

The Bible

At the coronation of the Monarch of the United Kingdom, the Moderator of the Church of Scotland hands the monarch a Bible, saying:

“This Book is the most valuable thing that this world affords. Here is Wisdom; this is the royal Law; these are the lively Oracles of God.”

John Wesley says in the Preface to his published sermons:

I am a creature of a day, passing through life as an arrow through the air. I am a spirit come from God, and returning to God: just hovering over the great gulf; till, a few moments hence, I am no more seen; I drop into an unchangeable eternity! I want to know one thing – the way to heaven; how to land on that happy shore. God Himself has condescended to teach the way; for this end He came from heaven. He hath written it down in a book. O give me that book! At any price, give me the book of God!

Inspiration of the Bible

The Bible occupies a place between the general revelation of God in nature, and the full revelation of God in Jesus Christ. He is the Personal Word (*Logos*); the Bible is the written word. It is an inspired revelation from God to man.

What do we mean by inspiration?

“Inspiration” means “breathing”. God breathed the words; man wrote them down. 2 Tim 3:16; 2 Peter 1:21.

But the inspired writings came through human vessels. Like water that moulds itself to the vessel that contains it, the words are moulded by the inspired person through whom they came. The writers were not passive robots. Compare the personality of Paul, as compared with that of John, as shown in their writings.

Scriptural proofs of inspiration

The witness of the Old Testament – 2 Samuel 23:2; many times the prophets say, “The word of the Lord” or “Thus saith the Lord.”

The witness of the Lord Jesus – Luke 24:44,45; Matthew 15:3,6; John 10:35; Luke 24:27. He quoted from four of the five books of Moses, Psalms, Isaiah, Zechariah, and Malachi.

The witness of the apostles – 2 Tim 3:16,17; Acts 1:16; 2 Peter 3:2; Galatians 1:16; Ephesians 3:3, etc. Note that in 2 Peter 3:16 Peter put Paul’s writings on the same level as the other scriptures.

Why do we consider the Bible to be inspired?

There are several excellent responses to this question on YouTube. See, for example, “Why the Bible? Ravi Zacharias at the University of Illinois” (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pHRP0I2SrVs>).

Composition of the Bible

The “canon” of Scripture was not decided by church councils (though it was ratified by them) but by the common opinion of the whole Christian body. The word “canon” originally meant a measuring-stick.

Divisions of the Canon

The Jews recognised three divisions in the Old Testament:

- The Law – the five books of Moses. These books were accepted as canonical by 400 BC.
- The Prophets – The Former Prophets included the historical books of Joshua, Judges, Samuel and Kings; and the Latter Prophets included what we now refer to as the prophetic books (except for Daniel). This section was agreed to be canonical by 200 BC.
- The Writings – Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, and Esther. This group was agreed upon by 100 BC.

The Muratorian canon of the New Testament was accepted in 200 AD. It contained all the present books except Hebrews, James, and 3 John. Other books were rejected, such as the Acts of Paul, the Epistle of Barnabas, etc. These rejected books form the New Testament Apocrypha, which you can still find included as an appendix in some versions of the Bible.

The two testaments

A “testament” is a covenant – an arrangement made between two parties. Several covenants are recorded in the Bible. The two “testaments” refer to the two major covenants that God has made: the old covenant made with Israel through Moses (the law) and the new covenant made with His new people through Jesus Christ. See Jeremiah 31:31ff. and Hebrews ch.8.

The Old Testament is a preparatory revelation that prepares us for the coming of the New. See Gal 3:24. It is superseded by the New, though the moral law of God is unchanged.

Chronological order of the books

The Old Testament books were written over a period of about 1000 years. The table below shows the chronological order in which books of the Bible were written (the dates of some books are subject to opinion). Note the following:

- The Psalms occur throughout the period.

- The biblical order shows little relationship to the historical order.

