

# What Are the 5 Most Accurate Bible Translations?

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If the Bible is truly the inerrant Word of God, why are there so many different versions of it? Why do some people insist their translation is the best, and some versions are heretical? Shouldn't there just be one? Why can't Christians even agree on this?

The reasons behind the proliferation of Bible translations are complex, but can be simplified to something very simple: audience and purpose. Many of us have heard that the Bible is the best-selling book of all time, and this is a true statement. In fact, it's not even close. It is estimated that a Bible is present in 85% of U.S. households, and that the average Bible-per-house ratio is over four.

All this to say that even with an average of four Bibles per American household, we still continue to purchase millions of Bibles each and every year. Much of the reason for this is that Americans are upgrading Bibles, giving them as gifts, and just as often, we are buying *different versions* of the Bible.

## Why Are There So Many Bible Translations?

To understand this question, we can compare it to Shakespeare. Shakespeare's English is often called Old English, but in reality, it is early Modern English. In spite of this, it is often difficult for modern readers like us to understand. To get an idea, let's take a look at this couplet which appears in Act I of Shakespeare's "Romeo and Juliet":

*"The measure done, I'll watch her place of stand,  
And, touching hers, make blessed my rude hand."*

What is Romeo talking about here? What does this mean? Why is there a funny accent mark over “blessed”?

Now let’s say you are teaching this to a ninth-grade class. In order to understand these words, you would probably have to write it differently. [SparkNotes](#) translates it as, “When this dance is over, I’ll see where she stands, and then I’ll touch her hand with my rough and ugly one.”

This is easier to understand, but most of the words are different, the meter is gone, and the rhyme of “stand” and “hand” are gone.

And this is just translating English to English.

Bible translators have the difficult task of translating ancient Hebrew and Greek into readable English. Along with that, they have to consider the audience. Is this Bible suited for a seminary professor? A teenager? Children? Families? Anyone and everyone?

Remember, the English language as Shakespeare knew it would not even exist for well over a thousand years after Paul penned his final letter.

When coming across words that rhyme in the original languages, do translators strive to find similar rhymes in English to keep the poetry, or do they ignore the rhyme to keep the meaning? These decisions are difficult enough when dealing with Shakespeare, but they take on eternal significance when handling the Word of God, theological accuracy, and a clear picture of what it means to be saved.

This is the motivation behind so many Bible translations: **they are all essentially seeking a way to present the truth of God’s Word in a way that is the most accurate and yet the most understandable by the most people.** This is no simple task, and this is the reason so many have undertaken the effort to make the Bible as readable as possible while remaining as accurate as possible.

### **Which Bible Translation Is Closest to the Original?**

Based on what we now know of how difficult translation is, this is also a difficult question to answer, and it leads to comparing two different translation philosophies. The first is **formal equivalence**, also called literal or “word-for-word” equivalence. Formal equivalence strives to stay as close as possible to the actual wording of the original language, striving to translate each Greek or Hebrew word to the closest possible word in English. Think of this reading Shakespeare as Shakespeare wrote it.

The second is **dynamic equivalence**, or “thought-for-thought” equivalence. This approach attempts to stay as close to the thought the original writer was trying to convey. Think of this as Shakespeare rendered as an easier-to-understand language for modern English speakers.

Each approach has strengths and weaknesses, and ultimately most translations are a true combination of the two. The versions below are generally considered to be very close to the original.



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## What Are the 5 Most Accurate Bible Translations?

There are other versions that are worthy of attention, but these five are universally considered great for several reasons. First, they are all translated by respected and diverse groups of theologians. Second, they all stay fairly close to one another in attempting to give the best meaning to what the Scripture has to tell us today.

My top 5 (in alphabetical order) are:

### 1. CSB – Christian Standard Bible

The [Christian Standard Bible](#) is a 21<sup>st</sup> century translation (2017) that is a revision of the HCSB (2004). According to the [CSB preface](#), it seeks “optimal equivalence” in “a commitment to both ‘formal equivalence’ (which recognizes the importance of the form of the original language text—that is, the words used and the grammatical and rhetorical structures) and ‘functional equivalence’ (which recognizes the importance of conveying the original message and intent in natural English readily understood by modern readers).” It is also unique in being the first translation to use contractions, such as in [John 3:10](#), “‘Are you a teacher of Israel and don't know these things?’ Jesus replied.”

