

Wings

*“Those who wait on the Lord shall renew their strength;
they shall mount up with wings like eagles.”
Isaiah 40:31*



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Why So Many Versions?

The dizzying array of English translations of the Bible raises a valid question: Why so many?

The answer involves a peek into the science of how the Bible came down to us.

The first question that confronts anyone shopping for a new Bible is, why are there so many different versions? Why can't publishers settle on one "correct" version that everyone can use?

There are two factors that contribute to the plethora of Bible translations on the market today. A knowledge of these two factors not only answers our question, it also reveals a useful strategy for improving our personal Bible study.

The first factor is the inherent difficulty involved in translating *any* message from one language into another. Languages often have different rules of syntax and grammar that make word-for-word equivalence impossible. Idioms (figures of speech) rooted in ancient cultures often sound nonsensical when translated literally into another language, so translators must somehow compensate to make them intelligible. In some cases, a word in the original language has no exact counterpart in English, so translators have to make a judgment call in selecting which English word to use, knowing that it isn't entirely accurate.

The second factor behind the large number of versions is a bit more complicated. It relates to something called "textual criticism." The "criticism" here has nothing to do with judging the *message*, but rather the *text* of the message—that is, the copies of copies of copies, ad infinitum, of the original documents. During the thousands of years since the books of the Bible were originally written, the copying process by which the Bible came down to us has been subject to all the usual glitches involved in transcribing ancient texts: scribal errors, accidental deletions, editorial insertions, transposed letters or words or even verses, and many other issues. The task of the textual critic is to sift through all the thousands of available copies and make a determination as to which readings are the most faithful rendition of the original. Of course, since we no longer have the originals, there is a good deal of educated guesswork that goes into those decisions.

(If this sounds like the Bible is shot full of errors and can't be trusted, don't fret. None of these discrepancies affect

any essential doctrine of faith. In fact, the huge number of available manuscripts reinforces our confidence in the overall reliability of the text.)

Faced with both kinds of issues, every translator is faced with a formidable task in teasing out the best English rendering of each verse. Every translation on the market represents one translator's (or more often, one translation committee's) attempt to resolve all these issues. Given the wide variety in theological perspectives represented among translators, it's no surprise that we have so many versions.

Rather than being a cause for concern, the abundance of versions represents an ideal opportunity to read the Bible from a variety of translation perspectives. Comparing different versions can be immensely helpful in unraveling the meaning of difficult passages. I have over thirty translations in my personal library, with others available online; comparing all these versions is an essential part of my research method.

So when you buy a new Bible, do yourself a favor and buy two or three.

— David King