

Why the Differences between Bible Versions?



This is a fair question that has caused concern for many Bible believers and has even engendered various conspiracy theories. But really, the answer is not a secret. There are differences in Bibles because there are differences in views concerning the underlying texts, differences of opinions about how literal a translation should be, and differences in the preconceived notions of translators about what the text should say.

Differences in the Underlying Texts

Consider the texts that form the basis of translations. For centuries, there was very little controversy regarding the Greek text of the New Testament. Until Erasmus's (1466–1536) first work in compiling a definitive Greek New Testament, Roman Catholic theologians were much more concerned about what the early Latin texts said than what the original Greek manuscripts said. In fact, it was out of a desire to produce a better quality Latin New Testament that Erasmus began to gather the best Greek manuscripts available to him. His desire was to compile a high-quality Greek New Testament that could be the foundation for a new Latin translation of the New Testament. While Erasmus's new Latin version never caught on, his Greek Testament became one of the first bestsellers in the era of modern printing.

Erasmus produced his Greek New Testament in 1516.¹ Within a short period of time others such as Stephanus,² Beza,³ and the Elziver brothers⁴ began printing Greek Testaments as well. None of these Greek New Testaments was an exact copy of any manuscript in existence, and they did not completely agree with one another. They were the

result of comparing and contrasting multiple manuscripts. This practice has come to be known as *textual criticism* (the word "criticism" here speaks of making informed choices between readings in the text rather than criticizing the text in some negative way). These early Greek New Testaments have collectively been called the *Textus Receptus* ("Received Text"), and they, along with various earlier English translations, became the foundation upon which the King James translators produced the New Testament of the bestselling translation of Scripture in history.

The early King James Version was based upon multiple representations of the *Textus Receptus*. In 1894 the English scholar F.H.A. Scrivener compiled a new edition of the *Textus Receptus* that represented, as closely as he was able, the textual choices made by the King James translators. Scrivener's text is what many people refer to today when they use the term "*Textus Receptus*." There are two translations available today that reflect Scrivener's *Textus Receptus*. They are the King James Version and the New King James Version.⁵

With the advent of modern archaeology many ancient manuscripts have been found since Erasmus's first work. These include works of both high quality and low quality, on parchment and papyri, and with varying dates of origin. There is much debate today over the quality and reliability of these manuscripts (as well as of the manuscripts that Erasmus used). With a desire to represent all manuscripts in a modern Greek New Testament, various recent scholars have developed an eclectic system for making choices on each individual variant of the text. They have developed a system of rules that provide guidance in making choices where there are differences in manuscripts. These rules are not rigid but rather are an attempt to reflect with reason-

able probability how changes can enter into hand-copied documents. As can be seen below, the rules are not universally accepted. Some of the rules are as follows:⁶

The older reading is preferred over the more recent reading. This rule gives preference to older manuscripts even if there are fewer of them with that particular reading. The argument against this rule would be that while older manuscripts might have a particular reading, it does not necessarily follow that the reading in newer manuscripts is not also old. In fact, many of the very ancient quotes in the writings of the early Church Fathers correspond with readings from the newer manuscripts, giving evidence that those readings have an ancient history as well.

The shorter reading is preferred over the longer reading. The idea of this rule is that when a copyist faces two different manuscripts with two different readings, the tendency would be for that copyist to combine (conflate) the two readings into one longer reading rather than make a decision to use one but not the other. The argument against this rule would be that the vast majority of copyists were not comparing and contrasting manuscripts but simply making copies of what they had. In that case, it would be much more logical that they accidentally left out a phrase or word than adding the same.

The less clear reading is preferred over the more clear reading. The idea here is that the tendency of a copyist in a difficult passage would be to “clean up” the reading so it would be easier to understand. Others argue that mistakes in copying tend to make a text less clear, not clearer.