Genesis	1 Kings	2 Chronicles	Lamentations
Job?	Ecclesiastes	Obadiah	Daniel
Exodus, Leviticus	2 Kings	Joel	Psalms 137
Numbers	Jonah	Isaiah	Ezekiel
Deuteronomy	Amos	Hosea	Ezra
Psalms 90, 91	Psalms 1, 2, 10, etc.	Micah	Haggai
Joshua, Judges, Ruth	Psalms 102, 104-106, 111-125, 127-136, 146-150	Nahum	Psalms 107, 126
1 and 2 Samuel	1 Chronicles	Zephaniah	Esther
Proverbs	Psalms 42, 44, etc.	Habakkuk	Ezra 7-10
Song of Solomon		Jeremiah	Nehemiah, Malachi

For the New Testament, the order is as follows:

Matthew	Philippians	Hebrews	1 Peter
Mark	1 and 2 Thessalonians	Titus	2 Peter
Luke	1 and 2 Corinthians	Philemon	1 John, 2 John
John	Ephesians	1 Timothy	3 John
James	Romans	Acts	Jude
Galatians	Colossians	1 Timothy	Revelation

Authors and dates

Opinions differ on the authorship and dates of some of the books. Here are the generally agreed dates and authors.

Old Testament

Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy = Moses - 1400 B.C.
 Joshua = Joshua - 1350 B.C.
 Judges, Ruth, 1 Samuel, 2 Samuel = Samuel / Nathan / Gad - 1000 - 900 B.C.
 1 Kings, 2 Kings = Jeremiah? - 600 B.C.
 1 Chronicles, 2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah = Ezra - 450 B.C.
 Esther = Mordecai - 400 B.C.
 Job = Moses? - 1400 B.C.
 Psalms = several different authors, mostly David - 1000 - 400 B.C.
 Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Solomon = Solomon - 900 B.C.
 Isaiah = Isaiah - 700 B.C.

Jeremiah, Lamentations = Jeremiah - 600 B.C.
 Ezekiel = Ezekiel - 550 B.C.
 Daniel = Daniel - 550 B.C.
 Hosea = Hosea - 750 B.C.
 Joel = Joel - 850 B.C.
 Amos = Amos - 750 B.C.
 Obadiah = Obadiah - 600 B.C.
 Jonah = Jonah - 700 B.C.
 Micah = Micah - 700 B.C.
 Nahum = Nahum - 650 B.C.
 Habakkuk = Habakkuk - 600 B.C.
 Zephaniah = Zephaniah - 650 B.C.
 Haggai = Haggai - 520 B.C.
 Zechariah = Zechariah - 500 B.C.
 Malachi = Malachi - 430 B.C.

New Testament

Matthew = Matthew - A.D. 55
 Mark = John Mark - A.D. 50
 Luke = Luke - A.D. 60
 John = John - A.D. 90
 Acts = Luke - A.D. 65

Romans, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 Thessalonians, 2 Thessalonians, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon = Paul - A.D. 50-70

Hebrews = unknown, best guesses are Paul, Luke, Barnabas, or Apollos - 65 A.D.
James = James - A.D. 45
1 Peter, 2 Peter = Peter - A.D. 60

