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# Choosing a Bible

*From literal to interpretive: a quick chart of English Bible translations*

Every English Bible is a translation from Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. Translators sit somewhere on a line. At one end they keep the original wording and word order as closely as English allows. At the other end they put the meaning into natural, everyday English. Neither end is "the right one." They do different jobs.

| Band | 1 Interlinear or very literal | 2 Formal (word-for-word) | 3 Balanced (mediating) | 4 Functional (thought-for-thought) | 5 Paraphrase |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | <-- MORE LITERAL (word-for-word) | | | MORE INTERPRETIVE (thought-for-thought) --> | |
| **What it does** | Shows each original word, often under the Hebrew or Greek line. | Keeps the words and word order as close as English allows. | Stays close to the words but smooths them where a literal rendering would confuse. | Puts the meaning of each sentence or phrase into natural English. | Restates the text freely in today's language, often in one person's words. |
| **Reads like** | A study tool, not a book you read through. | Careful and exact. Can feel stiff. | Clear and fairly smooth. | Smooth, like a modern book. | Very easy and lively. |
| **Best for** | Word-by-word study with the original languages. | Close study, word studies, memorizing exact wording. | One Bible for both study and everyday reading. | Reading long passages, devotions, new readers. | A fresh look at a passage you already know. |
| **Watch out for** | Not meant to be read as normal English. | Old or awkward phrasing; idioms carried over word for word. | Some interpretive choices hidden in smooth wording. | More of the translator's interpretation; harder for word studies. | Too loose to be your only Bible or to settle a doctrine. |
| **Bibles here** | **No guide places a full Bible here. Interlinears belong here by format.** | **NASB 1995*, NASB 2020*, ESV*, KJV*, NKJV*, LSB, NRSV*** | **NIV*, CSB*, NIrV*, BSB, NET, CEB, NABRE** | **NLT*, GNT, CEV** | **MSG, TLB** |

In between: the guides split on the AMP (Amplified Bible), between bands 2 and 3, and the TPT (The Passion Translation), between bands 4 and 5. * = ECPA (Evangelical Christian Publishers Association) top 10 best-selling translations, September 2026.

## Three things to keep in mind

- **More literal does not mean more accurate.** Every translation has to interpret. A word-for-word Bible can carry an idiom over so exactly that the meaning gets lost, and a thought-for-thought Bible can get the meaning right in plain words.
- **Use two Bibles from different bands.** Read a literal Bible beside a readable one. Where they differ, you have found a place worth a closer look. Bible websites and apps put them side by side for free.
- **Sales tell you what is popular, not what fits you.** Pick the Bible that fits how you will use it.

How the chart was made: each Bible's band is the middle value (median) of the published guides that place it: Logos (Faithlife), Christianbook, Bible Gateway, Tyndale and Olive Tree. The full list of 77 translations, with every guide's placement and source, is in the free book "Which Bible, Which Books?" and its companion workbook.

# How to Choose

*Start with how you will use your Bible, then pick a band*

These are my suggestions. The band numbers come from the published guides; which Bible fits which reader is my judgment, based on each Bible's band and the readers its publisher says it was written for.

| If you say… | Look in band | Try | Why it fits |
|---|---|---|---|
| **I want to study the exact wording, do word studies, or memorize.** | 2 Formal | NASB 1995, ESV, LSB, NKJV | You see the same English word where the original repeats a word, and the sentence order follows the original. Study tools like concordances line up well. |
| **I want one Bible for both study and daily reading.** | 3 Balanced | CSB, NIV, BSB | Close enough to the wording for study, smooth enough to read a chapter without stumbling. |
| **I want to read big sections, a whole book or a Bible in a year.** | 4 Functional (or 3) | NLT, NIV | Natural English keeps you reading. You follow the story and the argument instead of wrestling the sentences. |
| **I am a new believer, a teen, or English is my second language.** | 3 or 4 | NLT, NIrV, GNT | A lower reading level gets you into the text right away. You can add a more literal Bible later. |
| **I am reading to children.** | 3 Balanced | ICB, NIrV | Written for young readers, with short sentences and simple words. |
| **I want to follow along at church or in a small group.** | Any | The one your pastor or group reads | Matching the reading from the front makes it easier to follow, mark and remember. |
| **I want a fresh look at a passage I know well.** | 5 Paraphrase | MSG (The Message) | Good beside a real study Bible to hear a familiar text in new words. Not as your only Bible. |
| **I am Catholic, or I want the books my church counts.** | 2 or 3 | NABRE, NJB, Douay-Rheims | Catholic Bibles include the deuterocanonical books. Which books a Bible holds is a separate question from how it is translated. |
| **I want a Bible that keeps the Jewish setting in view.** | 3 or 4 | TLV, CJB | Messianic Jewish translations keep Hebrew names and terms and the Jewish context of the text. |

## Five questions to ask before you choose

1. **What will I use it for most?** Close study points left on the chart. Long reading points right.
2. **Can I read it for 20 minutes without getting lost?** Read a full chapter, like John 3 or Psalm 23, in two or three Bibles online before you buy.
3. **What does my church read from?** Following along in the same Bible helps a lot, especially when you are new.
4. **Does it have the books my tradition counts?** Protestant Bibles have 66 books. Catholic and Orthodox Bibles have more. Check the contents page.
5. **Does the edition fit me?** Study notes, print size, cross-references and an app version matter more day to day than most people expect.