Eclectic texts today, such as the United Bible Society (UBS) text, extensively footnote the selection process so that it is easy for the textual scholar to follow the reasoning behind particular decisions. While good people differ on the textual decisions that are made, such openness argues against a conspiracy to secretly change the Bible. Almost all modern translations of the New Testament today outside of the King James and New King James follow the UBS eclectic text.

The question of the Old Testament is less complex than the New Testament. There are substantially fewer variations in readings. The most common debate is whether a translation should use the Masoretic Text of the Old Testament exclusively or not. Like the *Textus Receptus*, the Masoretic Text does not refer to one particular manuscript. It was produced by a group of Jewish scholars in the seventh through eleventh centuries AD and is represented by a number of Hebrew manuscripts, which have slight variations among themselves. Many modern translations use the Masoretic Text with some variants based upon the ancient Greek Translation of the Old Testament called the Septuagint, Latin versions, and other resources.⁷ Some argue that the

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KJV Old Testament was translated solely from Bomberg’s printed edition of the Masoretic text. Others claim that the scholars followed some form of the Masoretic Text, if not always Bomberg’s. Finally, some claim that they used principally the Masoretic Text but sometimes followed the readings from other sources, including the ancient Greek and Latin. This historical question is hotly debated.

Translation Philosophy

The next issue to consider is translation style or philosophy. There are three variant philosophies regarding the way in which the Bible should be translated. By far the most common method today is a **dynamic equivalent** translation style. This style seeks to convey the *idea* of the document as clearly as possible in the new language. It tends to focus on thought units

(sentences) rather than individual words and word order. The goal is to make the translation flow and be easily readable. Translations using this philosophy tend to find phrases and expressions in the new language that convey the same idea as the original even though they are not exact translations. The Hebrew, “covereth his feet” (KJV and Hebrew) is replaced with “is relieving himself” (ESV). “It is good for a man not to touch a woman” (1 Cor. 7:2, KJV, NASB, and Greek) is replaced with “it is good for a man not to marry” (NIV) or “it is good for a man not to have sexual relations with a woman” (ESV). The problem is that in order to make a translation more readable, the translator has to make interpretation decisions that are often best left to teachers, preachers, and commentators.

A **formal equivalent** (sometimes called **verbal equivalent**) translation seeks to maintain the words and word order as much as possible in the new translation. Some dynamic equivalency is always necessary and evident in every translation; otherwise, the new translation would be almost completely unreadable. Glance at an interlinear translation sometime to see the literal representation of the Greek or Hebrew. The issue here is whether the translators (and readers for that matter) value literalness over readability or vice versa. The most literal popular translation on the market today is the New American Standard Bible.⁸ It is often criticized for being “wooden” in its flow because of the stiffness of its literal translation style. The KJV and NKJV are also very literal translations but include some dynamic equivalency. For instance, the Greek exclamation “May it never be!” in Romans 6:2 is translated “God forbid!” in the KJV. For those with a Biblical view of inspiration, it would make sense to prefer a Bible that preserves as much as possible the literal words of the text.

There are also paraphrases on the market. A **paraphrase** is not technically a translation but more of a commentary

on the text. It is a restatement of the text in the words of the author. Kenneth Taylor's *Living Bible* is such a paraphrase. It has never been portrayed to be a translation by the author, but it is used as such by many. There are good resources today that give the background regarding most of the versions on the market.⁹

Theological Bias

The third difference in translations is the theological bias of the translators. While no particular translator wants to acknowledge this, the impact of the preconceived theological positions of the translators ranges from slight to blatant.

Even the most conservative translations contain slight theological bias. The King James translators were charged with retaining ecclesiastical terms such as "bishop" and "church" rather than "overseer" and "assembly." In some cases they did this by transliterating certain words (making a word in the new language that sounds similar to the word in the original language) rather than translating them. For example, the Greek word *baptizo*, which means "to dip," became "baptize" rather than "immerse" or "dunk."

