

How to start reading the Bible

St Bartholomew's Church, Sydenham; 9th December 2008

Session 6: The history of the bible and how to choose your own bible

The history of the bible

This section covers the story of how the bible came to be one book.

Originally, the earliest stories in the bible were handed down in the oral tradition, as we discussed in Session 1. Peoples like the early Jewish nation who were used to oral history had much better memorisation skills than we typically do today, and these stories were structured so that they were easy to remember and re-tell, and dramatic and exciting for their listeners.

Later, as there came to be more and more information around, more of these stories were written down. Writing allows a story to have an official version which can be reproduced very accurately even when the only way of copying it is by hand. A guild of scribes grew up – people whose vocation was to write and copy Israel's sacred texts, but also to preach and teach from them and use their principles to administer justice, so they were very important members of the community. They had a long training period where they learned how to reproduce texts highly accurately.

The Hebrew scriptures were copied and circulated in written form and also edited (or “redacted”) over the next long period in the history of the bible. Gradually a “canon” or agreed list of books was made official.

Physically, these early books were in scrolls, sets of about 20 sheets of papyrus (or, earlier, leather) pasted together into a widthwise roll wrapped around handles so people could read a page at a time.

The New Testament books coalesced into a written collection much more quickly as they came into being in a society which was already used to writing as well as an ongoing oral tradition. The earliest documents are probably Paul's letters, plus some early written forerunners of the gospels we have today which were lost along the way and now exist as possible sources within the gospels themselves. These documents were often made up in “codex” form, with the pages sewn together along the side like a modern book, as this was easier to transport and to hide during times of persecution than a big scroll.

Other books circulated at the time of the New Testament and the century or two which followed but, whilst they contained useful teaching or information, were not thought normative enough to be part of the official New Testament canon. This canon, however, took centuries to be agreed, and in fact there is more than one version of this list. As we have seen, the early Christians used the Septuagint as their “Old Testament”, but the New Testament developed over time. The Pauline epistles were circulating in collected form by the end of the first century AD. Justin Martyr, in the early second century, mentions

the "memoirs of the apostles," which Christians called "gospels," and which were regarded as on par with the Old Testament. In around 160, Irenaeus was arguing that there were four definitive gospels. By the early 200's, Origen of Alexandria may have been using the same 27 books found in modern New Testament editions, though there were still disputes over the canonicity of Hebrews, James, II Peter, II and III John, and Revelation. The list as we know it today was the same as the one written by Athanasius in 367, and agreed by the popes in 382 and 405, and synods in Hippo in 393 and Carthage in 397 and 419, but the Ethiopian church today has a slightly different NT canon. Later on, after the church had split into Western and Eastern forms, and the Western or Latin rite had split into Catholicism and Protestant or Reformed wings, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent in 1546 and the Church of England formulation of the Thirty-Nine Articles in 1563 both affirmed the canon as it had been described by these much earlier councils.

The bible for “ordinary” people

As we discussed earlier, the OT was originally written in Hebrew, with a small amount of Aramaic, and the NT in Greek. The OT was translated into Greek, the translation we know as the Septuagint, very early on, for the sake of converts to Judaism throughout the Ancient Near East.

At the time the NT books were written, Greek was the language of educated people throughout the region, much as Latin would be in Europe in the Middle Ages. As time went on, there was a need for people who did not read Greek to have access to these texts, and so they were translated into Latin (for the Roman Empire, around 150 to 200), Syriac (for the Syrians, around 160) and Coptic (for the Egyptians, around 200), and gradually spread into the local languages of the region.

However, in Europe the bible was only available in Latin. In fact, for a long time in European history, only a very few scholars even learned Greek or Hebrew to read biblical texts in the original, and many of these texts were not available – this was before the printing press, and during a period of many conflicts between Northern Europeans and the Moors and the Muslim East. The main Latin version was called the Vulgate, and most of this was translated by one scholar, St Jerome, in the fifth century.

Eventually there were moves to translate the bible into “the vernacular” – the language of the ordinary people – English in England, and so on. The church feared people would misinterpret the bible if they read it in their own language without the mediation of scholars and clergy. In fact, once the new translations spread, it became obvious that this did sometimes happen, but also that the church hierarchy had made some dubious interpretations of its own over the years – e.g. overly allegorical interpretations. Once the printing press was invented and then became widely available books could be produced in a fraction of the time and cost of a hand-written manuscript and bible translation and bible ownership took off.