## A good habit

Read from one Bible on each side of the middle. For example, read the NASB 1995 or the BSB for study and the NLT for long reading. Where they say it differently, slow down and look closer. That one habit will teach you more about translation than any chart.

# My Top Three

*One pick from each part of the line: literal, middle of the road, and interpretive*

**LITERAL PICK**

## NASB 1995

*2 Formal (word-for-word)*

### New American Standard Bible, 1995 update (The Lockman Foundation)

**Where it sits:** Band 2, formal (word-for-word). All four guides that place it agree, and the publisher calls its method "formal equivalence, or a word-for-word approach."

**Reading level:** About grade 11 (Bible Gateway).

**Best for:** Close study of the wording, word studies, memorizing, comparing with Hebrew and Greek tools.

**Trade-off:** It can read stiffly. Lockman released an updated NASB in 2020, so check the cover or the copyright page if you want the 1995 edition.

**Why I picked it: Every guide that places it calls it word-for-word, and I studied from it for years. It shows you what the text actually says.**

**Also good:** ESV (all four guides that place it agree on band 2; the number 2 seller), LSB.

**MIDDLE-OF-THE-ROAD PICK**

## BSB

*3 Balanced (mediating)*

### Berean Standard Bible (Berean Bible Translation Committee)

**Where it sits:** Band 3, balanced. Only one guide places it so far (Olive Tree), so treat that spot as tentative. Its publisher says each word is connected back to the Greek or Hebrew.

**Reading level:** Not rated by the guides. In my own count over Genesis, Psalms and John, it read the easiest of the Bibles I could test, including the NASB 1995 and KJV.

**Best for:** One Bible for study and daily reading; reading side by side with a literal Bible.

**Trade-off:** It is newer, and few independent guides have placed it yet.

**Why I picked it:** It reads easily but stays close to the Hebrew and Greek, and it has been dedicated to the public domain, so you can read it, print it and share it free. You can read it at berean.bible or Bible Hub.

**Also good:** CSB (all three guides that place it agree on band 3), NIV (the number 1 seller; three guides say band 3 and one says band 4).

**INTERPRETIVE PICK**

## NLT

*4 Functional (thought-for-thought)*

### New Living Translation (Tyndale House Publishers)

**Where it sits:** Band 4, functional (thought-for-thought). The three guides that place it agree. Tyndale says it translated "as simply and literally as possible" when that gave clear English, and "more dynamically" when it did not.

**Reading level:** About grade 6 (Bible Gateway).

**Best for:** Everyday and devotional reading, reading whole books at a time, new believers and young readers.

**Trade-off:** It interprets more, so it is less suited to word studies. Check a literal Bible before you build a teaching on one word.

**Why I picked it:** Of the thought-for-thought Bibles, it is the one the guides most agree on, and it is a top-5 seller. It reads like a modern book, and it is easy to pair with a literal Bible.

**Also good:** GNT (Good News Translation). I do not recommend a paraphrase such as The Message as anyone's only Bible.

Quoted method statements are from each publisher. Band placements are the median of the guides named on page 1. Sales ranks are from the ECPA Bible Translations Bestsellers list, September 2026. The reading levels come from Bible Gateway's translation guide. Facts were checked as of November 2026. The Bible I read and quote is the SLB, my own word-for-word translation in today's language (trinfinityenterprises.com/slb).

Acronyms: AMP Amplified Bible; BSB Berean Standard Bible; CEB Common English Bible; CEV Contemporary English Version; CJB Complete Jewish Bible; CSB Christian Standard Bible; ECPA Evangelical Christian Publishers Association; ESV English Standard Version; GNT Good News Translation; ICB International Children's Bible; KJV King James Version; LSB Legacy Standard Bible; MSG The Message; NABRE New American Bible, Revised Edition; NASB New American Standard Bible; NET New English Translation; NIrV New International Reader's Version; NIV New International Version; NJB New Jerusalem Bible; NKJV New King James Version; NLT New Living Translation; NRSV New Revised Standard Version; SLB Steadfast Literal Bible; TLB The Living Bible; TLV Tree of Life Version; TPT The Passion Translation; YLT Young's Literal Translation; ASV American Standard Version.