

MAKING SENSE
OF THE
BIBLE

HOW TO CONNECT WITH GOD
THROUGH HIS WORD

DAVID WHITEHEAD



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To my wife, Kathleen,

*who has remained my inspiration and
friend through the seasons of life.
I could not have done this without you.*

“Blessed are the pure in heart,
for they shall see God”
(Matthew 5:8).

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Introduction

All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.

—2 Timothy 3:16-17

The goal in reading the Bible is not to simply *read the Bible*. The goal in reading the Bible is to *get to know and interact with the God of the Bible*.

Sound radical? I stumbled on to this understanding when I first became a Christian, and it has been the way I have approached the Scriptures for more than thirty years. For me, the Scriptures have been a guide in the darkness, a lifeline when I have felt overwhelmed, and much-needed correction when I have overestimated my own spiritual importance.

There are a lot of books about *how to read the Bible*, so why do we need another one? In many ways, this book is an extension of my experience in writing the daily online devotional *The Daily Bible Verse* (www.thedailybibleverse.org), which has taken on a life of its own on the Internet and now reaches many corners

of the world. Of course, one of the wonders of the Internet is how it gives us the ability to interact with one another instantly. As I review the comments on my Facebook page and receive personal emails, one of the questions I am often asked is “How can I understand the Bible?” It seems that even the people who have been exposed to the Bible most of their lives don’t know what to do with it.

Most people in this country know what the Bible is. It is sold in most bookstores. Many families have Bibles somewhere in their house, even if it’s in the attic or other storage space. Bibles are often given as gifts, especially at times of a birth, marriage, or graduation. When I’ve mentioned the Bible in conversation, I have yet to hear anyone ask, “What is the Bible?”

The Bible fascinates people. Yet when one tries to read it, there is one obvious barrier: the Bible is a big book.

If you start at the beginning, it’s interesting enough: the creation, the flood, the nomads, and Egyptian kings. But beyond that, the Bible takes a different tack: laws for eating, building plans, family trees. Suddenly the reader gets bogged down in a lot of things that seem boring and irrelevant to current everyday life. There is much to be gained from these sections of Scripture, but because we don’t see the big picture, we can miss what God wants to say to us through the more detailed portions of the Bible.

This presents a problem in an age when people are reading less. A recent survey from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) states that nearly half of Americans between the ages of eighteen and twenty-four read no books for pleasure.¹ Yet when Christians talk about growing in a relationship with Jesus Christ, people are told to read their Bible.

But it’s a *really* big book! My copy of the Bible has 1,326 pages. When I first looked at a Bible, I was pretty intimidated. My family did not attend church or talk about the Bible much

except in vague terms. At a very young age, I determined that all religions were myths, and I turned to atheism as the only reasonable view of the universe.

At the age of twenty, my roommate became a Christian, and I was determined to get him out of his “religious phase.” Yet in my attempts to bring him back to what I considered sanity, I found that Christianity had better explanations about life than my own views of the world. I was confounded, and thus began my journey toward God.² I wasn’t sure what I was getting into, but I became acutely aware that a force I couldn’t see with my physical eyes was drawing me to the historical event of Christ’s death on the cross and His resurrection. I realized that if I were to make any sense of these claims about Christ, I would have to understand the claims of the Bible.

As a new follower of Jesus Christ, I didn’t know the difference between the Old and New Testaments. There was a major fear factor when I started reading Revelation—all of that stuff about beasts coming out of the water and the threat of Antichrist kept me up at night. I was thrilled to know that the Bible was there to help me, but it took a while for me to get up the courage to ask *how* to read the Bible.

Since that time, I have had the privilege of studying the Scriptures at a seminary level at two major institutions. After three decades, the Bible is more alive to me now than ever before.

You will notice that the chapters in this book are not long and the concepts are basic. These concepts, however, were informed by years of study. As these come alive for you, my hope is that this work will serve as an introduction that will get you started and then inspire you to learn more. There is a list of other great resources to take you forward in appendix B.

With that goal in mind, let’s look at the Bible itself and why it is so amazing.

Whether you agree with the Bible or not, it is the most influential book ever written. The Bible is still the number-one bestseller of all time, estimated to have sold more than 2.5 billion copies since its printing on the Gutenberg press in 1451.

Two qualities that distinguish the Bible from other books are the number of writers and the number of books. The Bible consists of sixty-six books written by forty-four authors from three continents.

The Bible was written over a fifteen-hundred-year span and its authors range from shepherds to kings, untrained fishermen to scholars. And because the scope of its authorship is so broad, it cannot be assumed to have been written in isolation. Locations for its original writing include dungeons and palaces, desert wildernesses and sophisticated cities.

The original languages in which the Bible was written are Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. The genres of writing include historical narrative, poetry, songs, biography, law, prophecy, allegories, and more. The reader of the Bible will find not only instruction, but also drama, romance, comedy, and action.

