

Many translations of the Bible do not mean it has been changed



Big picture: The Bible has been translated into many languages, and into English many times. Many translations do not mean that the Bible has been changed, but in fact strengthen the argument that there is only one Bible text and show that God wants us to know him.

1. Muslims claim that many translations of the Bible into English show the Bible has become corrupted

A common objection our Muslim friends raise is a correlation between the assumed corruption of the Jewish and Christian Scriptures and multiple translations of the Bible into English and other languages. The objection is simply stated, 'the Bible must be corrupted; just look at how many versions of the Bible there are!'



2. New translations are needed as languages are dynamic

To start answering this objection, there is value in explaining the reason for many translations. The first is that language is not static. The everyday English spoken in the 16th Century, for example, was quite different, and in many ways unintelligible to modern readers. Language changes, and therefore new translations need to be produced for the original texts⁴ to be understood clearly.

3. Different approaches in translation are helpful for different reasons

Another reason for multiple translations into English is that the words, ideas, and sentence structures of the Biblical languages are different from English. Choices need to be made regarding the best way to translate any given sentence or idea. For example, it is possible to translate the Bible into English using a strictly technical word-for-word approach⁵. Alternatively, it is possible to translate the Bible "thought-for-thought", so that the meaning of the text is conveyed using equivalent ideas⁶. The aim here is for the translation to be understood easily by the modern reader⁷, translating in a way "the original authors might have said it had they been speaking in English to the global English-speaking audience today." Both types of translation have different strengths and are useful in different contexts⁸.

4. Translations early in the history of the Old and New Testaments strengthen the argument that there is only one Bible text

One perception that exists among Muslims is the idea that the translation of the Bible has taken place sequentially. In other words, an original was translated into a target language, the next translation was translated from the translation and so on, creating a long chain of "whispers" prone to the introduction of errors. With modern translations however, whenever a new translation or revision of a translation is made, the tendency is to go back to the earliest Hebrew or Greek manuscripts and include any advancement in manuscript discoveries, in order to ensure as high an accuracy as possible.¹¹

5. Translations become more accurate over time due to continued reference made to

the best available manuscripts

Right from earliest times, the Bible has always been translated, whether it is the Old Testament into Aramaic or Greek⁹, or the New Testament into Syriac or Latin and later into many languages. While this is perceived by Muslims as a weakness¹⁰, it actually provides us with an extra layer of textual evidence that helps us know the Bible has been transmitted accurately. For example, the Septuagint is a collection of translations of the Old Testament into Greek, used by the Jews from the 3rd Century BCE. While it contains many differences to the Masoretic Text, it is a key help to scholars as they seek to determine the original text of the Old Testament. See also “Abundant NT manuscript evidence” and “Old Testament carefully copied and affirmed by Jesus” for more information.

It is worth noting that the Quran translated into another language is no longer the Quran, but only an “interpretation” or “an attempt to understand its message”¹². In fact, according to Muslim scholars, the Quran cannot be translated. At the same time, in Muslim thinking, all translations are translated directly from what the Muslim believes to be the original seventh century text of the Quran. For them there are no issues of corruption of the Quranic text arising over the centuries. This approach might be one reason why Muslims raise the number of translations as an objection.

6. Many Muslims are reliant on translations of the Quran, of which there are many translations

While bearing this difference of approach to Scripture in mind, there may be value in raising the question with your Muslim friend as to why there are so many translations of the Quran. The Wikipedia page “English translations of the Quran” mentions at least 70 different translations of the Quran into English from Arabic¹. The Quran has also been translated into Urdu nearly 500 times². In this app we have included a link to a Quranic verse to show 16 different English translations of the Quran, which you can compare and show to your Muslim friend³. If the Quran revealed in Arabic is sufficient for Muslims worldwide for all time, why translate it at all?

7. Many translations show that God wants to communicate with people from all nations

The fact that as Christians we believe that God’s words can be translated is closely linked with the fact that we believe God is a relational God who wants us to know him personally. Point out to your Muslim friend that God wants to reveal himself to them and they do not need to learn Quranic Arabic in order to know the joy of knowing him. This is especially true if your friend’s mother tongue is not Arabic, perhaps even if your friend is fluent in the language.

The Bible continues to be translated into many languages, and as of 2020 there are 7360 languages in the world. Of these, 704 languages have a full Bible, which according to Wycliffe Bible translators gives 5.7 billion people access to the Bible in their own language¹³. A further 1551 languages have a full New Testament, 1160 have some portion of the Bible translated, and 2731 languages have active translation work. Just as he came down in the person of the Lord Jesus, God allows his words to incarnate into every language in existence, that all nations might know him.

References

1. [1 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_translations_of_the_Quran](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/English_translations_of_the_Quran)
2. [2 https://www.majesticquran.co.uk/can-the-quran-be-translated/](https://www.majesticquran.co.uk/can-the-quran-be-translated/)
3. [3 https://apologist.app/quran/compare/112/1/](https://apologist.app/quran/compare/112/1/) is a good example of one of the simplest statements the Quran makes, yet there is huge variation in how it is translated into English.
4. [4](#) A notable example is the latest version of the NIV that has chosen to translate ideas in a gender-neutral way in response of Western society's welcome recognition of the equality of men and women.
5. [5](#) This type of translation is known as “formal equivalence”
6. [6](#) This type of translation is known as “dynamic equivalence”
7. [7](#) Some modern translations like The Living Bible, or The Message take more of a paraphrased approach.
8. [8](#) “Word-for-word” translations are more useful for technical study, “thought-for-thought” translations tend to be better for public reading and teaching.

9. 9 See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cg4NbRHb8iY> for a detailed review of Old Testament manuscript evidence.
10. 10 See for example Mohammed Hijab's objections on the Bible's reliability: <https://youtu.be/JjhyoBSuDkk?t=-2020>
11. 11 See for example <https://www.thenivbible.com/textual-basis>
12. 12 <https://www.majesticquran.co.uk/can-the-quran-be-translated/>
13. 13 Compare this with only 420 million people able to read the Quran in Arabic (<https://istizada.com/complete--list-of-arabic-speaking-countries-2014/>) See also, "Is Islam an international religion?"