

Episode 239

Speaker 3

Welcome to the Got Questions podcast. Today, Jeff and Kevin are going to join me, and we're going to be discussing a frequently asked question about the Bible itself. Our slogan is Got Questions. The Bible has answers. We'll help you find them. So a big question that we're asked is, what Bible do you use? Why do you use this translation versus another? Or, even to get a little more generic, get a lot of questions about why there are so many Bible translations. This is particularly an issue in English, but there's some other languages that have several translations as well. But in English, we are blessed. I guess I don't know if that's the right term, with so many different Bible translations, many of them excellent. So, Kevin, why don't you start us off? Why are there so many English Bible translations?

Kevin Stone

Well, there are a lot of different factors that go into producing a new Bible translation, and a lot of these would be given as reasons for producing a brand new translation. And through the years, different people have had different philosophies of translation. They've wanted to come up with a Bible with a different readability level, different reading level for people. And then just various features, you know, like the maps and the illustrations, the footnotes, the cross-references, all these things go into making a new Bible translation.

Kevin Stone

But really, I think one of the most basic reasons for the different translations is the fact that language keeps changing. We're adding words to the English language all the time. They keep expanding the dictionaries, you know, and Webster's comes out with a list of newly added words through the year and all this kind of stuff. But when you take a look at, you know, just in our own language, we have Old English, we have Middle English, and then we have Modern English that we're speaking now. But even Modern English is divided into Early Modern English with a these and thous, and then the more Contemporary Modern English, where we've done away with a these and thous. And so, language has always changed. For example, there is a growing trend today, noticed by linguists, to prefer the word clarity over the word clearness. It used to be that people would speak about the clearness of an idea, and today, they hardly use that word. Today, they speak of the clarity of an idea. So, there's a change, and these changes build up, and eventually,

people start saying, well, you know what, we need to have a Bible that speaks today's language. And so many others.

Kevin Stone

There's a sensitivity today, a growing sensitivity to gendered language. So, for example, in 2 Corinthians 1 and verse 8, where Paul's talking about his afflictions in Asia, he says, brothers, I want you to know about these afflictions. Well, we all know that he was speaking to the whole church, and there were women in the church. And so, some of the more modern translations will say, brothers and sisters, let me tell you about my afflictions. And so, they've added that phrase, and sisters, in order to just provide clarity and to just avoid the gendered language that might offend some people today.

Kevin Stone

We have all kinds of language changes that have happened through the years, and reading level is a big thing too. We have reading levels for the Bible that go from fourth grade or below, like the contemporary English version is a fourth grade reading level, all the way up to the 12th grade reading level, which would be the King James Bible, the old King James that's on the level of Shakespeare, the Pilgrim's Progress, other works like that. And it's a challenge to read, but we run the gamut of reading levels in Scripture as well.

Kevin Stone

And so, different translations will be targeting different audiences.

Do we want to target a younger audience? Do we want to target a more educated audience, with full of scholars? Do we want to provide a Bible for people that are just learning English as a second language? All of these things factor into coming up with a new translation. So, through the years, we've amassed a lot of different translations, and they all serve a different need. They're all targeted for different groups. If they're done well, they're accurate translations, then we say, praise the Lord, we'll take more.

Jeff Laird

The important thing for us to remember in all this is that when we talk about translations of the Bible, we are using the term the Bible in the singular. In other words, there is only one original. So, this is not a question of people taking vastly different source material and trying to make their own interpretation of that vastly different source material. At this point in time, especially at this point in history, the manuscripts that we're translating the Bible from are very public and very well established and very well known. So, all the mainstream translations that we see are essentially using the same base text to try to come up with what they think is the best translation to meet

what Kevin was saying was the needs of a different demographic, either a different language, different age group, different time period, things like that.

Jeff Laird

So, when you hear people say things like, well, you know, there's translations of translations of translations, or there's edits to the edits and things like that, it's it really is not true. The translations that we see out there really do essentially start from scratch. Now, there are translations that use existing translations as a basis, but those are still coming from the original. They're not just saying, well, we're just going to reword or rephrase this English one. No, all the actual translation stuff is coming from the original language. So, anytime we talk about translations and varied translations, we need to remember that that really is this pyramid shape. There is one source that all these things are coming from, and that's what the mainstream versions are using.

