

Bible Versions, Messianic

I have seen a variety of Messianic Bible versions on the market. Is there any particular one that you recommend? What is your opinion of them?

There are a wide variety of Bible versions available on the market, which to various degrees have been produced with a Messianic audience in mind. Some of them are good, and some of them are questionable, perhaps no different than the many Christian Bibles that are available today. Some of them represent a good, conservative theological position, and affirm foundational doctrines of the faith, and some of them skew foundational doctrines of the faith.

The most commonly encountered Messianic version today, used within a great deal of Messianic Judaism and many sectors of the independent Messianic movement, has to be the *Complete Jewish Bible* translated by David H. Stern (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1998). The CJB uses a wide array of Hebrew and Jewish terms, including personal names of Biblical characters, place names, and terms used for ritual objects and practices. “Torah” is most often used for “Law.” One feature of the CJB that all readers need to be aware of, is that even though it is commonly used throughout the Messianic world, it is nevertheless a paraphrased version, and is not as literal as Christian versions like the NASB/NASU, RSV/NRSV/ESV, or even NIV/TNIV, and because of this, our ministry has only used the CJB in a secondary capacity. It is most appreciated, though, that the reasons for some of Stern’s renderings are offered in his valuable companion, the *Jewish New Testament Commentary* (Clarksville, MD: Jewish New Testament Publications, 1995).

As of Summer 2011, the *Tree of Life Messianic Family Bible—New Covenant* (Shippensburg, PA: Destiny Image, 2011) has been released, with the complete Bible of both the Tanach and Apostolic Scriptures (Old and New Testaments) due to be released sometime in 2013. The TLV is largely a Messianic update of the 1901 American Standard Version, with a wide array of well known Messianic Jewish leaders having served on its editorial board. The TLV uses far less Hebrew and Jewish terms than the CJB, sticking primarily to Yeshua, Messiah, Torah, and various ritual items. Other than that, more customary English names like Jacob (for James), Peter, John, Paul, and Moses are used. Those Bible readers who are used to a relatively literal version like the NASB/NASU, or even a dynamic equivalency version like the NIV, will very much appreciate the TLV. The TLV can be easily used as a close second version, alongside of the more well known Bible versions employed today.

Aside from the Complete Jewish Bible, which is used throughout mainline Messianic Judaism, the next most common Messianic version one is likely to encounter is *The Scriptures*, published by the Institute for Scripture Research of Northridge, South Africa. It should be noted that the ISR Scriptures has both a 1998 second edition and 2009 third edition, with some changes made in the third edition. Unlike versions such as the CJB or TLV, the ISR Scriptures represents a Sacred Name theology, seen by their usage of יהוה in Hebrew letters for the Divine Name YHWH/YHVH, instead of either “the LORD,” “ADONAI” (CJB), or “HASHEM” (ATS) per the widescale Jewish practice of not speaking God’s proper name.¹ The Hebrew title Elohim is used instead of “God.” Hebrew character and place names, as witnessed in versions like the CJB, are also used in the ISR Scriptures (even though the exact transliterations might differ). Unlike either the CJB or TLV, though, the Institute for Scripture Research has not been forthright in saying who served on its translation or editorial team, and as they have stated on their website (isr-messianic.org), “The ISR will not respond to doctrinal questions.” This means that there is no real way of knowing why certain things in the ISR Scriptures are rendered the way they are. Usage of the ISR Scriptures has doubtlessly grown because of how versions like the CJB were paraphrased, and the ISR Scriptures is far more literal. Still, because of the Institute for Scripture Research not holding to any definite doctrinal views, we must advise a high level of caution in using it.

¹ For an important review, consult the author’s article “Sacred Name Concerns” (appearing in *Confronting Critical Issues*).

Many of the other “Messianic” Bible versions that one may encounter (more likely being versions produced by the Sacred Name Only movement), tend to be little more than modified editions of the King James Version, with the Elizabethan period English updated with more modern terminology—and then with selective edits here and there, sometimes with Hebraic terms subjectively inserted with no substantial theological justification. Furthermore, a few of those who produce Messianic Bible versions exhibit no formal training in the Biblical languages of Hebrew or Greek, and appear to be nothing more than eclectic re-writings of Scripture to fit some kind of (gross sectarian) bias. Interesting renderings of various controversial verses may be offered, but they are then not joined with any kind of strong theological or exegetical defense in the form of associated research papers or substantial commentary.

