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Sakae Kubo

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# What should I look for in choosing a Bible version?

by Sakae Kubo

The potential Bible-buyer today faces a bewildering choice of versions, translations, paraphrases, and editions. How can you know which Bible will best suit your needs?

Sakae Kubo is a librarian at Andrews University, Berrien Springs, Michigan, and author of articles in a number of publications.



KING JAMES VERSION

REVISED STANDARD VERSION

PHILLIPS

“Let this mind be in you, which was also in Christ Jesus: who, being in the form of God, thought it not robbery to be equal with God: but made himself of no reputation, and took upon him the form of a servant, and was made in the likeness of men: and being found in fashion as a man, he humbled himself, and became obedient unto death, even the death of the cross.”

“Have this mind among yourselves, which you have in Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.”

“Let Christ Jesus be your example as to what your attitude should be. For he, who had always been God by nature, did not cling to his prerogatives as God’s equal, but stripped himself of all privilege by consenting to be a slave by nature and being born as mortal man. And, having become man, he humbled himself by living a life of utter obedience, even to the extent of dying, and the death he died was the death of a common criminal.”

Philippians 2:5-8, as it appears in six different translations, shows the wide variety available today.



# P

ERHAPS AT NO TIME in the history of Bible translation have there been as many translations into English within such a short period as during the past thirty years. This flood of translations and their different renderings has raised the questions "Which translation is best? How shall I choose which version of the Bible to use?" It is not safe simply to take the translation that a reader likes. And yet what else can he do if he has no guidelines? He chooses a particular verse from one version that appeals to him and another verse from a different version. But this is too subjective a basis for selection.

There are three basic elements in a Bible translation that the reader should look for, all equally important. The first of these is the text. By this we mean the Hebrew and the Greek text from which the translation is made. Most modern translations are based on relatively good original texts. This does not mean that they will always agree. There will always be some variations, because slight differences appear in different Hebrew and Greek texts.

Depending on which original text the translator uses, some translations either omit or include such passages as: Matthew 16:2, 3; Mark 16:9-20; Luke 22:19, 20; John 7:53 to 8:11; 1 John 5:7, 8; or single verses as: Matthew 6:13; 17:21; 18:11; 21:44; Mark 9:44, 46; Luke 9:56; Acts 8:37; Romans 16:24.

Occasionally the choice of an original text will affect the wording of a phrase. For example, in Revelation 22:14 one translation may have, "who wash their robes" while another reads, "that do his commandments." Similar substitutions occur in Mark 1:41 ("in warm indignation" for "moved with compassion") and in John 19:29 ("javelin" for "hysop").

But although there are occasional

TODAY'S ENGLISH VERSION

NEW ENGLISH BIBLE

THE LIVING BIBLE

"The attitude you should have is the one that Christ Jesus had: He always had the very nature of God, but he did not think that by force he should try to become equal with God. Instead, of his own free will he gave it all up, and took the nature of a servant. He became like man, and appeared in human likeness. He was humble and walked the path of obedience to death—his death on the cross."

"Let your bearing towards one another arise out of your life in Christ Jesus. For the divine nature was his from the first; yet he did not think to snatch at equality with God, but made himself nothing, assuming the nature of a slave. Bearing the human likeness, revealed in human shape, he humbled himself, and in obedience accepted even death—death on a cross."

"Your attitude should be the kind that was shown us by Jesus Christ, who, though he was God, did not demand and cling to his rights as God, but laid aside his mighty power and glory, taking the disguise of a slave and becoming like men. And he humbled himself even further, going so far as actually to die a criminal's death on a cross."

minor variations in the original Hebrew and Greek which affect the translation, the whole body of Scripture is solid and sure. It is important for a modern version to be translated from a good text, that is, one derived from the earliest and best manuscripts.

The second basic element is accuracy in translation. The good Greek or Hebrew text would be of no use if it were not translated carefully and accurately. However, there are different standards of accuracy, different philosophies of translation. On one extreme stand those who feel that one should be as literal as possible even in regard to the order of the words. Words not actually found in the original text must be indicated by



italics or other devices. At the other extreme are those who feel that a translation must deal with not only words but ideas and customs. Phillips's translation follows this philosophy when instead of "Greet one another with a holy kiss" (Romans 16:16), he writes, "Give one another a hearty handshake all round for my sake." The New English Bible does not go quite as far as Phillips but nevertheless leans in this direction. Notice this translation from the New English Bible, for instance. Instead of "a man clothed in soft raiment" (Matthew 11:8), it says, "a man dressed in silks and satins." The purpose of such translations is to convey the *thoughts* of the original in contemporary English rather than translating the actual Hebrew or Greek *words* into English. When such a translation really does a good job, the result is lively reading such as the early Christians must have enjoyed as they read the original manuscripts. However, these types often tend to go too far. Take, for example, these passages from The Living Bible: "The Revelation of Jesus Christ, which God gave unto him" (Revelation 1:1) of the King James Version becomes "This book unveils some of the future activities soon to occur in the life of Jesus Christ"; "upon the first day of the week" (1 Corinthians 16:2), "on every Lord's Day"; "For the law was given by Moses" (John 1:17), "For Moses gave us only the Law with its rigid demands and merciless justice." Too many subjective elements easily come into play. Somewhere between the rigid word-for-word translation and the subjective paraphrase lies the happy median.

