

# SELECTING A STUDY BIBLE

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## SELECTING A STUDY BIBLE

A study Bible is essential for any serious student of the Scriptures. Unlike a standard Bible that includes only the text of the Scriptures, a study Bible also includes an introduction to each book, notes, cross references, maps and much other supporting material. All study Bibles aim at helping you to understand the Bible better. Selecting a study Bible is a highly personal decision that is complicated by the many types and translations available. To make an intelligent decision, one should keep in mind four criteria: 1) the textual basis for the translation, 2) the accuracy of the translation, 3) the quality of the English, and 4) the quality of the accompanying notes and supporting material.

## TEXTUAL BASIS

The Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, with parts of Ezra and Daniel in Aramaic; the New Testament was written entirely in Greek. The earliest manuscripts of the Old Testament are included among the Dead Sea scrolls, discovered in 1948, and date from c. 250 B.C.-A.D. 70. These manuscripts include a complete scroll of Isaiah, a commentary on Habakkuk, and some collections of psalms; in addition, the Dead Sea Scrolls have yielded over 400 manuscript fragments of Old Testament books. Before the Dead Sea scrolls were discovered, the earliest Old Testament manuscripts were from the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D., with the vast majority originating much later. The most important collection of Hebrew manuscripts, apart from the Dead Sea Scrolls, is in the Russian Public

Library in St. Petersburg: it includes 1,582 items on parchment and 725 on paper; another collection in the same library includes about 1,200 fragments.

When we turn to the New Testament, we presently have 5,366 manuscripts. The oldest is a fragment of the gospel of John, dating from A.D. 125; the most important texts date from the fourth century, with the vast majority ranging from the sixth through the sixteenth centuries.

Manuscripts of the Old and New testaments have been collected and catalogued, and the most important of them have been edited so that they are available to scholars and other interested readers; there is also a major project underway to create a computer data base of all the important biblical manuscripts.

The quality of any Bible translation depends heavily

upon the quality of the Hebrew and Greek texts it is being translated from. Textual scholars have produced critical editions of both the Old and New Testaments for just this purpose. A critical edition is the scholarly world's best attempt at producing an accurate, reliable text of the Bible in the original languages. Three of these critical editions are very important:

***Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia*. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1990.**

This is a critical edition of the Masoretic text of the Old Testament, principally those manuscripts dating from the tenth and eleventh centuries A.D. It is the text on which any translation of the Old Testament should be based, though every translation should also refer to the Dead Sea scrolls, as well as to other texts and manuscripts for specific readings.

**Eberhard Nestle and Erwin Nestle (continued by Kurt Aland, et al.) *Novum Testamentum Graece*, 26th edition. Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1999.**

Commonly referred to as the "Nestle-Aland 27th edition" this is the standard critical edition of the Greek New Testament. All New Testament translations should be based on this text.

**Kurt Aland, et al, *The Greek New Testament*, 4th edition. New York: United Bible Societies, 1998.**

This text, commonly referred to as the "UBS 4th edition," is identical to the Nestle-Aland 27th edition in wording, but it differs somewhat in paragraphing, spelling and punctuation. Many translations are based on the Nestle-Aland 27th edition, but refer to the UBS 4th edition for some details.

Most modern translations are based on these three critical editions, but there are notable exceptions. The King James Version (though it was first printed in 1611), bases its New Testament on the "Received Text," or the *Textus Receptus*. The *Textus Receptus* is a version of the first Greek New Testament published in 1516 by the famous Dutch scholar, Erasmus. He had access to only about a half-dozen Greek manuscripts, yet his version of the Greek text became the standard for over 400 years! Likewise, all American Catholic Bibles until the New American Bible (1970), were translated from the Latin Vulgate. The Latin Vulgate was translated by St. Jerome at the request of Pope Damasus, beginning in A.D. 382. Jerome used only those few Hebrew, Greek and Latin manuscripts that were available to him. American Catholic Bibles prior to 1970, are thus translations of a translation, which itself is based on a very limited number of texts.