Yet despite the great variety of authors, languages, and styles, as well as locations in which it was written, the Bible is amazingly unified. It reads as if the writers got together to make sure their books coincided—a human impossibility!

No matter your view of the Bible, it is relatively safe to say that of all the books ever written, the Bible stands unique.

How is this possible?

When given an English-Arabic translation of the New Testament, Mosab Hassan Yousef was fascinated. As the son of one of the founders of the Palestinian resistance group Hamas, Mr. Yousef was steeped in Islam, but he found a difference as he read the Bible: “I found that I was drawn to the grace, love, and humility that Jesus talked about.” The more he read, the

more he was changed. Mr. Yousef is now a follower of Jesus Christ.

This is one of the assumptions of this book: that the Scripture is what it claims to be—the very words of God. It has stood the test of time and persecution. It has changed the lives of the great and the small, and it can change your life as well.

Maybe you have heard this before: “The Bible is the oldest book in publication whose author is still alive.”

The Bible *is* a big book, but it *can* be read and understood. When the Bible is read with a humble heart and an eager mind, transformation can and does occur. This is what the apostle Paul was referring to in 2 Timothy 3:16 when he said Scripture is “breathed out by God.” In some mysterious fashion, God uses Scripture to teach, reprove, correct, train, and equip us for life on this earth. The Bible is God’s vehicle to reveal to us the good news—otherwise known as the gospel—which is the very power of God.³

I want to invite you to join me in learning how to read the Bible. I believe understanding the Bible is the greatest investment of time you will ever make.

David Whitehead
New York City, 2014

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CHAPTER I

Why Are There So Many Translations?

When we submit our lives to what we read in Scripture, we find that we are not being led to see God in our stories but our stories in God's. God is the larger context and plot in which our stories find themselves.

Eugene Peterson

Once we get past the size of the Bible, the next step of this journey takes us to a local bookstore or website to buy a Bible. Now we will face another hurdle in understanding the Bible: choosing a translation.

When we arrive in the appropriate aisle of the bookstore (or the search results on a website), it quickly becomes apparent that there is not just *one* version of the Bible. If you did a search on the web for *The Bible*, you would encounter sites like www.biblegateway.com, which has over one hundred translations available at the click of your mouse.

The King James Version, the New King James Version, the English Standard Version, the New International Version, the New Living Translation, *The Message*—the list goes on and on.

So the question we are faced with is “Why are there so many translations, and how do I know which one is the best?”

A brief look at how the Bible was written can help clear up this confusion.

The Bible was originally written in three languages. The Old Testament was written in Hebrew. Half of Daniel and two chapters of Ezra were written in Aramaic, a sister language of Hebrew. The New Testament was written in the common Greek of the day, the forerunner of modern-day Greek.

Thousands of ancient documents containing the Old and New Testament texts have been discovered, making the Bible the most copied and distributed book in ancient history. More than 25,000 ancient manuscripts have been found to date for the New Testament alone. We have so many manuscripts of the Bible with only minor differences between them that we can have great confidence in the accuracy of the Scripture in its original languages.¹

That’s great news if you can read ancient Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic. But since the vast majority of us can’t read or write in those languages, we need translations so that we can read and understand the Bible in our native language.

Three Methods of Translation

Fortunately, there are a lot of men and women who have given their lives to understanding the Bible in its original languages. As these scholars took on the task of translating the Scriptures, they developed a number of approaches. Here are the basic three, though there are some variations within each approach.²

Literal. This is an attempt at a word-for-word translation of the original text into English. As a word-for-word translation, the translators assume that you know what all of the references and sayings meant thousands of years ago. The King James Version and the New American Standard Bible are the most popular versions of this approach.

Paraphrase. A paraphrase attempts to connect more with the ideas in the passage than the exact words of the original. This is the opposite of a literal translation, because the translator connects the ancient text with the grammar and idioms of our day. *The Message* and the New Living Bible are the paraphrases that many people currently use.

Dynamic Equivalent. This type of translation is presented as a middle ground between the literal method and the paraphrase method of translation. This approach takes the original words into account, but then looks for accurate equivalents in English. The New International Version is the best known example of this method. The English Standard Version is another dynamic equivalent translation that leans more toward the literal approach.

Challenges to Literal Translations

One might think that the literal approach is the best form of translation, but it's not so clear-cut. Here are a few reasons why: Translations are word for word, therefore, they assume that you know the common references and sayings from the time period that a particular book was written. For example, let's take a look at 1 Peter 1:13 in the King James Version:

Wherefore gird up the loins of your mind, be sober, and hope to the end for the grace that is to be brought unto you at the revelation of Jesus Christ.

What does “gird up the loins of your mind” mean? This is a literal translation, but the phrase needs to be decoded for us today. Notice how the New International Version 1984 translates this:

Therefore, prepare your minds for action, be self-controlled, set your hope fully on the grace to be given you when Jesus Christ is revealed.

