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## "The Best-Selling Bibles: What Librarians Need to Know"

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# The Best-Selling Bibles:

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## What Librarians Need to Know



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### **ABSTRACT**

This article presents guidance for librarians in the selection and recommendation of Bible translations. Pairing a reader with an appropriate Bible requires clear understanding of patron reading level and intended purpose along with a general knowledge of the major translations and their key characteristics. Bibliographic details and annotative summaries of the 10 best-selling Bibles in the United States are included. Ranking is based on the latest unit sales data released April 2014 by the Association for Christian Retail.

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The God-breathed words of the Holy Scriptures were originally recorded in the languages of the time: the Old Testament in Hebrew and Aramaic, and the New Testament in Greek. Over the millennia, learned scholars, from scribes to modern-day translators, have been arduously rendering these original texts into the languages of the world, making the Bible the most translated book of all time.

Fee and Strauss (2007) explain that modern Bible translation is based on the interrelated methodologies of formal equivalence and functional equivalence. Formal equivalence, or form-driven translation, strives to preserve literalness and syntactical structure, while functional equivalence emphasizes thoughts and meaning. No translation is strictly one style or the other; rather, it is the translators' blending of the two that creates a Bible's signature characteristics and predominant style. A continuum, ranging from extremely literal to extremely free (with mediating referring to the midpoint), is frequently used to plot Bibles and their translation philosophy and to illustrate their relationships. Reading several Bibles from across this continuum is very beneficial and highly encouraged, particularly in the settings of individual and corporate Bible study where literal versions are consulted alongside idiomatic ones (Fee & Strauss, 2007, pp.26-29).

Generally speaking, formal equivalent translations are best suited for serious study and should be recommended to the highly literate. These translations are often used with companion study aids such as concordances, commentaries, and dictionaries. Mediating translations are well-balanced and multipurpose. These are appropriate for both reading and studying and serve as excellent primary Bibles for adults.

Functional equivalent translations, the majority of Bibles today, are outstanding reading Bibles. These are especially helpful to new Bible readers, mission workers, and those for whom English is a second language.

Translators working in teams, empowered with the latest technology, are advancing the translation effort faster than ever before. The magnitude of the translator's task – to convey the Creator's message to His creation with accuracy, clarity, and readability – is awe-inspiring. Second Timothy 3:16-17 proclaims the purpose and power of the Scriptures:

God has breathed life into all of Scripture. It is useful for teaching us what is true. It is useful for correcting our mistakes. It is useful for making our lives whole again. It is useful for training us to do what is right. By using Scripture, a man of God can be completely prepared to do every good thing (New International Reader's Version).

Psalms 119:89 declares the magnificence of God's Word:

"Your word, Lord, is eternal; it stands firm in the heavens" (New International Version).

Pairing a reader with an appropriate Bible requires a clear understanding of patron reading level and intended purpose along with a general knowledge of the major translations and their key characteristics. A translation that is right for one person may not be right for another. A Bible's preface and introduction reveal essential information such as the goals of the translation team, translation philosophy, sponsorship, the use of inclusive language, and special features. The following list of the best-selling Bibles includes bibliographic details and annotative summaries intended as guidance in the selection and recommendation of Bible translations. Ranking is based on the latest unit sales data released in April 2014 by the Association for Christian Retail (CBA: The Association for Christian Retail, 2014).

### 1. **New International Version (NIV)**

**Primary Sponsor:** New York Bible Society/International Bible Society

**Translation Philosophy:** Mediating

**Reading Level:** Grade 7

**Website:** <http://www.biblica.com/en-us/>

The defining, international character of the NIV makes this Bible the number one choice of English speakers worldwide. It is also the preferred Bible of Evangelicals. In North America, the NIV accounts for 50% of all Bible sales. It is considered a versatile, well-balanced translation that is appropriate for young adults and adults. The NIV is appropriate for public and private reading and is commonly used in settings that involve teaching, preaching, devotions, study and memorization (Taliaferro, 2013, p. 155). The use of inclusive language is minimal.

## 2. King James Version (KJV)

**Primary Sponsor:** King James I England, 1611

**Reading Level:** Grade 12

**Translation Philosophy:** Formal Equivalence

**Website:** <http://www.kingjamesbibleonline.org/>

The KJV, also known as the *Authorized Version* (AV), dominated the English-speaking world for over 300 years and was the top-seller in the United States until the late 1980s. Numerous revisions have been published; however, the underlying text has not been changed to reflect newly discovered sources such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The KJV was written in Shakespearean English which is difficult for some people to understand today. It is recognized for its literary excellence, poetic rhythms, and majestic style. These characteristics make it best suited to churches offering a traditional, formal liturgy and to readers who grew up reading it.