Read more [here](#).

### 2. ESV – English Standard Version

The [English Standard Version](#) is also a 21<sup>st</sup> century version (2001), and is based on a revision of the 1950's RSV. According to the [ESV preface](#), it is "an 'essentially literal' translation that seeks as far as possible to reproduce the precise wording of the original text and the personal style of each Bible writer." The ESV does not contain the thee's and thou's of the [KJV](#), but considers itself to be in the stream of translations descended from the KJV. It does manage to maintain the KJV "feel" while being understandable and readable. [Psalm 23:1](#) is an example of following traditional, yet familiar language, "The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want." The ESV Bible combines word-for-word precision and accuracy with literary excellence, beauty, and readability. Read more [here](#).

### **3. KJV/NKJV - King James Version/New King James Version**

The [King James Version](#), originally known as the Authorized Version, dates to 1611, is a formal/literal version, and has had just a few language tweaks since written. This version continues to be the version most people consider "The Bible," and it has stood the test of time. Although not the first translation into English, the KJV was the first to gain and maintain nearly universal acceptance throughout the English-speaking world, and continues to be quoted and well-known to this day.

Read more [here](#).

[The New King James Version](#) was produced in 1982 as a modern update to the KJV that would retain the beauty and poetry of the text, while incorporating modern manuscript discoveries and changes in language. It is successful in doing these things. The [preface states](#) that the NKJV's, "principle of complete equivalence seeks to preserve all of the information in the text, while presenting it in good literary form." Its strength lies in its closeness to the KJV and extensive textual reference footnotes.

Read more [here](#).

### **4. NASB – New American Standard Bible**

The [New American Standard Bible](#) (as the name suggests) is a 1971 revision of the American Standard Bible of 1901. The ASV was so literal that it was difficult to read and understand, and the NASB continues to be among the most literal "word-for-word" versions available. [According to the preface](#), the "four-fold aim" is that "1. These publications shall be true to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. 2. They shall be grammatically correct. 3. They shall be understandable. 4. They shall give the Lord Jesus Christ His proper place, the place which the Word gives Him; therefore, no work will ever be personalized." The NASB was updated in 1995, and again in 2020, and retains its place as a wonderful Bible for deep study.

Read more [here](#).



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## 5. [NIV](#) – New International Version

The [New International Version](#) is regularly atop the charts of most popular versions, and has been for several decades. It views itself as a balance between the dynamic “thought-for-thought” and formal “word-for-word” translations. The NIV [translators state](#) that their goal is to “ensure that it continues to offer readers an experience that mirrors that of the original audience”, and to provide “the most accurate text possible in clear, natural English.”

Read more [here](#).

## Why Are These Five the Most Accurate?

These five translations are considered to be accurate and readable, and present a clear picture of who God is, how we can know Him, and what it means for our lives. They are easily accessible and come in excellent study Bible versions. I highly recommend owning a Study Bible, as no matter which version you are reading, notes and commentary are helpful to understanding, and give full context to what you are reading!

As English-speaking Bible readers, we are blessed with numerous versions, and websites such as [BibleStudyTools.com](#) that allow us to engage with multiple versions from our mobile devices. Let us not forget that while we have been blessed with multiple versions of Scripture, many others around the world who speak other languages have one, or possibly none. We must continue to pray for them, and support organizations that are getting the Gospel into the hands of those around the world.

As for us, the best advice that can be given is to own a couple of translations, maybe a dynamic version and a formal version to compare. It is also good to pick one that you will read the most, most likely the one used by your church weekly. Read it daily and

start memorizing the Word of God! Every believer who can will benefit from having a physical, print translation that you can study, read, and take notes in (or at least have a Scripture journal). Whatever Bible you have, read it often and let God's Word dwell in your heart and mind.

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