In England some important names in the history of English bibles are Wycliffe and the Lollard movement, Tyndale and Coverdale, and the translators working to produce the Authorised Version. It should be noted that the early church made some translations of parts of the bible into English as early

as the seventh century, but these were not destined to have a great effect on many people as this was before the invention of printing and during a period of widespread illiteracy.

The first great attempt to produce English bibles was spearheaded by John Wycliffe (mid-1320s to 1384). He was a theologian, translator and reformist who studied at Oxford alongside great theological and philosophical figures of the time such as Roger Bacon and William of Occam, and became disillusioned with many aspects of the church of the day and the current Scholastic theology. He also campaigned on the political/ecclesiastical front, wanting to limit the power of the church in secular matters and concerned about the abuse and corruption of systems such as selling of indulgences, and concerned about the growing power of monasteries in particular. This is a common theme with the early biblical translators, and perhaps their concern to reform the church as well as to make the bible available to a wider range of lay people ensured that the new translations were received into a hostile environment rather than being seen in their own rights. Wycliffe's bible was translated into the English of the time from the Latin Vulgate, and Wycliffe himself was responsible for translating the gospels and possibly some other parts of the New Testament. His network of travelling preachers called Lollards were instrumental in taking this bible throughout the country. His denunciations of the pope and some of his more theoretical positions, such as on the nature of the eucharist, caused great controversy and, although he died of natural causes, he was declared a heretic after his death and his works banned.

On Continental Europe there were analogous movements of Protestants and Reformers from this time forward, coalescing around Martin Luther in Germany and Jan Huss in Prague, and others. Religious differences, and rulers of kingdoms making use of them, were at the heart of many wars in Europe in the next few hundred years.

William Tyndale (1494 – 1536) was the first translator into English who went back to the Hebrew and Greek versions of the text instead of using the Vulgate. His Bible was able to take advantage of the printing press, not around in Wycliffe's time, and thus was much easier to produce and distribute. He was trained as a priest at Oxford, and supplemented the training of the time with his own biblical and linguistic studies, horrified at the lack of scriptural preparation in the university syllabus. As he knew Latin, Greek and Hebrew he was in a position to translate the bible himself, but he failed to obtain official permission to do so, and did so in secret whilst travelling incognito throughout Europe. Copies of his New Testament started arriving in England and Scotland in 1526, smuggled in from the continent. Tyndale was finally tried as a heretic and burned at the stake in Brussels. Part of his legacy is his effect on our language, words such as "Passover", "scapegoat" and "Atonement" were coined by him to represent words in Hebrew or Greek which then had no English equivalent.

Myles Coverdale's (1488 – 1569) translation of the psalms is the one still used in the Book of Common Prayer. This was the first full translation of all books of the Bible in English. Coverdale himself was not fluent in Hebrew or Greek, so he used a team of translators and checked against sources in Latin, English and German, also making use of Tyndale's New Testament. Coverdale worked on the Great Bible, authorised to be placed in churches by Henry VIII, which developed from his own translations. Thus Henry, who had been instrumental in having Tyndale caught and condemned, came round to the idea of Bibles available to all the population.

In 1611, the Authorized Version or King James Version was published. One of the scholars responsible was Bishop Lancelot Andrewes, a great linguist, who is buried in Southwark Cathedral. This translation is very evidently influenced by Wycliffe's and Tyndale's. Since their time, a number of difficulties with their translations had been detected so, in 1604, James I convened a conference to set up a new translation. The translation was by 47 scholars, all of whom were members of the Church of England. In common with most other translations of the period, the New Testament was translated from the *Textus Receptus* (Received Text) series of the Greek texts. The Old Testament was translated from the Masoretic Hebrew text. The Book of Common Prayer (1662) used the Authorized Version for its gospel and epistle readings. The intentions of the committee included ensuring that the translation conformed to the structure and doctrine of the Church of England of the time. For example, "church" was used to translate "ekklesia" in the New Testament in all occurrences, rather than using "gathering" or "congregation". On the other hand, an effort was made to ensure that translators were drawn from all camps within the church from Puritans to very High Church clergy, so that the translation had common support once published.