The third basic element in choosing a translation is beauty and clarity of thought. It is possible to be accurate but not clear. Such is the case with the early Wycliffe Version. Hebrews 1:1 reads: "Manifold and many manners some time God speaking to fathers in prophets, at the last in these days spoke to us in the son." Wycliffe intended to translate from the Vulgate as literally as possible, including its word order. According to this standard, the translation is correct but muddled. Accuracy has to do with the relationship of the text to the translation. Clarity has to do with the relationship of the translation to the reader. It has to do with the structure of the sentence and the vocabulary selected.

There is a fourth element, style, which is important but not essential. It is the extra that enhances the translation but except for literary purposes is not essential. We might compare literary style to the artistic arrangement of food and table. We can live without it, but it adds a spark, a plus, to life. A version that is based on the best original text (that is, going back as close as possible to what the author actually wrote), translated with the greatest accuracy and clarity, and put together in a style

that is lively and attractive, would be the perfect Bible translation. Of course, most translations excel in one of these elements and fail in others. The King James Version still maintains today a beauty of style that is unsurpassed but receives low grades especially for its original text and in clarity for us today. The King James Version was translated in 1611 before the earliest and best manuscripts became available. Its vocabulary includes not only obsolete words but, what is even more confusing, words which are still used today but with a different meaning than they had in 1611. The American Standard Version does better on the text, excels in accuracy, but fails in literary beauty and clarity.

Also in evaluating a version, one needs to be aware of the different purposes and uses of a particular version. He must ask himself: "What objective did the Bible translator have in doing his work?" It would not be fair to judge a translation for what it never intended to accomplish. It is not right to expect of Phillips the kind of literal accuracy that you find in the American Standard Version. The translator himself, J. B. Phillips, did not recommend it for study purposes.

There are some translations which are made for private use, such as Phillips and The Living Bible. They tend to be less precise, more free, with emphasis on equivalent effect rather than literalness. These are excellent for devotional use but hardly acceptable for study purposes. For the latter objective one should turn to the American Standard Version or the Revised Standard Version.

There are some translations which are more fitting for pulpit use. The King James Version and the Revised Standard Version are suitable for this, although the latter is preferable because it has a better text and the style and vocabulary are modern. The New English Bible is also acceptable, although a lot freer, but at times it is a bit too colloquial.

There are some translations which are made for people with limited English background. The Basic English Bible, for instance, uses a vocabulary of 850 to 1,000 words with an additional 50 special "Bible" words. The New Testament: A New Translation in Plain English by Charles Kingsley Williams uses 1,500 words with an additional 160 to 170 which are explained in the glossary. Such translations sacrifice literary beauty for simplicity and ease of understanding. Today's English Version (Good News for Modern Man) has no arbitrary limitation in vocabulary but is intended to be usable for one for whom English is an acquired language. Not only does it use a simplified vocabulary but the structure of the sentence is also modified to make for ease in understanding.

It would not be fair to evaluate every

translation by the same standards. These different objectives indicate also that a reader should have more than one version, using one for his private devotion and another for study purposes. But each translation should measure up to the three basic elements—a good text, accuracy, and clarity.

Evaluating certain recent translations by these criteria, while also keeping in mind their own objectives, would place the Revised Standard Version as the best all-around Bible. Any evaluation, of course, will be somewhat subjective, depending on one's philosophy of translation and personal taste in matters of style. The New English Bible has more vigor and graphic language, is more modern and more enjoyable to read, but perhaps it is a bit too free and too colloquial at times. Phillips is an excellent translation for private reading and devotion. This version perhaps reads least like a translation. The effect is as if the Bible were originally written in English, although British English. This is an excellent version for young people or for those who have little background in the Bible. One should remember, however, that it should not be used for study purposes.

The two recent Catholic translations, the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible, are both good translations. The same differences exist between these as between the Revised Standard Version and the New English Bible. The British Jerusalem Bible is more colorful and spicy than the New American Bible, which is typically American in style, plain and straightforward, and more literal than the Jerusalem Bible. The Jerusalem Bible has helpful extensive notes, although its introductory material is quite liberal.

Today's English Version (Good News for Modern Man), though limited in its use of English vocabulary and directed to a special class of English-speaking people, is nevertheless an excellent translation for anyone. It is accurate and clear. Children will probably get much more benefit from this version than any other, especially when the Old Testament is completed.