When selecting a Bible be sure to read the introductory material in the Bible's "Preface." This will tell you the textual basis for the translation you are about to buy. Make sure that it is translated from the critical editions noted above.

## ACCURACY OF THE TRANSLATION

Bible translation is a highly developed science, as well as an art. Yet, translation methods differ legitimately among scholars, depending upon the purpose of the translation and the audience for whom it is intended. Modern Bible translation methods may be classified into three categories: 1) literal, 2) dynamic equivalent, and 3) paraphrase.

### LITERAL

Bible translators who take a literal approach attempt to translate the Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek word-for-word, including grammar and syntax, to the closest degree possible. The translators of the New America Standard Bible (1971) take this approach. The NASB lays out four goals for its translation: 1) to be true to the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek; 2) to be grammatically correct; 3) to be understandable to the masses; and 4) to avoid "personalizing" the translation (that is, to avoid denominational or personal biases). It accomplishes these goals admirably. As a study text, the NASB is excellent, especially in the way it consistently translates verb tenses and in the way it italicizes English words that are not in the original languages, but that must be added to make the translation understandable in English.

For those without Hebrew or Greek, a literal translation captures the meaning of the original languages quite well, especially the nuances of grammar. Literal translations are often "wooden" or "stilted," however, in their language and style. Although excellent for study purposes, they fall short—in my opinion—for devotional, liturgical or public reading.

### DYNAMIC EQUIVALENT

Dynamic equivalent translation seeks to create in the reader a similar experience of the text to that which a reader of the original language would have. In *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969), Eugene Nida says that "translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style...But to reproduce the message one must make a good many grammatical and lexical adjustments" (p.12). In Mark 2:1, for example, the Greek, if literally rendered, says "in house," but a dynamic equivalent translation would render the phrase "at home." Likewise, a dynamic equivalent translation would render a Hebrew idiom, used by St. Paul in Colossians 3:12, (literally translated, "bowels of mercies") as something like "tender compassion." Although English has the words "bowels" and "mercies," we don't combine them to create the same meaning as the Hebrew idiom does.

Dynamic equivalent translation focuses on meaning more than on words. Most often, however, the meaning of a text is embodied in a fairly straightforward, literal translation; but when it is not, dynamic equivalent translation probes beneath the surface of a word to its meaning as it is embodied in the word's linguistic and cultural context. (How, for example, does one render "white as snow" in Numbers 12:10, in the language of a culture that has

never seen snow?) *Dynamic equivalency is the dominant approach to translating the Bible today.* Among the many English language Bibles produced by dynamic equivalent translation, the New International Version (1985) and the New Jerusalem Bible (1985) are among the best.

## PARAPHRASE

Paraphrase is one giant leap beyond dynamic equivalency. Paraphrase simply summarizes a passage of Scripture, then restates it in English. From a technical point of view, paraphrasing is unacceptable as a translation method, but it is useful for some purposes and audiences. The Living Bible (1971) is a paraphrase. Kenneth Taylor, who produced the text, says: “To paraphrase is to say something in different words than the author used. It is a restatement of an author’s thoughts, using different words than he did.” Taylor began work on The Living Bible when he realized that his own children couldn’t understand the King James Version that he had been reading to them. He began to explain the passages in ordinary, everyday English that they could understand. The Living Bible is thus intended for children and young adults who have difficulty understanding a more faithful rendering of the Bible. A paraphrase is excellent for young or very unsophisticated readers; it is not adequate as a study Bible for adults.