1 John, 2 John, 3 John = John - A.D. 90
Jude = Jude - A.D. 60
Revelation = John - A.D. 90

The Biblical text

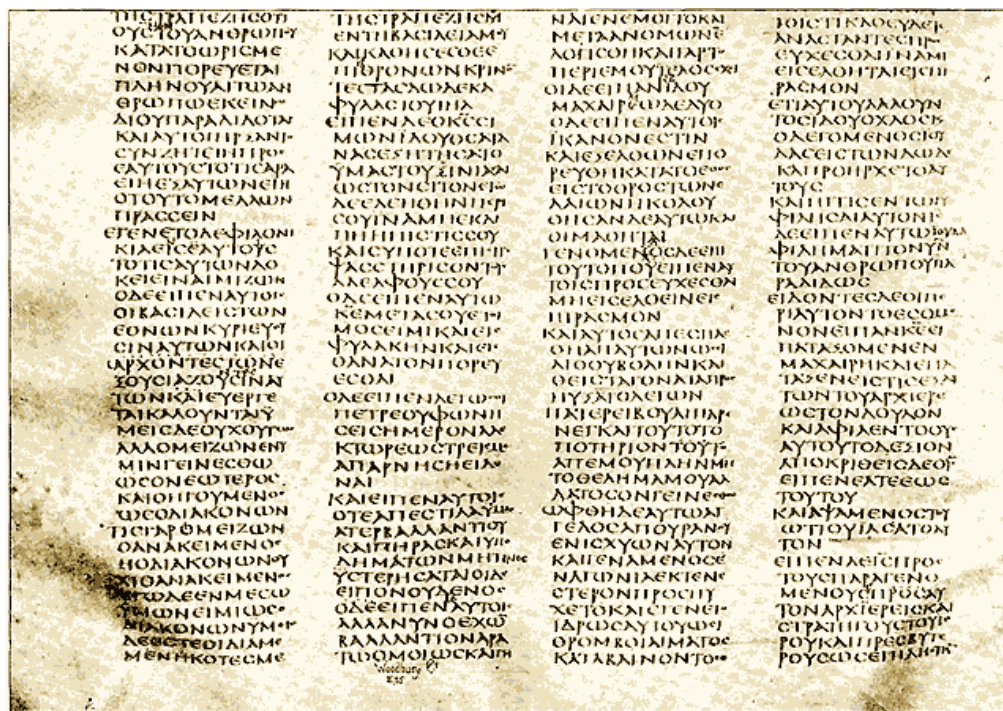
The original manuscripts that make up the Bible were written over a 1,500 year time span by more than 40 authors from every walk of life including kings, peasants, philosophers, fishermen, poets, statesmen, and scholars.

They were written in three languages: Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek; in times of war and times of peace; and written on three different continents: Asia, Africa and Europe.

Manuscripts

The original manuscripts written by the authors are, of course, lost. But there are thousands of manuscripts that contain fragments or whole books. The study of these manuscripts, in an effort to get back to the original, is called Lower Criticism. Lower Criticism allows us to get a fairly accurate idea of the exact words used by the original author. In truth, the deviations among manuscripts are almost entirely trivial and do not compromise the overall message. It has been estimated that the “best” aggregate manuscript of the Greek New Testament is 99.6% accurate.

A page from a 4th century manuscript of the New Testament is shown below.



Note that:

- It is all in capital letters, so words like *Spirit* can be written with or without a capital.

- There is no punctuation.
- There are hardly any spaces between the words.
- There are no chapter or verse numbers (those came over 1000 years later), so you should always read past a chapter division.

Bible translations

Translation is full of pitfalls; no translation is perfect. The translator cannot help getting in the way, and his/her own beliefs always affect the result. There are basically two types of translations:

Word-for-word translation

In this type of translation the words are translated as they stand. Idioms are translated literally. So if the writer wanted to say he was “in a hole” (meaning in debt) it would be translated literally as if he was in a depression in the ground.