Since the New International Version is not a word-for-word translation, it attempts to capture the intent of the original document.

Another drawback to literal translations is the use of measurements. Notice the difference between a literal translation and a paraphrase translation of Numbers 15:4.

New American Standard Bible (literal):

The one who presents his offering shall present to the LORD a grain offering of one-tenth of an ephah of fine flour mixed with one-fourth of a hin of oil.

The Message (paraphrase):

The one bringing the offering shall present to GOD a Grain-Offering of two quarts of fine flour mixed with a quart of oil.

Which one do you understand better?

But paraphrases can have their problems as well. Let’s look at 1 Corinthians 12:1 in the New Living Translation, which is a paraphrase:

Now, dear brothers and sisters, regarding your question about the special abilities the Spirit gives us. I don’t want you to misunderstand this.

Why Are There So Many Translations?

Compare that to the more literal English Standard Version:

Now concerning spiritual gifts, brothers, I do not want you to be uninformed.

The difference between “special abilities” and “spiritual gifts” can be perceived very differently. There is also a significant difference between misunderstanding an issue and being uninformed. There is a strong case to be made for the fact that the literal translation is more helpful in this passage.

The main point is that each method has its own strengths and weaknesses. In their wonderful book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*,³ Douglas Stuart and Gordon Fee present the following chart to help us understand how the most popular translations generally relate to each category:

Literal			Dynamic Equivalent		Paraphrase
KJV	RSV	NRSV	NIV	GNB	<i>The Message</i>
NASB	ESV		NAB		TLB
	NKJV				Phillips

KJV—King James Version

NIV—New International Version

NASB—New American Standard Version

NAB—New American Bible

RSV—Revised Standard Version

GNB—Good News Bible

ESV—English Standard Version

TLB—The Living Bible

NKJV—New King James Version

We have explored at a basic level the question of why so many translations exist. Now we can address the second half of the original question: Which one is best for you?

Two simple questions can help you decide:

Question #1: Which translation is the easiest for you to understand?

If the translation you are currently using is hard to understand, look at some of the other options we have explored. This is important, because reading the Bible should be more than an academic exercise—it should be a life-changing event (more on that in the next chapter). Having a translation that is enjoyable to read is absolutely vital. Many publishers also offer study Bibles that contain explanations of Bible texts written by the very scholars who translated the texts from the original language.

You may discover that using more than one translation enriches your understanding of the Bible. As we have seen, each translation has a different purpose. Using a paraphrase Bible as a secondary translation can open up the understanding of a text in wonderful ways.

This warrants a brief, but important, discussion about the King James Bible. When many people think of the Bible, they think of the King James Version, which celebrated its 400-year anniversary in 2011. The style of King James English has literally shaped both our language and our Western culture. It has lyricism that almost sings the Bible to us. The King James Version also appeals to literary atheists, who enjoy reading the Bible for its sheer elegance.

But there are some limitations to this venerable translation. When the translators created the King James Version in 1611, they were using the available documents of their day. Since that time, thousands of older and more accurate documents have been discovered.⁴ Therefore, the recent translations are considered to be more faithful to the original text.

The other aspect to consider is that language is dynamic and not static. That is, language is always changing. The English used in the King James Version is not the English we use today.

The reader is forced to translate the King James as they read. If you were raised with the King James Version, this can be a familiar and therefore comforting way to read the Bible.

But for others, the King James Version may be too difficult to read. Fortunately, in 1982, Thomas Nelson Publishers released the New King James Version. This translation attempts to update the vocabulary of the King James while maintaining the elegant style and beauty of the original. The New King James still uses the source material of the King James Version but also cites some of the differences in newly discovered manuscripts.

Question #2: Which translation is your local church using?

This might be a surprising factor when looking at the right translation, but Jesus calls all of His followers to be a part of the church. Having a translation that is used in a local congregation makes a lot of sense. It empowers the community at large to have a similar vocabulary of the Scripture, and facilitates following along when Scripture is read aloud.

Bibles for Free

The decision over translations may fade in comparison to the cost of buying a Bible. It seems that publishing Bibles costs a lot of money. Just look at how many pages have to be printed! But if the cost of a Bible is too much, there are a number of ways that Bibles can be found cheaply or even completely free.

Many times local churches have Bibles available to give to people who can't afford to buy one. Just ask the pastor or other leader of a local church if they have Bibles for this purpose. For more options, see appendix B.

We will explore in the next chapter another aspect of reading the Bible that is just as vital as the translations we choose: the condition of our heart.

Summary

We need translations of the Bible because most of us don't know Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek. For some of us, a direct translation is the most relatable, while for others it may be the relevancy of a paraphrase that suits best, but there are plenty of options to help us understand the history, the stories, and the praises of God in our own language. This should empower us to use the translation we understand best and not to judge someone else on the basis of what translation they prefer.