Choosing from the different bibles available

Choosing a translation

But you were planning to read it in English, right? In fact, we all read the bible in translation, at least nearly all the time. Recall: the Old Testament was originally written in Hebrew, apart from some small sections of a couple of books which were in Aramaic. The New Testament started out in Ancient Greek, or rather a particular version of Ancient Greek called Koine or Common Greek which was the standard second language for academic and educated types throughout the Ancient Near East at the time it was written, although Jesus and his followers actually spoke Aramaic to each other.

So before you even get started there is a layer of *interpretation* which has already happened as the translators try and change the Hebrew or Greek into English you can understand. There is the additional problem that these languages are very old and have a very different structure and set of concepts compared with today, and they describe events in a very different place, time and society. All this makes the translation job difficult, and there are several ways of trying to get a good translation done.

Some translations are done by a committee, so all the experts involved can check each other's work and discuss difficult parts. The disadvantage of this is that the resulting language might end up a bit like a memo in a large corporation – like the old joke about how a camel is a horse which was designed by a committee.

Others are done by one expert, or one for the Hebrew and one for the Greek. This has the advantage of a consistent style, if you like that person's style, and the disadvantage that there are fewer checks to ensure they are correct, although their work will be discussed and reviewed in theology journals.

Other problems with translation:

Which text are they using?

For most of the books of the bible we have a large set of different manuscripts (hand-written versions of the book) but it is not necessarily possible to tell which is the oldest, they are not all complete, and they do not all agree. So before the translator even writes a word of English they have to decide which of these *source texts* to use. In practice, they usually pick one or two main ones and add extra possibilities as margin notes when something is very ambiguous. Decisions can be taken using “external evidence” e.g. the age and quality of the manuscript, and “internal evidence”, e.g. the types of copying errors scribes were most likely to make.

Some of the main source texts:

- The Masoretic Text: is a Hebrew text, which dates from the Middle Ages but is reliable due to the Hebrew scribes’ exceptionally careful copying techniques
- The Septuagint: an early Greek text, so called because tradition has it that 70 scholars produced it.
- The Dead Sea Scrolls: found in the middle of the last century at Qumran, these date from the first century.

What translation method are they using?

There are different theories of the best way of translating, and they give quite different results.

One method is called literal or formal equivalence: the translators retain the structures of the original language, trying to maintain “historical distance”, so you need to know the differences between the original language and culture and ours yourself.

Another is “functional equivalence”: the translators use normal idioms of English to express the meaning of the original, keeping historical distance for facts but updating the style.

A “free translation” or paraphrase: will translate the ideas, usually resulting in a readable book, but not one that can be used for serious academic study e.g. The Message.

Do I like the English and find it possible to read?

You need to be happy with the way the bible looks to you when you read it. You wouldn’t lend a copy of Shakespeare to your new neighbour who has just arrived from a foreign country and is still learning basic English. It’s beautiful language, but not appropriate.

Different bibles will have different “reading ages” based on the complexity of the language, e.g. the Good News bible is designed to be accessible to younger readers and those who are learning English.

What format suits me?

You will find some bibles are available in many different formats – hardback or paperback, obviously, but some come in protective cases and are designed to last a long time even if carried around every day. Pick a format which works for how you tend to use your bible, especially if you only have one. Don't feel you can't highlight your bible or add notes in the margin – it's a book to be read and used, so if this helps you, do it. Or, if it feels wrong to you, don't! – carry notes around instead, whatever works for you.

Larger format bibles are more likely to have footnotes and cross-references. Footnotes will typically give information about unfamiliar concepts or words, or alternative translations where there is uncertainty. Cross-references point you towards similar or related passages in other books, or refer you to the OT original being quoted by Jesus, Paul or another speaker in the NT. Some very full bibles like the larger NJB editions also have introductory essays for each book and set of books, and rather more teaching material in their footnotes.

A comparative table of translations:

Formal equivalence		Functional equivalence				Free
KJV	RSV	NIV	GNB	JB	NEB	The Message
	NRSV	TNIV				
	ESV	NJB	REB			

Where to start and resources to help you

Daily study guides

These are available from many different publishers. They tend to be in the form of a pamphlet which lasts for several months, where each page has a suggested daily reading and some related background information and questions for you.