## QUALITY OF THE ENGLISH

A satisfactory translation of the Bible must be both accurate and clear. Accurate means that it is faithful to the original languages, clear means that a modern American reader should easily understand it. The two criteria are related, but they are not the same. In addition, the style and power of the English should be memorable and should engage the reader. This is the chief quality of the King James Version. It is, after all, written in Shakespeare’s English. Dr. J. Vernon McGee always taught from the King James Version, for he said that the language of no other translation matched its majesty, dignity and reverence. And he is correct. The King James Version is a monument of English literature in its own right. When we think of Psalm 23 we always think of it in KJV language: “The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. / He maketh me to lie down in green pastures / He leadeth me beside the still waters. / He restoreth my soul...”; and even today when we pray the Lord’s prayer, we pray from the KJV, “Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...” No modern translation comes close to the quality of English in the King James Version.

Hillair Belloc once said that the key to successful translation is not to ask oneself “How can I get this foreigner to talk English,” but “What would an Englishman [or American] have said to express the same?” J.R.R. Tolkien, who translated the book of Job for the original Jerusalem Bible (1966), added that an English translation of the Bible should not sound like a translation at all; it should sound like it was written in English to begin with. That is a tall order, and few Bible translations deliver on it. The King James Version comes closest. Among modern translations,

the New Jerusalem Bible (1985) scores highest on this count: a dynamic equivalent translation, it’s English is elegant and its style is superb.

## QUALITY OF SUPPORTING MATERIAL

All study Bibles have some supporting material, such as introductions, maps, notes, and so on. Some have extensive material. Since the Bible is a big book, spanning 2,000 years in a time and culture far removed from our own, *comprehensive* supporting material is essential to your study Bible.

This is an area where you should be careful. Although the texts of modern translations seldom include denominational or personal biases, supporting material usually does. Text is text, but supporting material by its very nature is interpretive. Supporting material is where one encounters “Protestant Bibles,” “Catholic Bibles,” “conservative Bibles,” “liberal Bibles,” and most everything else.

In selecting a study Bible, it is very important to find one whose supporting material fits your own denominational and theological point of view. Conservative Protestant study Bibles include the New Scofield Reference Bible (with KJV, New KJV, NASB and NIV texts), the Ryrie Study Bible (with KJV, New KJV, NASB and NIV texts), the Thompson Chain Reference Bible (with KJV and NIV texts), and the NIV (New International Version) Study Bible. Among conservative Bibles, the Scofield and Ryrie are the most conservative; the Thompson is in the middle, and the NIV is moderately conservative. Liberal Protestant Bibles include the New Oxford Annotated Bible (with the New Revised Standard Version text). There are two important Catholic study Bibles: the New Jerusalem Bible (with its own translation) and the Catholic Study Bible (with New American Bible text). Both are theologically very liberal.

At minimum, all study Bibles should include: 1) an introduction and outline for each book of the Bible, 2) cross references, 3) textual and explanatory footnotes, 4) a concordance, 5) full-color maps, and 6) an index. Any study Bible that lacks these basic tools is inadequate for a serious Bible student.

## PRACTICAL GUIDELINES

As I mentioned at the start, selecting a Bible is a very personal decision, and you should give it much thought. To make your decision, you might follow four practical guidelines suggested by Oxford University Press, one of the most respected Bible publishers in the world.

- **Determine which translation is best for you.** There are about fifteen Bible translations available today, each aiming for a different effect or audience. *There is no single, perfect translation.* If you want a translation that is traditional, dignified and of high literary quality, you’ll probably like the King James Version (KJV). If you want a literal, word-for-word translation, The New American Standard Bible (NASB) will serve best. If you are looking for readability and a contemporary style, the New

International Version (NIV) should be your choice. If you want a Bible that matches the readings in the Roman Catholic liturgy, choose the New American Bible (NAB).