Jeff Laird

The other thing that's important about that is to remember that only the original can be considered the one and only inspired word of God. Any translation, every translation, we need to be able to look at and remember, I'm reading a translation. I am reading something that human beings, usually educated, usually pretty sincere people, have said they think this is what this means from the original language. Now, because that information is so public and so well established, it's another reason that the mainstream translations are generally pretty safe, and they're generally in agreement on just about everything, because there's not much room in there for people to say, well, I'm just going to go off on a completely wild tangent, and nobody's going to know. There are a few versions that do something like that, that are deviant in a lot of areas, and those things are known. Those are recognized. For example, the Jehovah's Witnesses use the New World Translation, or the NWT. That has translation choices that the biblical interpretation community recognizes as being unreasonable or bizarre, and it's not accepted as a general mainstream translation for that reason.

Jeff Laird

So only the original is really the actual word of God, but there is just that one version that's God's word, and I like the idea of having lots of different translations available for us to use. I think that the variations in it, in a way, is sort of a big help to the layman today, and BibleRef, we try to do this by example. We have seven versions that you can read, seven translations, and it's handy sometimes when you see a verse and you notice that, for example, every single translation translates this verse exactly the same way. Well, what that tells you is that pretty much every translator who looks at this sees

something very clear, and they believe that this is the clearest way to present it. Sometimes you look at a verse and there's subtle differences between one translation and another, and that lets us know that there's some nuance in there. It's like using a thesaurus. You get to see a couple different shades of meaning, and it kind of helps you understand maybe where there's depth to what's being said here.

Jeff Laird

And then you have times where there's verses, and they're not very often, but there's sometimes there's a few verses where the actual phrasing is pretty different. It doesn't change anything important or the meaning of anything theologically, but you can look at that verse and go, wow, this is very obscure, so I need to be careful about how much weight I give to any one particular phrasing on this verse. There's a couple times in Psalms, for example, where you'll see a construction of something and the translators just kind of put up their hands and go, it's weird. I don't know exactly what that means. Thank goodness it's not about something super important, but that's about the only time that we have that because most passages are clear.

Jeff Laird

So I think this is the general answer that we have for people is there's lots of translations because there's lots of different kinds of people. There's different periods of time, there's different cultures, and that's a good thing. As long as we remember, as long as we recognize that that's what we have, our translations, that we don't take any one man-made version and either say, this is absolutely perfect, or I could never learn anything from this, then we're in good shape with that. That's how we actually say, look, I trust and I believe that God preserved His word. He just did it in the original language.

Shea Houdmann

Having taken a lot of Greek and Hebrew classes and seminary at various times, I love just looking at the original text of the Bible and being able to understand a good amount of it. I mean, first to admit that I'm very rusty at this point, but you can see the original flow of thought in some of the original translations. I was much better at Greek than I was at Hebrew, but even just seeing how the language works, and then sometimes even when you're reading the English with that background, you can know, I bet you the original structure was something like this.

Shea Houdmann

But the translation issue, and part of what you were getting to, Jeff, is the people having confidence in God's word. We get people who say, why do you read the Bible when it's a translation of a translation of a translation? It's like, well, one, that's not true. Textual scholars have put together a very reliable

manuscript of what we have access to by every science of textual criticism says very close to the Bible originally said, so we can trust it. And then the scholars who are doing the translation work these days are of the utmost scholarship, committed to the authority, inspiration of scripture, and want to render it as close to it as possible.

Shea Houdmann

But one thing that's always interested me is in the science of translation, how literal do you want to be? And that's another big factor in the different translations. You can call it formal equivalence, so more word-for-word translation, and then dynamic equivalence, which is a more thought-for-thought. But in every translation, there's a mix. There's a mix, first of all, and what are they aiming for? I want to be in the middle, I want to be super literal, I want to be very thought-for-thought. But even in the thought-for-thought translations, there are some verses that are translated very literally. And even in the literal ones, there are ones I cannot literally translate this literally because it wouldn't make sense in English, therefore we have to translate it thought-for-thought.

Shea Houdmann

Then of course, you go to the extreme of the thought-for-thought, you get into the paraphrases, which you want to be very careful. Paraphrase, we're not saying they're without value, but they are not Bible translations like other translations are. So even you take like the NIV, it's more thought-for-thought, take the NASB, the New King James, the King James, ESV on the more literal side, there's value in all of that. If you really want minimal thought of the translator or the preference of the translator, go with a literal translation. But some of those, you read them, doesn't really sound like the highest quality English. That's often a complaint with some of the more literal ones. But in the thought-for-thought, you got to be careful because then I'm not just taking the words in Hebrew and Greek, choosing the closest equivalent, and then changing the word order so it makes sense in English. I'm actually giving a little more thought, interpretation as to what this means and inserting that into the translation. So there's a little bit of risk there.

