

# A Word for You

Knowing how Bibles are translated will help you pick the version you need

IN TRANSLATING ANY ANCIENT TEXT, determining how literal the translation should be must be decided first. To create a translation, one of three general methods is applied to the translating process: *word-for-word* or *formal equivalence*, in which the meaning of the original words is expressed; *thought-for-thought* or *dynamic equivalence*, in which the thoughts and ideas of the original text are expressed; *paraphrase* or *functional equivalence*, also a thought-for-thought method in which the thoughts and ideas of the original text are reworded for clarity or for a specific readership. »



## Word-for-Word

For this, the translator attempts a literal rendering of each word of the original language into the receptor language and seeks to preserve the original word order and sentence structure, without adding his ideas and thoughts.

Thus, the argument goes, the more

literal the translation is, the less danger there is of corrupting the original message. Critics of this translation method say it assumes too much—specifically that the reader has a moderate degree of familiarity with the subject matter.

Also, a grammatically complete sentence does not always result from

a word-for-word translation. Words must sometimes be added to complete the English sentence structure. Most printings of the King James Version, for example, italicize words that are implied but are not actually in the original source text. Thus, even a formal equivalence translation has at least *some* modification of sentence structure and regard for contextual usage of words.

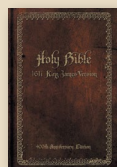
**Popular examples:** The New American Standard Bible (NASB), King James Version (KJV), English Standard Version (ESV).

## Word-for-Word Translations

A word-for-word (formal equivalence) translation tries to remain as close to the original text as possible, without adding the translators' ideas and thoughts into the translation. It is argued that the more literal the translation is, the less danger there is of corrupting the original message. Examples of select versions include:



**1. New King James Version (NKJV)**  
example: New Spirit Filled Life Bible



**2. King James Version (KJV)**  
example: Holy Bible, 1611 King James Version: 400th Anniversary Edition [Hardcover]



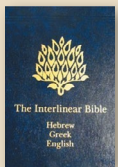
**3. New American Standard Bible (NASB)**  
example: Life Application Study Bible, NASB



**4. New International Version (NIV)**  
(a balance of word-for-word, thought-for-thought)  
example: NIV Thinline Reference Bible [Leather Bound]



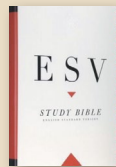
**5. New Living Translation (NLT)**  
(a balance of word-for-word, thought-for-thought)  
example: Discover God Study Bible: New Living Translation [Leather Bound]



**6. Interlinear**  
example: The Interlinear Bible, Hebrew-Greek-English [Paperback]



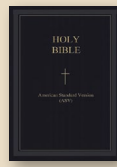
**7. Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)**  
(a balance of word-for-word, thought-for-thought)  
example: HCSB Study Bible [Jacketed Hardcover]



**8. English Standard Version (ESV)**  
example: ESV Study Bible



**9. Revised Standard Version (RSV)**  
example: Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version [Paperback]



**10. American Standard Version (ASV)**  
example: The Holy Bible [Hardcover]

## Thought-for-Thought

The goal of this method is to produce the closest natural equivalent of the message expressed by the original-language text—both in meaning and style it is meant to be reliable and readable. While a literal translation may obscure (it is argued) the intention of the original author, the dynamic equivalence translator attempts to convey the subtleties of context and subtext in the work, so that the reader is presented with both a translation of the language and the context.

Yet, translating the thought of the original language requires that the translator can interpret the text accurately and that it can then be rendered in understandable idiom. To safeguard this approach against personal biases and to ensure the accuracy of the message, a thought-for-thought translation should be created by a group of scholars who employ the best exegetical tools and also understand the receptor language very well.

Some argue that a thought-for-thought translation prepared by a group of capable scholars has the potential to represent the intended meaning of an original text even more accurately than a word-for-word translation. For example, the Hebrew word *hesed* cannot be adequately translated by any single English word because it can connote “love,” “mercy,” “grace,” “kindness,” “faithfulness” and “loyalty.” The context—not the lexicon—must be examined to determine which English term to use.

In 1 Kings 2:10, this is seen in the English words different versions use

to translate the idiom “slept with his fathers”:

“So David slept with his fathers, and was buried in the city of David” (KJV, word-for-word).

“Then David rested with his fathers and was buried in the City of David”

(NIV, thought for thought).

“Then David died and was buried in the City of David” (NLT, thought for thought).

Only the New Living Translation clearly translates the real meaning of the idiom, which refers to death, into

contemporary English.

**Popular examples:** New Living Translation (NLT), Holman Christian Standard (HCSV), New Jerusalem Bible (NJB). The New International Version (NIV) is often viewed as a thought-for-thought translation, but because it attempts to strike a balance between dynamic and formal equivalence Bible experts disagree on how to categorize it.

## Thought-for-Thought Translations

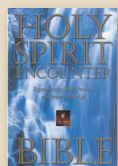
A thought-for-thought (dynamic equivalence) translation tries to clearly convey the thoughts and ideas of the source text. The translator attempts to present the reader with both a translation of the language and the context in which the passage was written. The intent of such a translation is to have the same impact on modern readers as the original had on its own audience. Versions and select examples include:



**1. New International Version (NIV)**  
(a balance of word-for-word, thought-for-thought)  
**example:** NIV Life in the Spirit Study Bible



**2. Today's New International Version (TNIV)**  
**example:** *The Story*



**3. New Living Translation (NLT)**  
(a balance of word-for-word, thought-for-thought)  
**example:** Holy Spirit Encounter Bible



**4. New Century Version (NCV)**  
**example:** The Everyday Bible



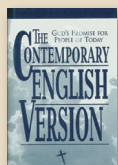
**5. Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)**  
**example:** HCSB Study Bible, Jacketed Hardcover



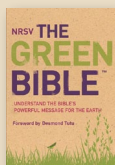
**6. New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)**  
**example:** The New Jerusalem Bible: Standard Edition



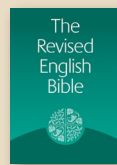
**7. Good News Bible (GNB)**  
(formerly Today's English Version)  
**example:** Text Bible—Good News



**8. Contemporary English Version (CEV)**  
**example:** CEV Promise Bible



**9. New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)**  
**example:** The Green Bible [Paperback]



**10. Revised English Bible (REB)**  
**example:** The Revised English Bible Standard Text [Hardcover]

## Functional Equivalence

A functional equivalence attempts to give the meaning of entire phrases, sentences or even passages rather than individual words. Though less precise, functional equivalence can be for certain passages a more accurate translation method.

Paraphrases, which fall under the functional equivalence category, are typically not intended for in-depth study. The intention behind them is to put the basic message of the Bible into language that can be understood by the typical reader (who has no theological or linguistic background).

**Popular examples:** *The Message* by Eugene H. Peterson. *The Living Bible* by Kenneth N. Taylor, although it is a paraphrase by definition, is a rewording of an English translation (American Standard Version, 1901) rather than a translation using the functional equivalence method.

## By Contrast

Those who prefer formal equivalence believe that a literal translation is better because it is closer to the structure of the original. The proponents also argue that some ambiguity of the original text is usually ironed out by the translators; that is, some of the interpretation work is already done. Those who favor dynamic equivalence suggest that a freer translation is better because it more clearly communicates the meaning of the original texts.

The disagreements over the two methods abound. But almost everyone on both sides agrees on one point: that anyone who has attempted to communicate the richness of God's Word into another language will realize it is impossible to make a perfect translation. ■

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