- **Decide how you want your study Bible to treat the idea of Scriptural interpretation.** If you want a study Bible that holds a high view of the inerrancy of Scripture and is very literal in its interpretations, choose the New Scofield or the Ryrie. If you want a Bible that is traditional and theologically conservative, but that presents other points of view as well, choose the NIV Study Bible. If you want a Bible that reflects a very liberal Catholic position, choose The Catholic Study Bible.
- **Determine which study Bible is organized in a way that is easiest for you to use.** Different study systems are designed to accomplish different things, and many people have several study Bibles for different purposes. *No single study Bible can do everything.* If you want a study system that helps you look things up (verses, incidents, teachings, and so on) the Thompson Chain Reference is the best. If you want to focus on the historical and cultural background of the Bible, the NIV Study Bible is the best. If you want a study Bible that stresses a deeper understanding of theology and your growth as a Christian, the New Scofield or Ryrie are very good.
- **Decide what style of Bible best suits your purposes.** Bibles come in a remarkable variety of format, size, color, and print. You probably want your study Bible to be a permanent addition to your library, but you also want to use it. (And I strongly encourage that you do so *energetically*: write in it; take notes; underline; draw diagrams. A good study Bible should wear out with use!) Consider investing in a leather Bible with relatively large print and ample margins for making notes. Be sure that it is printed on high quality paper, so that highlighter marks and ink don't bleed through to the other side. Thumb indexes may help you find your way around the Bible if you are new to it, but personally I don't care for them; they get in the way of making notes, and after a while you'll know your way around the Bible unaided. Morocco leather is the highest quality binding (and also the most expensive), but it feels good in your hand, and it lays open nicely: it's worth the extra money.

Your local Christian bookstore will be happy to help you select a good study Bible. Most have a vast inventory of Bibles for you to look at, and they will happily order any Bible that they do not have in stock.

## **PERSONAL RECOMMENDATIONS:**

Again, I want to stress that selecting a study Bible is a very personal decision, you should give it much thought

and prayer. The Bible is, as Pope St. Gregory the Great said, "a letter from God." Read it with love; study it with commitment and passion. The study Bible that you choose will shape your relationship with God in a profound way. Choosing the right one is a very important decision.

Personally, I use—and recommend—the following Bibles for study and reading. I want to emphasize that this is a personal choice. I hold a very high view of the "plenary, verbal inspiration of Scripture," and I am theologically conservative; I also place a strong emphasis on the literary qualities of Scripture. My choice of Bibles reflects this.

### **PRIMARY STUDY BIBLE**

***NIV Study Bible. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Bible Publishers, 1995.***

This is my primary study Bible, the one in which I spend most of my time and the one in which I take my notes. I chose the NIV Study Bible for several reasons. First, the dynamic equivalent translation produces a very readable text. Since I teach the Bible publicly the readability of the text is an important criterion for me. Second, the NIV supporting material agrees with my traditional, conservative, theological position and my respect for the integrity of the text. The supporting material is also the most comprehensive of any study Bible available. Third, the editors and publishers of the NIV Study Bible have produced an enormous amount of supplementary supporting material, including: the 12-volume Expositor's Bible Commentary, over 12,000 pages expanding and elaborating upon the study Bible's essays, notes, and outlines; The NIV Exhaustive Concordance, a complete concordance of the NIV text, cross referenced to the original Hebrew and Greek words; a 4-volume Dictionary of New Testament Theology that includes essays on important New Testament words; and The NIV Hebrew-English Interlinear Old Testament, which gives the entire Hebrew text of the Old Testament with a literal translation of each word directly below the Hebrew word, along with the NIV text in a parallel column.

### **SECONDARY STUDY BIBLE**

***Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible, compiled and edited by Spiros Zodhiates. Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG Publishers, 1990.***

This is a limited, but very useful study Bible. It underlines important words on each page and keys those words to the original Hebrew and Greek words that are listed in the back of the volume with brief definitions. Important Hebrew and Greek words also appear in "Lexical Aids to the Old Testament" and "Lexical Aids to the New Testament." These sections give detailed definitions of the important words. A section titled "Grammatical Notations" gives concise definitions of Hebrew and Greek grammatical categories. This is an excellent Bible to use as a quick reference for a literal translation. The Hebrew-Greek Key Study Bible is available in the KJV and NASB translation. I use the NASB.