Shea Houdmann

So me personally, I prefer a more literal translation, but not on the extreme end of the literal, because there are extremely literal translations. You read those and this is just, it's not good English. And you remember when the Bible was originally written, it was written in the language that people could understand. It was how they read, how they thought, how they spoke at that time. So should it be translated into the English and other languages we speak today. So yeah, the literal versus dynamic, the formal versus

paraphrase, all those things, all plays a factor. And that's another major reason for all the different Bible translations, because a translation is aiming for a different perspective, a different method, and that leads to a very different translation in how it's worded.

Jeff Laird

Right. And Shea, the point that you brought up about that is important. I think there's a good way to demonstrate what you're saying. And I think that's the concept of an idiom, I-D-I-O-M. Those are what we would say in English are unique expressions, things that don't really mean what the words say, but they have a different meaning. You know, like when we say, oh, that's nails on a chalkboard or it's raining cats and dogs, things like that. When we say those things in English, that's the literal words that are being used is not the meaning of the phrase. So when we say those things, we say those to other people who have an understanding for what those things mean. If we were to take that and use the hyper literal translation and translate it into something like Spanish, and we're telling people that I think it's perros and gatos are falling from the sky, that wouldn't necessarily make sense. Now, because of the way culture goes, there may be enough overlap that they're like, oh, wait a minute. I think I know. I think I know what that means. But if you were talking to somebody who didn't really have experience with English and you use an expression like it's raining cats and dogs, then people would go, I don't even understand what that means. Or you say this guy's running around with his hair on fire. We use that as a way of saying that somebody's really, really excited. But if you use it hyper literally, you don't understand it.

Jeff Laird

So here's where the translation process and the discernment comes in. How do I take somebody who wrote down, it was raining cats and dogs? How do I put that into words for somebody in a different language that's literal enough that they understand what the original writer was saying, but it's translated enough that it's the meaning that comes across. And there are going to be times in scripture where we're going to have to make that, that discernment. And that's where the good mainstream translations differ a little bit from each other is in those kinds of subtle choices of saying, we're trying to say the same basic thing, but we do need to translate it. So for, for people who don't have a lot of experience with foreign languages, that's sort of a good way to think of it is just there's times where the literal words cannot just be one-to-one transferred into a different language and retain the meaning. It's actually going to obscure it. So if you want to translate it right, sometimes you actually have to change the wording in order to preserve the meaning.

Shea Houdmann

So Kevin, as the English grammarian among the three of us, what are some other things that people need to remember as they're asking this question of why there's so many Bible translations?

Kevin Stone

Well, if you're looking to pick out a particular translation, there are, of course, a lot of different choices. The NIV is probably the, I think that's probably the most popular translation that's going right now. That is often used as an everyday study Bible and also for devotional reading. You have many different versions of the NIV with different features available in these different editions of them.

Kevin Stone

There is, of course, the King James Version, and this would be, this would be the one that is most challenging to read for modern readers, probably because the language is more archaic. But at the same time, see, the King James Bible is really interesting because a lot of people just grew up with it. I grew up with the King James, and so if I'm starting to quote a Bible passage, I will automatically be quoting it in the King James Version because that's just what I learned. And so it's, on the one hand, a very familiar translation, and the rhythms and the cadences of that language is kind of ingrained in a lot of people. On the other hand, it is more of a challenge to read because of the archaic nature of the language. But KJV is still often used in traditional worship settings, and literary-minded readers will pick up the King James Bible just because of its literary value, if nothing else.

Kevin Stone

There's the New King James as well, which maintains the classic feel of the KJV, but then updates the language, gets rid of the theses and thous, not that those are hard to understand, but it replaces them with the modern you, which is a catch-all pronoun. The English Standard Version is really good for intensive study. It's good for memorization. It's a good, accurate, and fairly literal translation. The New Living Translation is good for new readers, maybe younger readers as well. It's good for devotional reading. The New Living Translation, which should be differentiated from the Living Bible, it's kind of an update of the Living Bible, but the Living Bible was a paraphrase. The New Living Translation is an actual translation, where they went back to the original languages and they translated that into English. The NET Bible, the N-E-T, or the New English Translation, is really good for readability, but it also has a whole lot of study notes. I use the NET a lot when I am wondering about why the translators picked one word over another. If I notice differences in translation, I'll say, well, why did they go with this wording in this one and a

different wording in another one? I'll get out my New English Translation, and most of every page of that Bible is translator's notes, where they go into depth about why they chose one word over another in English. It explains it very well. It's really good for those background kind of studies.