## 3. English Standard Version (ESV)

**Primary Sponsor:** Crossway

**Translation Philosophy:** Formal Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 10

**Website:** <http://www.esv.org/>

The ESV is a stand-out among form-driven translations. It is considered more literal than the NIV but not too advanced for most readers. The ESV is a revision of the 1952 *Revised Standard Version*. It is written in the KJV tradition yet is free of archaisms. According to many scholars, this Bible strikes a nice balance between reading ease and literalness. It is trustworthy, accurate, and faithful to the original source languages. The ESV is excellent for teaching ministries and for individual and corporate Bible study. It does not use gender neutral language.

## 4. New King James Version (NKJV)

**Primary Sponsor:** International Bible Society

**Translation Philosophy:** Formal Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 8

**Website:** <http://www.thenkjvbible.com>

The NKJV is an excellent translation for those who are familiar with the KJV and want to transition to a more modern translation. It retains the acclaimed literary attributes of the KJV while offering a more up-to-date text. Obsolete expressions and archaic words such as thee and thou have been removed. The NKJV is not a replacement for the KJV. Two well-known study Bibles, *The MacArthur Study Bible* and *The Nelson Study Bible*, are based on the NKJV.

## 5. Common English Bible (CEB)

**Sponsorship:** Christian Resources Development Corporation, a subsidiary funded by the United Methodist Publishing House

**Translation Philosophy:** Functional Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 7

**Website:** <http://www.commonenglishbible.com/>

The *Common English Bible* is the newest translation on the market. The preface states this Bible strives to be “a fresh translation” intended for Anglican, Orthodox, and Catholic congregations. The CEB is written in casual, everyday American vernacular. The extensive use of contractions results in shorter sentences and a reduced overall word count. This Bible uses inclusive language and gender-neutral renderings for people. The Son of Man is referred to as the Human One.

## 6. New Living Translation (NLT)

**Primary Sponsor:** Tyndale House

**Translation Philosophy:** Functional Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 6

**Website:** <http://www.newlivingtranslation.com>

The NLT is a complete revision of the 1970s classic *The Living Bible*. Passages are written in smooth, contemporary everyday English, making it one of the easiest reading translations. It is highly recommended for the quick reading of lengthy passages and for public reading. The NLT uses inclusive language and gender-neutral renderings for people. Bible scholars, including Geisler & Nix (2012), do not recommend this Bible for in-depth study (p. 376).

## 7. Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB)

**Sponsorship:** Sunday School Board of the Southern Baptist Convention/Lifeway Christian Ministries

**Translation Philosophy:** Mediating

**Reading Level:** Grade 8

**Website:** <https://www.mystudybible.com/>

The HCSB bears the partial name of its publisher, Broadman & Holman (B&H), Holman being the oldest Bible publisher in America. As stated in the preface, the translation philosophy is optimal equivalence, which capitalizes on the strengths of both formal and functional equivalence. The HCSB is more literal than the NIV and does not use inclusive language. This translation contains many “helps” in the form of marginal and bullet notes which appeal to the serious scholar and those devoted to personal Bible study. The HCSB is appropriate for public and private reading.

## 8. Reina Valera 1960

**Translation Philosophy:** Formal Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 10

**Website:** <https://www.biblegateway.com/> (There is no official website.)

The *Reina Valera 1960* or the *Reina-Valera Revisión 1960 (RVR 1960)*, as it is known by Spanish-speakers, is the standard Spanish translation for Protestants and Evangelicals worldwide. This Bible is named after the original translator, Casiodoro de Reina, and the first editor, Cipriano de Valera. The first printing took place in Basel, Switzerland in 1569; the first revision was made in 1602 and published in Amsterdam. There have been a number of revisions of this classic work; however, the 1960 edition remains the most widely read.

## 9. New International Readers Version (NIRV)

**Sponsorship:** International Bible Society

**Translation Philosophy:** Functional Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 4

**Website:** <http://www.biblica.com/en-us/>

The NIRV was prepared by a subset of the NIV translation team. The NIRV is a simplification of the NIV. Sentences are very short, vocabulary is elementary, and gender-neutral language is used in moderation. The layout takes on a simplified form as the books of the Bible are broken down into many brief sections with subheadings. The NIRV targets early readers. It is recommended for children, adults with reading disabilities, and speakers of English as a second language. The NIRV is a stepping stone to the NIV.

## 10. New American Standard Bible (NASB)

**Sponsorship:** The Lockman Foundation

**Translation Philosophy:** Formal Equivalence

**Reading Level:** Grade 11

**Website:** <https://www.biblegateway.com/> (There is no official website.)

The NASB is one of the foremost literal translations because it so closely reflects the original languages. Some regard the NASB as more literal than the KJV. This translation is extremely valuable to serious Bible scholars, students, and those with an interest in etymology. Dewey (2009) and other theologians consider the cross-reference system one of the best (p. 157). The NASB does not employ gender inclusive language. Updates to the translation have eliminated archaisms and sentences beginning with “and.” This Bible is popular among conservative Evangelicals. †

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Stephanie P. Livengood is a librarian at the University of Akron Wayne College in Orrville, Ohio. She also serves as church librarian for Grace Church, Wooster, Ohio. She can be contacted at [steph25@uakron.edu](mailto:steph25@uakron.edu).

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