

How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions

Gordon D Fee and Mark L Strauss (Zondervan, 2007)

Sometimes it seems that of the making of many Bible versions there is no end. Nearly every year there seems to be a new revision of an existing version, or a new more 'readable' version. How do we choose between them all?

If, like me, you have often been asked to recommend a first Bible for a new Christian, or you have had to decide on a version to use as a pew Bible, this is an important decision. How does one choose between the versions on offer?

The answer? 'It all depends' – in other words, the best, or even most 'faithful' version depends partly on the reader, and what they want to use the Bible for – for example, primarily to read, or to study. But the authors do give some recommendations at the end.

They get there by way of reviewing all the issues that go into translation: the meaning and task of translation; language, culture, text and style. Two final chapters give a brief overview of the Bible in English, and an exploration of all the contemporary Bible versions from the RSV (1952) onwards.

For me, it was helpful to understand early on in the book the difference between 'formal equivalence' and 'functional equivalence' (formerly known as dynamic equivalence). The former approach seeks to retain the form of the Greek as closely as possible (while often not reading so well) while the latter seeks to reproduce the meaning in good English. 'Mediating' versions lie somewhere in the middle.

The book's premise is that 'the best translation is one that remains faithful to the original meaning of the text, but uses language that sounds as clear and natural to the modern reader as the Hebrew or Greek did to the original readers.' It reminds readers that no translation is perfect, and that while the best translation should be 'accurate, clear, natural and audience-appropriate', no one version can be all of these.

Numerous examples explain some of the issues which translators face. We are introduced, for example, to the principles of 'lexical semantics': the Greek word *logos*, which many of us assume means 'word', can be translated with at least 17 different English words. So *logos* has no one 'meaning', but a range of meanings. When it comes to gender, the authors explain how language has changed, and how gender accurate language intentionally clarifies or specifies whether references are to males only or to both males and females.

And the recommendations? The NRSV as the most reliable 'formal equivalent' version. As a mediating, general-purpose Bible, the authors recommend the TNIV, an improvement on the NIV in both gender accuracy and exegetical precision. And among 'functional equivalent' versions? There are 'many good choices' listed.

Those who have benefited from Fee and Stuart's *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* will understand how the title came about – and will also have high expectations. In my view they will not be disappointed. While some might wonder about reading a whole book on issues of translation, the book is so fascinating and well written that I would commend it to all Christian leaders.

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