Kevin Stone

The New American Standard Bible is loved by many as one of the most literal translations, and yet also remains very readable, very close adherence to the original texts, including the original structure of the wording as much as possible. The Christian Standard Bible, the CSB, was published in 2004, and then it was revised in 2017. It leans toward formal equivalence, but not near as much as the New King James or the NASB, but it emphasizes clear communication and readability. It also includes gender neutrality, if that is something that you're looking for. Then the Amplified Bible, which is a paraphrase, but it's kind of a unique paraphrase, in that it kind of paraphrases things on a word-by-word basis, and so I know it's sometimes marketed as the Bible that takes as many English words as necessary to communicate the full meaning of the Greek and Hebrew. The Amplified Bible is out there as well, and it's a very interesting read. It's always thicker than most Bibles, because it does take a whole lot of words to communicate the full meaning of the Greek and Hebrew.

Jeff Laird

There are going to be choices that are made in those different translations, and just to pick up on one of the points that you were making, Kevin, when you talked about something like gender-inclusive language, the drive behind that is exactly what we were talking about when we used the idea of using literal words versus understanding. A lot of people are familiar with the idea that in English, we have the word love, and we use that very, very broadly. It can mean lots of different things, and people who speak English understand that when I say, I love cheeseburgers, I love my dog, I love my children, those are all three different kinds of love. Whereas in Greek, there are different words that are meant to get to those different nuances, and it's the same thing, but sort of in reverse at times with the Bible when it uses terms for man or mankind in a general sense, and then it uses man or mankind or male in a very male sense. So some translations choose to just stick with a more literal man in circumstances like that, which is fine because that's what it's saying. Other translations say, look, you can tell from the context here that this is referring to all people, so we're going to say something like people. That is different from translations that decide to deliberately obscure things that the Bible is saying. So far as I know, the major translations do not have an issue with that. These versions that you've mentioned, Kevin, they don't

have that problem where they're making those choices in a way that's disturbing or that seems to be excessive, like they're trying to erase some sort of a gender distinction. But that is, again, that is part of how the translation process works.

Jeff Laird

I agree with you. I like that there's the different versions. It gives you a chance to sort of compare and contrast them and see where am I seeing subtlety, where am I seeing something obvious, where am I seeing something consistent that's in there? So it's a very good reason to use multiple versions on purpose specifically so that you can tell where those boundaries are.

Shea Houdmann

Jeff, thanks for bringing up the gender inclusive thing because that's a big debate among Bible translations. And thankfully, none of the Bible translations we mentioned have gone to the extreme on the gendering inclusivity, which the extreme would be removing masculine pronouns to refer to God, those sorts of things. So if Paul says in his letters, brothers, and then gives an instruction that's clear in the context, he's referring to men and women, is that literal to translate a brother and sisters? No. But does brothers and sisters actually fit with what Paul was saying? It's debatable, but I would say yes. So in some instances, I am fine with gender inclusivity. In other cases, I'm not, depending on what you're talking about. So it's a term that tends to be thrown about without being clear on what we're actually referring to and arguing against.

Shea Houdmann

There are extreme Bible translations out there that seek to deny any gender-related reference to God, even though the Greek and Hebrew consistently universally refers to him using male pronouns. So that's not what we're talking about, and none of the translations we're mentioning do that. But to varying degrees, they do translate some things non-literally, including women or including gender-neutral language in how they render it.

Shea Houdmann

So ready to close this episode, how about each of the three of us just say which Bible translation we use and why. And let me start by saying for me personally, I'm currently using the ESV, English Standard Version. I like that it's literal but also very readable. So that's my current choice, but I do occasionally use other Bible translations when I'm studying or preparing or writing an article for Got Questions.

