **translation shopping**: start with a preferred conclusion, search versions until one sounds supportive, then declare that version most accurate. Responsible comparison reverses the process: **READ TEXT** → **COMPARE WORDING** → **INVESTIGATE DIFFERENCE** → **READ CONTEXT** → **FORM CONCLUSION**.

Memory Anchor: Do not choose the translation that proves the conclusion. Let the text shape the conclusion.

21. HOW SHOULD TRANSLATION COMPARISON RELATE TO OTHER BIBLE-STUDY METHODS?

Word Study - #266: comparison reveals words worth investigating, but context determines meaning. **Verse Mapping** - #262: multiple versions show possible renderings, but the verse belongs to its paragraph and book. **Inductive Bible Study** - #263: comparison strengthens observation, but observe first. **Cross-Referencing** - #269: translation may clarify connections, but each passage still needs context. For topical/theme studies, avoid arguments resting on vocabulary unique to one English version. For book study, reading



Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus

consistently in one primary translation helps preserve flow and repeated vocabulary.

22. WHICH TRANSLATIONS SHOULD I COMPARE?

There is no mandatory combination. A useful set may include **more formal**: NASB / ESV / NKJV; **balanced**: CSB / NIV; **more functional**: NLT; **paraphrastic comparison**: The Message. This is illustrative, not a ranking. Often three are enough: one primary, one somewhat more formal, and one somewhat more functional.

23. A SIMPLE TRANSLATION-COMPARISON WORKSHEET

READ: What does the passage appear to say?

COMPARE: What do 2-3 other translations say?

NOTICE: What differs meaningfully?

CLASSIFY: style / word choice / grammar / possible meaning / idiom / manuscript difference / unsure.

INVESTIGATE: Why might they differ? Do footnotes explain it? Would a dictionary, lexicon, study Bible, or commentary help?

CONTEXT: What does the paragraph and book communicate?

CONCLUDE: What interpretation is best supported? Is another rendering reasonable? Confidence: strong / reasonable but not certain / possible / further study needed.

FINAL CHECK: whole passage read; several reliable translations compared; minor differences not overinterpreted; context guided conclusion; no translation shopping; footnotes considered; language tools treated as tools; genuine ambiguity acknowledged; returned to Scripture.

Final Memory Anchor

READ the passage. COMPARE the translations. NOTICE the difference. INVESTIGATE the reason. CHECK the context. LET SCRIPTURE SHAPE THE CONCLUSION.

Final Takeaway

Bible translations differ because translation requires judgment. Hebrew, Aramaic, Greek, and English do not correspond perfectly word for word. Responsible translators make decisions about vocabulary, grammar, idioms, sentence structure, meaning, and manuscript evidence.

A more formal translation may expose original structure; a more functional translation may communicate an ancient expression naturally; a balanced translation seeks strengths of both; a paraphrastic rendering can help readers hear a passage freshly while requiring more caution for detailed study.

Ask: **What actually differs? Why? Does it affect meaning? What does context support? How certain should the conclusion be?**

Use a reliable translation. Read it consistently. Compare when helpful. Investigate important differences. Read the footnotes. Hold genuine ambiguities with humility. Keep returning to Scripture.

The best result of comparing Bible translations is not becoming suspicious of every English word. It is becoming a more careful, confident reader of God's Word.

Rooted in Scripture - Pointing to Jesus.