

THE BIBLE AND TRANSLATIONS

WHAT ARE THE SCRIPTURES?

The New Testament speaks of the Old Testament as Scripture, for which the Greek word is *graphe*, meaning "writing." The word *bible* comes from the Greek word for book. *Holy Bible* means the "Holy Book." It contains sixty-six separate books (thirty-nine Old Testament and twenty-seven New Testament), written in three languages (Hebrew, Greek, and a bit in Aramaic), over a period of more than a thousand years, by more than forty authors (of varying ages and backgrounds) on three continents (Asia, Africa, and Europe).

Authors of the Bible include kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, and scholars. The books of the Bible cover history, sermons, letters, songs, and love letters. There are geographical surveys, architectural specifications, travel diaries, population statistics, family trees, inventories, and numerous legal documents. It covers hundreds of controversial subjects with amazing unity. It is the best-selling book of all time and is now available in nearly three thousand languages.

The Old Testament was written on papyrus—a form of paper made out of reeds; the New Testament was written on parchment (prepared animal skins). Because both forms of documents easily degrade under hot and dry conditions, it is providential that we have so many copies of ancient manuscripts. The various chapter and verse divisions in the Bible were not part of the original books. A lecturer at the University of Paris created the chapter divisions in 1228. Its current chapter and verse divisions were not fully developed until 1551.

WHAT DOES SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT ITSELF?

Some statements from Scripture about Scripture:

- Given by inspiration of God — 2 Timothy 3:16; 2 Peter 1:19–21
- The very words of God — 1 Thessalonians 2:13
- All we need to know God — Luke 16:29, 31
- A perfect guide for life — Proverbs 6:23
- Pure — Psalm 12:6; 119:140
- True — Psalm 119:160; John 17:17
- Trustworthy — Proverbs 30:5–6
- Perfect — Psalm 19:7
- Effective — Isaiah 55:11
- Powerful — Hebrews 4:12
- Nothing to be taken from or added to — Deuteronomy 4:2; 12:32
- For everyone — Romans 16:25–27
- To be obeyed — James 1:22

Some poetic images from Scripture about Scripture:

- Sweet like honey — Psalm 19:10
- A lamp to guide our life — Psalm 119:105
- Food for our soul — Jeremiah 15:16
- A fire that purifies and a hammer that breaks us — Jeremiah 23:29
- A sword — Ephesians 6:17; Hebrews 4:12
- A seed for salvation planted in us — James 1:21
- Milk that nourishes us — 1 Peter 2:2

By its own declaration, the importance of Scripture can hardly be overstated. We will now examine how we received the precious gift of Scripture in the English language.

HOW DID WE GET OUR ENGLISH BIBLE?

Many volumes have been written to explain the miraculous and fascinating process necessary for the Bible's existence. To help you understand the process in a brief and simple way, I will explain a five-step sequence that has occurred for you to read the Bible.

God --> Revelation/Inspiration --> Transmission --> Translation --> Interpretation --> Application --> Your Life

1. Revelation is the miraculous event whereby God revealed Himself and His Truth to someone and inspired them, through the power of the Holy Spirit, to write down what He had to say—perfectly. This original copy is called the *autographa*.

2. Transmission occurred when the autographa was carefully copied by trained scribes so that other copies could be made available for people to read. While these handwritten copies have the occasional minor error (e.g., spelling or punctuation), they were accepted as accurate and authoritative by God's people (e.g., Deuteronomy 17:18 cf. 1 Kings 2:3; Ezra 7:14; Nehemiah 8:8). For example, the apostles, who were the senior leaders in the early church, taught from copies of the books of the Bible (Acts 17:2; 18:8), and the early church tested all teachings against the existing scrolls (Acts 17:11). Furthermore, Jesus Himself taught from copies of the books, not the autographa, and treated them as authoritative (e.g., Matthew 12:3–5; 21:16, 42; Luke 4:16–21; 10:26). In conclusion, God's people have always relied on manuscripts, and these writings have proven to be accurate and trustworthy. Jesus' own perfect example assures us of their trustworthiness.

Tragically, opponents of Scripture have attacked its trustworthiness by falsely stating that our current English translations are built upon poorly transmitted copies. However, the *bibliographical test* of Scripture flatly refutes this false argument. The bibliographical test seeks to determine the historicity of an ancient text by analyzing the quantity and quality of copied manuscripts, as well as how far removed they are from the time of the originals. The quantity of New Testament manuscripts is unparalleled in ancient literature. There are more than five thousand Greek manuscripts, about eight thousand Latin manuscripts, and another one thousand manuscripts in other languages (Syriac, Coptic, etc.). As the following chart illustrates, both the number of transmitted manuscripts we possess of Scripture and their proximity in date to the autographa are astounding and unparalleled in the canon of Western literature.