Shea Houdmann

For Got Questions itself, the website predominantly uses the New International Version. I would say not because we think it's the best

translation, because right now I would prefer others, but because it's the most commonly used. So very early on in the history of Got Questions, we chose the NIV because it was by far the most-read Bible version. So we thought the most people would be familiar with the biblical text we're quoting in the articles if we use the NIV. And we've been stuck with it, but honestly now with over 9,000 articles, switching them all to a different Bible translation would be a nightmare. I could give that job to Kevin and I wouldn't see him for a few years as he locked himself in a closet trying to accomplish all that. But again, we also love that on Got Questions, we have a tool that anytime you hover over any scripture reference, it allows you to choose which scripture occurs in the little pop-up window. And that also now links to BibleRef.com where they can get more commentary on what that verse means. So me personally, ESV, for Got Questions, NIV, and that's fine. So Jeff, how about you?

Jeff Laird

Well, I want to make sure that people notice that we're not holding up a little book here saying, this podcast episode is sponsored by the publishers of whatever. I mean, we don't have a dog in this fight in that sense, but you're right. At BibleRef, we use six different versions, ESV, NIV, NASB, CSB, NLT, KJV, and KJV. We do that so that we want to provide people with that broad array.

Jeff Laird

I find that personally, I tend to lean very heavily to the ESV because I like the combination of the readability and the accuracy. I spend a lot of time in study on the NASB because I do appreciate the literalness of it, especially NASBs that have the Greek and Hebrew interlinear in there to compare. So for me, ESV is definitely my preferred, you know, my daily carry sort of translation of the Bible and then NASB. And then when I'm really looking to get clear understanding, I will usually default back to checking on the NIV, CSB, and KJV to get other options. So that's kind of where I come at it.

Shea Houdmann

How about you, Kevin?

Kevin Stone

Well, I've mentioned that I grew up with the King James Bible, and that's not because my church was King James only or anything. It was just what was preached from, and that's what we used in our Sunday school and everything else as I was a child. All my memory work was done in the King James Bible. And so I used the King James up until I was in college, and then I made a switch to the New King James, which was not a huge switch, but it was a big thing for me because I wanted something more readable. Because it was in college that I was, for the very first time, reading the Bible all the way through.

So I chose the New King James to do that in, just to aid my reading. And I've stuck with that. I still use the New King James to preach from, and I use it for my private devotions. That's my go-to version.

Kevin Stone

But I also pick up, I think I mentioned earlier, I use the NET to do some word studies and find out various translation possibilities and things like that. So the New English Translation, I have a study Bible in the ESV that I pull out on a regular basis, and I'm using the ESV as well, devotionally. And then I really like the, more and more, the more I read it, the more I like it, is the New Living Translation, the NLT. I like its wording. And then as far as a paraphrase goes, I really like the Phillips paraphrase. J.B. Phillips did a paraphrase of the New Testament years and years ago. And I pull out an old copy of that pretty often, just to see what his wording is. And I always like it. I always say, well, yeah, that's a good way to put it. And so I appreciate the Phillips paraphrase as well.

Kevin Stone

I am so grateful that the Word of God is so accessible. I praise the Lord for men like John Wycliffe and William Tyndale and the translators of the Geneva Bible, the translators of the King James, and all the modern translators that are working today too. Praise the Lord for these men and women who are gifted by God linguistically and have a love for God's Word and have chosen to preserve God's Word in a language that we can understand, make it so readily available. We are indeed blessed.

Shea Houdmann

Amen. I agree wholeheartedly. So grateful for the men and women who know both Greek and Hebrew and Aramaic—let's not forget about that—but also know English very well and are able to take what God inspired in those original languages and then render them in English and other languages that we can understand. So, so, so important. I like, and I talked earlier about Greek and Hebrew, and I don't want to communicate that you have to know Greek and Hebrew in order to read the Bible. That's not the case.

Shea Houdmann

And Kevin also mentioned the King James Only controversy, but notice we didn't talk about that a lot today, because we actually did an episode on the King James Only movement, and I'll include some links to that in the show notes when this episode goes live. Some really good points that we discussed in the episode about the translation differences between the King James and the modern translations, and also the manuscript differences behind the scenes of the translations. So if you're interested in that, we have a whole episode recorded on it, and that's why we didn't dive into that today.

Shea Houdmann

So I hope our conversation today about the different Bible translations has been helpful to you. Any of the translations we mentioned, wholeheartedly endorse. Study God's word. Read it. Read it regularly. Read it in more than one translation. Listen to it and submit yourself to it and apply it to your life. Got questions? The Bible has answers and we'll help you find them.