Thought-for-thought translation

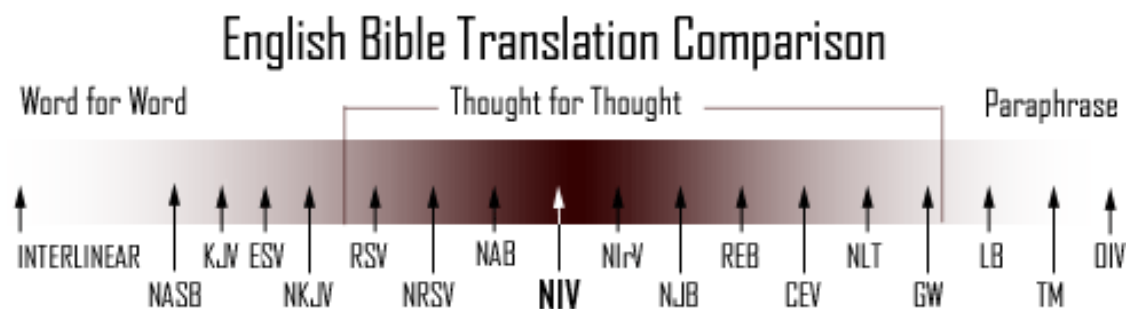
In this kind of translation, phrases are translated instead of individual words. So the author who was “in a hole” may be translated as “in debt”. The aim here is to make the Bible understandable by the average reader. “Strange” phrases and words are avoided, but accuracy may be lost.

Paraphrases

A paraphrase such as the Living Bible or the Message is not a translation at all, though it may draw upon translations. It is simply another translation rendered in everyday speech.

Which method is best?

You may think that a thought-for-thought translation is therefore better. But not necessarily. One problem with such a translation is that it is more susceptible to the translator’s preconceived ideas. The other is that by not taking care to translate words as they occur, it breaks links between occurrences of a particular word or phrase.



In practice, it is best to use a thought-for-thought translation for prolonged reading, because it will give you the general drift or what it is saying. But for study purposes, a word-for-word

translation is much better. I recommend use of the English Standard Version for reading, and the NASB for study – but you could use the ESV for both.

What kind of Bible to use

Get a Bible that meets these criteria:

- a good translation – preferably word-for-word
- has cross-references on each page
- does not give paragraph headings; these are the translator’s best guess and may not be reliable
- does *not* include notes that try to explain the passage (historical notes are OK). These comments are *not* inspired, frequently unreliable, and are coloured by the author’s doctrinal position. If you rely on them they will only give you one point of view.
- has a good concordance available for the version

How to read the Bible

There are many ways to read the Bible. You should use *all* of these.

- Reading long passages. Read chapters or whole books in order to get the general flow. Try reading them in chronological order (see above).
- Study of a passage. Use a good translation (word-for-word) and spend your time looking at a few verses in detail. Look up cross-references or use a concordance.
- Pray-reading. In this method you make the words into a conversation with the Lord. You can do it phrase by phrase or word by word. Either way, you will only cover a few verses in a session – but you will then know those well!
- Meditation. This has been compared to “chewing the cud”. You take perhaps a single verse and meditate on each word and phrase in turn. You do not look up cross-references; instead you just turn the text over again and again in your mind, perhaps combining it with pray-reading.

Bible Reading Aids

Often you will find great help in using aids that give you background or meaning of the text.

- Use a concordance to look up verses or to study particular words.
- Use a Bible dictionary to learn more about a place, person, thing, or doctrine. But remember that it may reflect the author’s prejudices.
- Use a commentary to get someone else’s ideas about the meaning of a particular passage – but remember that you are only getting one person’s ideas.

Interpretation

The science or art of Bible interpretation is known as *hermeneutics*. It aims to understand what the real meaning of the text is, and how to interpret a particular text in the light of other texts, some of which may seem to be contradictory.

When reading the Bible, remember that there are several layers of meaning:

- what it meant to the people who first heard it
- what it means within the overall revelation of the Bible
- what it means to you personally as the Holy Spirit applies it to you

Helpful hints

Here are some simple rules for understanding:

- Never let a plain statement of scripture be contradicted by an obscure one. Instead, interpret the obscure one in the light of the plain one.
- Don't let your personal understanding of a text contradict its original, plain meaning. Be honest – you don't know better than the Holy Spirit.
- Get as close as you can to the original wording. Using a word-for-word translation will help.
- Don't let familiarity cause you to skip over words. Read what the text actually says, not what you *think* it says.
- Always be willing to change your mind as you learn more. Don't confine scripture to one rigid system of interpretation.