The Lectionary

This is published by the Church of England and has the same daily readings in common with several other denominations. You could follow some (or all, if you were very industrious!) of the suggested readings for mornings and evenings throughout the week, as well as on Sundays, for a season or two or a whole year. The weekday readings in particular are likely to work their way through most or all of a book of the bible, so following a lectionary for a long time will get you through a whole bible eventually. There is the added benefit that you will be reading the same things as the CofE clergy and any other people following this routine, giving you people to discuss your readings with. A new lectionary is published in book/pamphlet form every year, covering Advent of the current year until the end of December the next year (i.e. 13 months or so). You can obtain this information online too as described below.

Commentaries and books on the whole bible

These books attempt to give you an overview of the whole bible, or information on how to read and use a bible, in one volume.

Some examples:

The Lion Handbook to the Bible – a very colourful and accessible book with lots of background information on the history and culture of the bible lands. Possibly too much information on minor facts and not enough on the major themes.

How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth (pun intended!) by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart – a guide to interpreting the bible, with sections for each type of biblical literature.

The Oxford Bible Commentary, ed. Barton and Muddiman – academic essays on each book of the bible in a huge and very comprehensive hardback.

Books on the Old Testament

These will give you some extra background information about the Old Testament, including the history and culture, although they are not a book-by-book commentary on the scriptures as such.

- Introducing the Old Testament, by John W Drane, Lion Publishing
- The Living World of the Old Testament, Bernhard Anderson, Longman
- Theology of the Old Testament, Walter Brueggemann, Augsburg Fortress

Books on the New Testament

These books fulfil a similar role for the New Testament.

- Introducing the New Testament, by John W Drane, Lion Publishing
- How to Read the New Testament, Etienne Charpentier, SCM Press
- The New Testament World, Bruce Malina, Westminster/John Knox Press
- The New Testament, Gerd Theissen, T & T Clark

Commentaries on individual books of the bible

There are quite a few series of these. Two by individuals which cover the whole New Testament are the set by Tom Wright, Bishop of Durham, called “For Everyone”, and William Barclay’s commentaries. Both of these contain the author’s own translation of a short passage, and then a few paragraphs on the original meaning and how we might use this passage in our lives today. These are designed to be accessible and practical to read a small section daily.

There are fewer commentary series which cover the entire Old Testament, and here you may well have to find a book by a different author for any OT book you intend to cover.

There are series which cover the whole OT or NT, or the whole Bible, consisting of dozens of volumes.

Online Resources

There is a lot of information available online to help you with your bible studies, whether you want to use an online bible to save carrying one around with you, to look up commentary on a bible issue, or to go to a site offering daily bible readings and prayers. All internet sites and addresses can be expected to change occasionally, but these have been checked and were valid in December 2008:

- Oremus (<http://www.oremus.org/>) has bible, liturgy and prayer resources, including an online version of the New Revised Standard Version of the bible at <http://bible.oremus.org/> You can also look up early psalm translations, and the Authorized Version of the bible. You can search for individual passages and by key words.
- Bible Gateway (<http://www.biblegateway.com/>) has dozens of translations of the bible in different modern languages, including a default to the New International Version in English. Being an American site, it refers to the Authorized Version by its American name, the King James. You can search their bibles for individual passages and by key words.
- The Revised Standard Version (for those who prefer it to the newer NRSV) can still be found at <http://quod.lib.umich.edu/r/rsv/>
- There is an interesting set of short videos by “Real Live Preacher” – a Texan Baptist Minister who often writes rather well – showing him talking about how to start reading the bible. Try his blog at <http://www.reallivepreacher.com/> or the direct link to the videos at <http://www.reallivepreacher.com/node/55>
- You can find and follow the CofE lectionary online at <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/liturgy/commonworship/texts/lect/lectfront.html> You can also download a lectionary from Oremus in several different calendar formats.
- Alternatively, you could go to the CofE daily prayer site, where the readings for the day are printed in full in the appropriate places in Morning, Evening and Night Prayer (both Book of Common Prayer and Common Worship versions). See the index page here <http://www.cofe.anglican.org/worship/dailyprayer/>

Our next step

In our next course we shall be reading and discussing the Gospel of Mark. This has been chosen for several reasons:

- It is the gospel used for the main reading of the Sunday services for the upcoming year of the church’s lectionary.

- It is frequently recommended as a good book to start your bible reading, as it contains lots of the more familiar stories and teaching about and by Jesus.
- It is easy to read and short.

If you get the chance, get started reading the Gospel according to Mark in your bible before the next sessions.