The Living Bible has found great favor among Christians today but must be used with care since the translator has at times imported his own ideas into the text. In other words, he has not always been faithful to the meaning of the original. However, this is not to deny its good features. The Living Bible should not be used as a study Bible but can be profitable for devotional use.

The good translations of the past generation—Weymouth, Moffatt, and Goodspeed—still have their values, but they are less now than at the time when they were translated, since the newer translations have taken their place. This is the nature and fate of all Bible translations. The Bible is God's living Word and must continually be translated as language changes.

## HOW THE VERSIONS RATE

Here is how the editors of *THESE TIMES* rated six of the most frequently used Bible translations. The rating is on a scale of one to three, with one being the lowest rating and three the highest. Every Bible translation must be evaluated overall in terms of its own stated purpose, since different translations have different objectives. A low rating in one area may simply mean that that particular area does not reflect the specific goals of that translation.

	Quality of Original Text	Accuracy of Translation	Readability (Clarity)	Literary Style	Devotional Use	Study Use
King James Version	2	3	1	3	3	3
Revised Standard Version	3	3	3	2	2	3
New English Bible	3	2	2	3	2	2
Phillips	3	2	3	3	3	1
Today's English Version	3	2	3	2	3	2
The Jerusalem Bible	3	3	2	2	2	3
The Living Bible	1	1	3	2	3	1

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in all His fullness to all the world.

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to be the authoritative Word of God,  
Satan to be our great adversary,  
Jesus to be our all-sufficient Saviour,  
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## What people say about God's Word

"There is nothing more calculated to strengthen the intellect than the study of the Scriptures. No other book is so potent to elevate the thoughts, to give vigor to the faculties, as the broad, ennobling truths of the Bible. If God's Word were studied as it should be, men would have a breadth of mind, a nobility of character, and a stability of purpose rarely seen in these times."  
—**Ellen G. White.**

"I believe that the Bible is to be understood and received in the plain and obvious meaning of its passages; since I cannot persuade myself that a book intended for the instruction and conversion of the whole world, should cover its true meaning in such mystery and doubt, that none but critics and philosophers can discover it."  
—**Daniel Webster.**

"The Bible is the Word of Life. I beg you will read it and find this out for yourself—read, not little snatches here and there, but long passages that will really be the road to the heart of it. You will not only find it full of real men and women, but also of things you have wondered about and been troubled about all your life. . . . When you have read the Bible, you will know that it is the Word of God, because you will have found it the key to your own heart, your own happiness, and your own duty."  
—**Woodrow Wilson.**

"I beg leave to give a short, clear, strong argument for the Divine inspiration of the Holy Scriptures. The Bible must be the invention of good men or angels, bad men or devils, or of God.

"1. It could not be the invention of good men or angels, for they neither would nor could make a book and tell lies all the time they were writing it, saying, 'Thus saith the Lord,' when it was their own invention.

"2. It could not be the invention of bad men or devils, for they could not make a book which

commands all duty, forbids all sins, and condemns their own souls to Hell.

"3. Therefore I draw the conclusion that the Bible must be given by Divine inspiration."  
—**John Wesley.**

"I regard the Bible as the best gift God has given to man."  
—**Abraham Lincoln.**

"Read the Bible, and read it again. Do not despair of help to understand something of the will and mind of God, though you think they are fast locked up from you. Pray and read, and read and pray, for a little from God is better than a great deal from man. Also what is from man is uncertain, and is often lost and tumbled over by man; but what is from God is fixed as a nail in a sure place."  
—**John Bunyan.**

"It is impossible to mentally or socially enslave a Bible-reading people."  
—**Horace Greeley.**

"There is a Book worth all other books which were ever printed."  
—**Patrick Henry.**

"It has been well said that upsetting the Bible is like upsetting a solid cube of granite; it is just as big one way as the other, and when you have upset it, it is right side up, and when you overturn it again, it is right side up still."  
—**David F. Nygren, in Watchman-Examiner.**

"One of the greatest challenges in America today is to renew a spiritual vision and vitality among our people. A renewal of America's spiritual vision and vitality depends to a large extent on an understanding of the Bible."  
—**Governor Reubin Askew (Florida).**

"Believe me, sir, never a night goes by, be I ever so tired, but I read the Word of God before I go to bed."  
—**General Douglas MacArthur.**



“There is no book like the Bible. There is none like it when your head is aching. There is none like it when the day is without the sun, and the night without its stars. There is nothing like it when your children are left motherless. There is none like it when you bury your baby. There is none like it when the springs of life are snapping. There is none like it when you reach the end of life’s journey and pillow your head on its promises, and God stoops and kisses you to sleep.”—H. M. S. Richards.

H. M. S. Richards, who has read the entire Bible scores of times, is speaker emeritus of the Voice of Prophecy, one of the oldest religious radiobroadcasts still operating. He is the author of the Bible study course offered on the following page.