AUTHOR	DATE WRITTEN	EARLIEST COPY	TIME SPAN	NUMBER OF COPIES	ACCURACY
Homer	ca. 850 BC			643	95%
Herodotus	ca. 450 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1350yrs	8	N/A
Euripides	ca. 440 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1500 yrs	9	N/A
Thucydides	ca. 420 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1300 yrs	8	N/A
Plato	ca. 380 BC	ca. AD 900	About 1300 yrs	7	N/A
Aristotle	ca. 350 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1400 yrs	5	N/A
Caesar	ca. 60 BC	ca. AD 900	About 950 yrs	10	N/A
Ticitus	ca. 100 BC	ca. AD 1100	About 1000 yrs	20	N/A
New Test.	ca. AD 60	ca. AD 130	About 100 yrs	14,000	99.5%

**Taken directly from Ken Boa's I'm Glad You Asked, page 78*

Possibly the oldest manuscript is a scrap of papyrus (p52) containing John 18:31–33 and 37–38, dating from AD 125–130, no more than forty years after John's gospel was likely written. A non-Christian scholar, Carsten Peter Thiede, even claims that he has dated a fragment of Matthew to about AD 60. By comparing the ancient manuscripts, we find that the vast majority of variations are minor elements of spelling, grammar, and style, or accidental omissions or duplications of words or phrases. Only about four hundred (less than one page of an English translation) have any significant bearing on the meaning of a passage, and most are footnoted in modern English translations. Overall, 97 to 99 percent of the New Testament can be reconstructed beyond any reasonable doubt, and no Christian doctrine is founded solely or even primarily on textually disputed passages.

Moreover, the Scripture quoted in the works of the early Christian writers (mostly AD 95–150) are so extensive that virtually the entire New Testament can be reconstructed, except for eleven verses, mostly from 2 and 3 John.

Critics of the accuracy of the Bible routinely claim that it is in fact a series of fables and legends that have developed over hundreds of years because there are not enough copies of ancient manuscripts to alleviate their skepticism. However, a simple shepherd boy dealt a death blow to their criticisms in 1947. He wandered into a cave in the Middle East and discovered large pottery jars filled with leather scrolls that had been wrapped in linen cloth. Amazingly, the ancient copies of the books of the Bible were in good condition despite their age and the harsh climate because they had been well sealed for nearly nineteen hundred years. What are now known as The Dead Sea Scrolls are made up of some forty thousand inscribed ancient fragments. From these fragments, more than five hundred books have been reconstructed, including some Old Testament books such as a complete copy of Isaiah.

Simply, if someone seeks to eliminate the trustworthiness of the New Testament, then to be consistent they would also have to dismiss virtually the entire canon of Western literature and pull everything from Homer to Plato to Aristotle off of bookstore shelves and out of classroom discussions. The transmission process of Scripture is, by God's providential grace, without peer.

3. Translation occurs in service to people who want to read the books of the Bible but are not familiar with the original language in which they were written (Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic). Teams of language theory scholars carefully undertake the painstaking process of translating the original languages into the languages of other peoples. Today, the Bible has been carefully translated into nearly three thousand languages. While the thought of a translation may concern some people, the fact remains that most of the canon of Western literature has also been translated because we do not use their original languages either. The first translation of the English Bible was initiated by John Wycliffe and completed by John Purvey in AD 1388.

4. Interpretation occurs when someone reads the Bible in a language they can understand and determines the meaning of the verses they read by the enablement of God the Holy Spirit who also inspired the writing of Scripture. Each text of the Bible has only one true interpretation and so we must be careful to read the truth out of the Bible (exegesis) rather than reading our beliefs and desires into it (eisegesis).

A common question arises at this point: is the Bible to be interpreted literally? The answer is yes. There are plain-literal and figurative-literal portions of the Bible. We begin by assuming the plain-literal meaning and if that seems absurd then we go with a figurative-literal interpretation. A figurative-literal Scripture teaches a truth in a poetic way and often uses the words "like" or "as" to tip us off that figurative language is being used. But even when figurative language is being used, it is still

communicating a literal truth. For example, in the poetic Song of Songs, the man says to his beloved, "your eyes are doves" (1:15). In this figurative language, the man is communicating a very literal truth. He likens her eyes to doves, which come in pairs, and when their tail-feathers flutter they appear like eyelashes. Doves have just one faithful mate throughout their lives, possibly indicating that her eyes are focused on him alone. The dove is also a symbol of peace and purity, alluding to her virginity.

5. Application is the result of taking what we learn from the principles in the Bible and making changes in our thoughts and actions by God the Holy Spirit's empowering grace so that our life is congruent with the Bible. There are a seemingly infinite number of applications for a text of the Bible. For example, when the Bible says that we should love people, the applications for that principle are endless.

In this five-step process (Revelation/Inspiration --> Transmission --> Translation --> Interpretation --> Application), we see how God speaks to us and cares deeply about our lives. We also see how the chasm between God and us is graciously filled by God's revelation, which is more accurate and true than our human speculation (e.g., religion and philosophy). While the first step (Revelation/Inspiration of the autographa) is the only one that is guaranteed to be perfect, the other steps are indeed accurate. We must be increasingly careful as we move through the steps, however, because the opportunity for error increases at each step. Lastly, the third step of translation is incredibly important because that is what we depend on for the learning and living of our Christian faith. On this point, noted theologian J. I. Packer said, "I find myself suspecting very strongly that my work on the translation of the ESV Bible was the most important thing that I have done for the Kingdom, and that the product of our labors is perhaps the biggest milestone in Bible translation in the past fifty years or more."

