

## ENGLISH BIBLES COME IN DIFFERENT FLAVORS

If you decide to start reading the Bible, the next step is to figure out which version to use. That's no small trick. For you can buy dozens of different English translations at your book store.

The Jewish scriptures were originally written in Hebrew; the Christian scriptures in Greek. So obviously modern readers must depend upon English translations. Over the centuries well over a hundred have been printed.

Some included the entire Bible; others contained just a portion or a book or two. Some were excellent literary productions; others were rather sloppy. Some were done by committees of scholars; others were private jobs made by a single translator.

Here are some of the major English translations used today. Each has its own flavor, a style which makes it special.

The first in the list is the **Douay Version** of 1610. It was a Roman Catholic production. During the 1500s half a dozen English translations had been put on the market, but they were all by Protestant scholars.

Back in those days, of course, Protestants and Catholics got along about as well as two tom cats in a gunny sack. So church officials authorized an official translation for Catholics to offset the suspect Protestant versions.

The Douay Version (named after the French city where most of the translating was done) was based on the official Latin version of the scriptures.

For centuries it was considered the official Catholic translation for English-speaking readers. In recent years it has been replaced in popularity by the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Version. But more about these two later.

The most popular Bible ever in English-speaking circles has been the **King James Version** of 1611. (Not the "Saint" James Version as some have labeled it.) King James I of England had even dabbled in some Bible translating himself. He wanted a version which all the churches in his realm would use.

So he gathered a team of scholars which included Presbyterians from Scotland and Anglicans and Puritans from England who

worked at Westminster and Oxford and Cambridge.

When they finished, their translation became the "Authorized Version" for all English churches. They must have done something right. For 400 years the King James Version, with its quaint Elizabethan flavor, has been a favorite.

But a lot of water has gone under London Bridge since then. Better ancient manuscripts have been found. Scholars have learned a trick or two about rendering some hairy Hebrew and Greek words.

And for many modern readers obsolete words mixed in with all those thee's and thou's made the Douay and King James versions impossible to understand in spots.

Dozens of corrections and up-dates have been tried in the past 300 years. Today the most widely used edition is the **Revised Standard Version**. The RSV, published in 1946 and 1952, was made by a team of over thirty British and American scholars, most of them Protestants.

Their job was to touch up the King James Version by correcting some mistakes and putting the whole thing into 20<sup>th</sup> century English.

Actually they did more than merely revise the old favorite. They consulted the original Hebrew and Greek text so much that the RSV was for all practical purposes a new translation.

And a pretty good one at that. One of the improvements was that poetic passages were made to look like poetry, and longer prose sections were put in solid paragraphs, not chopped up into little verses. An updated and more gender-neutral **New Revised Standard Version** was published in 1990.

Just about the time the RSV was put on the book shelves, a group of French Catholic scholars started a new project of their own. They weren't satisfied with depending on the venerable Latin version, so they started a new French translation based on the Hebrew and Greek texts. Their work was so well done that it inspired American Catholic scholars to duplicate it.

The end result, known as the **Jerusalem Bible**, was published in 1966. The footnotes were taken over from the French edition, but the biblical text itself was based on the Hebrew and

Greek. It is one of the few versions which print God's name as "Yahweh," instead of "the Lord." A revised version, the **New Jerusalem Bible**, was published in 1985.

1970 was a vintage year for English translations. The **New English Bible** was finished by Protestant scholars in Great Britain, and the **New American Bible** was printed on Catholic presses in the U.S. If you can keep the initials straight, NEB *versus* NAB, the rest is easy.

The NEB started out in the 1940s in Scotland when a church assembly resolved to get a new translation in modern speech, not just a revision of a 17<sup>th</sup> century version.

The idea was to get a Bible not just for old church people but also for younger folks and for intelligent men and women who did not go to church.

You'll have to judge for yourself how well they succeeded. In any event, the NEB has a pretty high quality. In fact, it's one of the few versions which had professors of English literature on its translating committee in addition to the usual Greek and Hebrew scholars.

If you ever thought that the British have a clever way with words, you'll find the shoe fits in this case. The radically updated **Revised English Bible** appeared in 1987.

The NAB also got going in the 1940s. Instead of using the official Latin Bible as their basis, the Catholic scholars were able to go directly to the original languages.

They weren't afraid to make some necessary changes in the traditional texts, either. Time after time a surprising turn of phrase or a carefully researched footnote lets you know that this is a top-notch product.

Not too many years ago outsiders had the idea that Catholics weren't supposed to read the Bible. If that was ever true at all, it isn't so any more.

The NAB is especially good at reproducing the different styles of speech found in the original texts. For example, if a Hebrew or Greek sentence stops in the middle, chances are the NAB will do likewise. It doesn't try to smooth everything out and make the whole Bible look the same.

In 1988 the NAB was reissued with significant revisions which use more traditional language to make it more suitable for public reading

in worship settings.

The **New Jewish Version** of the Hebrew scriptures (the books Christians usually refer to as the "Old Testament") was finished in 1982. Representatives of the three major branches of Judaism in America worked for twenty years to get a clear, readable translation which doesn't mess around with the ancient Hebrew text.

By and large the NJV works. It has found a way to put into good English passages which other versions had to guess at. The NJV is also called the **Tanakh** after the customary names for its three main divisions: the **Torah** (Law), the **Nebiim** (Prophets) and the **Kethubim** (Writings).

**Today's English Version**, sometimes called the **Good News Bible**, was completed in 1979. It was a whole new game in translating. The idea was not just to translate literally word-for-word, but to put the Hebrew and Greek into English thought-for-thought.

In fact, the translators wanted to produce something for people who were just starting to read or for whom English was a second language.

What they ended up with is easy to swallow. The TEV doesn't use a lot of religious jargon. Instead of "ark of the covenant," for example, it has "the Lords covenant box." Jesus' opponents aren't called "the scribes"; they're "the teachers of the law." Instead of being "justified by faith," people "have been put right with God through faith."

In 1995 the American Bible Society upgraded this project with the **Contemporary English Version**, which is designed to be read aloud and listened to with enjoyment and without misunderstanding.

In response to charges that the RSV was not a faithful rendition of the Holy Bible, several more literal translations were produced. The first was the **New American Standard Bible** of 1971.

The most popular is the **New International Version** of 1978, produced by a team of conservative Protestant scholars who hold to "a high view of Scriptures."

The result is a fairly accurate and smooth reading translation which has sold well in many fundamentalist-leaning evangelical churches. In

2002 the International Bible Society introduced a more gender-inclusive edition, **Today's New International Version**.

Finally, the **Common English Bible** was published in 2011 by an alliance of main-stream North American Protestant denominations.

The CEV advertises itself as an attempt to “balance rigorous accuracy in the rendition of ancient texts with an equally passionate commitment of clarity of expression in the target language,” that is, in English. This version works especially well when the Scriptures are read aloud in public worship.

That's all, folks. More than you maybe wanted to know about a slew of English Bible translations: Douay, KJV, RSV & NRSV, JB & NJB, NEB & REB, NAB, NJV or Tanak, TEV & CEV, NIV & TNIV, and CEB.

The trick is to find one which suits your taste. But with as many flavors as Bressler has ice creams, chances are one of these popular English translations will taste just right.

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