Some bias is much more significant, however. In the Revised Standard Version (and the NRSV), translators chose to translate the Hebrew word *alma* (Isa. 7:14) with the more colloquial reading of "young woman" rather than with the literal meaning of "virgin," even though the context would indicate a literal reading of the word. (After all, a young woman conceiving and having a son would hardly constitute anything unusual.) It is also clear that New Testament writers (Matt. 1:23) understood the word to mean "virgin," using the unambiguous Greek word *parthenos* when quoting Isaiah. In this case, theological bias against the Virgin Birth resulted in an unreasonable translation that is inconsistent with the context of the passage.

Sometimes theological bias is blatant, resulting in a translation without any grammatical or contextual justification whatsoever. The New World Translation text of John 1:1, "and the word was a god" rather than "and the Word was God," has no grammatical basis and is translated specifically to align with the Jehovah's Witness denial of the deity of Jesus Christ. In another example, various modern gender-neutral Bibles remove all masculine-pronoun references to God in order to satisfy the sensibilities of a politically correct culture. Such changes are violations of the ancient inspired text.

The Importance of Vast Amounts of Preserved Data

While opinions differ on preferred texts, translation styles, and theological tendencies, it is important for every believer to understand the background of the particular Bible that he or she is reading. This is especially important when facing the confusion of comparing various translations. Sometimes the reading is different because different translators chose to render the passage in differing ways. But sometimes there are words missing, added, or different because of the underlying text that the translator used.

Yet, in all this, the Bible is the most documented book in human history. With over 5000 ancient manuscripts available, no other ancient book comes close. Even with the variants between manuscripts due to copyist error—most of those are only differences in word order or spelling—no significant doctrine of Scripture is impacted when considering the whole of Scripture. It is only because of this vast amount of preserved data and our access to that data via modern technology that we can examine the text with such detail. In other words, the controversy itself is a direct result of the blessing of God's providential preservation of the text.



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¹ While Erasmus published first in 1516, he also published five later editions to improve and correct typographical errors.

² Four editions were published by Robert Estienne from 1546–51. Stephanus was the first to divide the text into verses for ease of reference.

³ Beza produced nine editions between 1565 and 1604. A tenth edition was published after his death.

⁴ This text was printed in 1633; by that time the King James Version had already been produced and subsequently revised five times.

⁵ While there are many who would hold to a Majority Text preference for New Testament texts and might see that as slightly different from a *Textus Receptus* preference, until relatively recently no New Testament translations reflected the Majority Text. *The World English Bible* is an online public domain revision of the American Standard Version that follows the Majority Text in the New Testament and the *Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia* in the Old Testament. According to its website it is an ecumenical work that includes the Apocrypha (<http://ebible.org/web/webfaq.htm#WhyApocrypha>). Another New Testament based on the Majority Text is the *English Majority Text New Testament*, translated by Paul W. Esposito. Both the KJV and NKJV are based upon the *Textus Receptus* and almost all other are based upon an eclectic text.

⁶ See Bruce Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament* (Oxford University Press: NY and London, 1980), 207–46. For a critique on the eclectic method see Hodges and Farstad, *The Greek New Testament According to the Majority Text* (Thomas Nelson: 1985).

⁷ Many KJV-only advocates say the New King James Version does not exclusively use Bomberg's Masoretic Text, while James Price, who served as executive editor for the Old Testament on the NKJV translation committee, insists that Bomberg was followed "as closely as possible" (<http://www.webcitation.org/5sJrik4vd>).

⁸ The NASB is criticized by KJV-only advocates for the eclectic text from which it is translated, not typically for its translation style.

⁹ Cokesbury has a chart that is very helpful in identifying the textual sources of various translations. However, it characterizes translations in general as more literal than most would see them (<http://www.cokesbury.com/freedownloads/bibletransguide.pdf>). There are many other charts available that address translation style; the reader should consult multiple charts since the level of "literalness" of a translation is often treated as a matter of judgment rather than quantifiable fact.