WHY ARE THERE DIFFERENT BIBLE TRANSLATIONS?

In translating the Bible into English, four general categories of translation are most common: word-for-word translations, thought-for-thought translations, paraphrases, and corruptions. The same four options are also used in the translation of other ancient books into English.

Word-for-Word

Word-for-word translations (also known as literal translations) make a special effort to carefully interpret each word from their original Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic into English. Word-for-word translations emphasize God, the divine author of Scripture, over the human reader of Scripture. The result is a striving for the precision of what the Bible says, much like one would expect in other important communications, such as legal documents, marriage vows, or contracts. Word-for-word translations are generally a high school reading level.

Word-for-word translations tend to be the best for studying because of their accuracy, though they sometimes lose the poetic nuances of the original languages. Probably the best word-for-word translations are the English Standard Version (ESV), the New American Standard Bible (NASB), and the New King James Version (NKJV). The King James Version (KJV) is also a word-for-word translation, but because of its use of old English, it is very difficult for some people to read. The NASB was widely regarded as the most scholarly word-for-word translation until the arrival of the ESV. It did not become widely popular, however, because of its tight copyright and sometimes stiff translation of poetry that lost some of the beauty of the original writings. Thankfully, the ESV has preserved the degree of accuracy present in the NASB while also doing a better job of translating the poetic parts of Scripture in a more fluid manner.

The philosophy of word-for-word translation guided virtually every English Bible translation until the middle of the twentieth century. At that time, thought-for-thought translation became popular.

Thought-for-Thought

Thought-for-thought translations (also known as dynamic equivalence or functional equivalence) attempt to convey the full nuance of each passage by interpreting the Scripture's entire meaning and not just the individual words. Thought-for-thought translations may include words that were not included in the original text in an effort to give the same meaning that the reader of the original languages would have had.

The best and most widely read thought-for-thought English translation is the New International Version (NIV). Other thought-for-thought translations include Today's New International Version (TNIV), New Living Translation (NLT), Contemporary English Version (CEV), and the Good News Bible (GNB). The benefit of thought-for-thought translations in general, and the NIV, my favorite thought-for-thought translation, in particular, is that they are easy to understand and make the Bible accessible to a wide number of people.

Going one step further than thought-for-thought translations are paraphrases, which combine both Scripture and interpretive commentary into the translation method.

Paraphrase

Paraphrased translations pay even less attention to specific word meanings than thought-for-thought translations in an attempt to capture the poetic or narrative essence of a passage. For this reason, many paraphrased translations do not even have verses divisions in them. Examples of paraphrased translations include The Message (TM), The Living Bible (TLB), and The Amplified Bible (TAB).

Corruption

Corruptions are "translations" of Scripture that clearly seek to undermine the very teaching of Scripture. These "translations" are very poor and should not be used as credible translations for study. These include the Jehovah's Witness translation called the New World Translation, which was written in large part to eliminate the deity of Jesus Christ.

Lastly, while purchasing a study Bible can be quite expensive, it is imperative that every serious student of the Bible invests some money purchasing at least one nice Bible with some helps (footnotes, cross-references, etc.) and room for their notes. When buying a Bible, the general rule is that the more money you spend, the better the quality of paper, binding, and leather you will receive. Because your primary Bible will be filled with notes and become so familiar to you, it is wise to invest in a good Bible so that it lasts. This will enable you to spend considerable time reading it, memorizing it, studying it, and meditating upon it as God the Holy Spirit reveals to you the person and work of Jesus on every page.

APPENDIX

Translations

CEV – Contemporary English Version
ESV – English Standard Version
GNB – Good News Bible
HCSB – Holman Christian Standard Bible
KJV – King James Version
NASB – New American Standard Bible
NCV – New Century Version
NIV – New International Version
NLT – New Living Translation
NKJV – New King James Version
NRSV – New Revised Standard Version
NTME – New Testament in Modern English (Phillips)
REB – Revised English Bible
RSV – Revised Standard Version
TAB – The Amplified Bible
TLB – The Living Bible
TM – The Message
TNIV – Today's New International Version
TSB – The Street Bible

Word-for-Word Translations

ESV, HCSB, KJV, NASB, NKJV, NRSV, RSV

Thought-for-Thought Translations

NCV, NIV, TNIV, NLT, CEV, GNB, REB

Paraphrases

NTME, TAB, TLB, TM, TSB

Corruptions

New World Translation

For Further Reading on Bible Translations

The Indestructible Book -- by Ken Connolly
The Word of God in English -- by Leland Ryken
Choosing a Bible -- by Leland Ryken
The Bible in Translation -- by Bruce Metzger
How We Got the Bible -- by John Sailhamer
A General Introduction to the Bible -- by Norman Geisler