Generally speaking, if today’s Messianic Believers can be aware of some specific places within mainline Christian versions like the NASB/NASU or the RSV/ESV—which tend to reflect an anti-Torah bias—then they should be able to get by for most reading fairly well. Verses to definitely be aware of in the Apostolic Scriptures or New Testament include:

- **Mark 7:19**, where “*Thus He* declared all foods clean” (NASU) appears, but where the clause *katharizōn panta ta brōmata* (καθαρίζων πάντα τὰ βρώματα) can be legitimately rendered as “cleansing all food” (TLV) or “purging all the foods,” referring to the process of excretion.²
- **Romans 10:4**, where the word *telos* (τέλος) is often rendered as “end,” in “Christ is the end of the law for righteousness” (NASU), has widely been recognized in theological studies as also meaning “goal” (CJB, Common English Bible, TLV), or at the very least something akin to “culmination” (TNIV), and not necessarily “end” equaling “termination.”³
- **Romans 14:14**, where Paul says, “I know and am convinced in the Lord Jesus that nothing is unclean in itself; but to him who thinks anything to be unclean, to him it is unclean” (NASU), the term rendered as “unclean” is *koinos* (κοινός), which “**pert. to being of little value because of being common, common, ordinary, profane**” (BDAG).⁴ In the food lists of Leviticus 11 and Deuteronomy 14, the Hebrew *tamei* (טָמֵא) or “unclean” is rendered as *akathartos* (ἀκάθαρτος) in the Septuagint, which is obviously not the term that appears in Romans 14:14. Food that is *koinos*, then, should be regarded as either “unholy” (TLV) or “common” (LITV), which may be viewed as “that which ordinary people eat, in contrast to those of more refined tastes” (BDAG).⁵ The situation in view would then pertain to various human judgments about what is acceptable for eating, but not have to do with the validity or abrogation of the kosher dietary laws.⁶
- **Ephesians 2:15**, for most Bible readers, says that the work of the Messiah has been responsible for “abolishing in His flesh the enmity, *which* is the Law of commandments contained in ordinances” (NASU). Much of how one approaches what *ton nomon tōn entolōn en dogmasin* (τὸν νόμον τῶν ἐντολῶν ἐν δόγμασιν) actually is, is in recognizing how *nomos* (νομός) or “law” does not always mean the Mosaic Torah or Pentateuch, and how *dogma* (δόγμα) can relate to “*that which seems to one, an opinion, dogma*” (LS),⁷ or “**something that is taught as an established tenet or statement of belief, doctrine, dogma**” (BDAG).⁸ With the barrier wall of the Jerusalem Temple in view (Ephesians 2:14), and with this not at all specified by the Mosaic Torah, extra-Biblical regulations are instead targeted here. It would not at all be inappropriate to then render *ton nomon tōn entolōn en dogmasin* as “the *religious* Law of commandments in dogmas” (my translation), with an italic “*religious*” specifying that man-made religious law and not Biblical law is in view.⁹

² Consult the FAQ, “Mark 7,” as well as the *Messianic Kosher Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

³ Consult the FAQ, “Romans 10:4.”

⁴ *BDAG*, 552.

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Consult the author’s article “To Eat or Not to Eat?,” as well as the *Messianic Kosher Helper* by Messianic Apologetics.

⁷ *LS*, 207.

⁸ *BDAG*, 254.

⁹ Consult the FAQ, “Ephesians 2:14-15.”

Other areas of potential disagreement among English Bible translations, in either the Tanach or Apostolic Scriptures, would then be those places where a spectrum of all interpreters and expositors—including Messianic teachers—do not necessarily see eye-to-eye. This is why there are a series of single translator/author versions on the market, such as *The New Testament in Modern English* by J.B. Phillips, or more recently *The Kingdom New Testament* by N.T. Wright. Robert Alter has released a series of specialty volumes on many parts of the Tanach, including the Torah, Psalms, and Wisdom books.