

Session 3

The origin and history of the Bible

How do we know that the 66 books in our Bibles were all inspired? What about other books? In this session we answer these questions. We also look at the manuscript evidence that our Bibles are reliable copies of what God originally caused to be written down. The Dead Sea Scrolls provide some fascinating and relatively recent evidence of the reliability of the Bible. Finally, we trace the history of the English Bible through to the most recent versions and discuss the problem of choosing a Bible to suit you.

Inspiration

The word *inspiration* literally means *God-breathed*. The Bible is “inspired” because the words have been breathed by God himself. The Apostle Paul described the Scriptures like this:

All Scripture is God-breathed and is useful for teaching, rebuking, correcting and training in righteousness, so that the man of God may be thoroughly equipped for every good work.

(2 Timothy 3:16–17)

Peter described the inspired prophets as

men [who] spoke from God as they were carried along by the Holy Spirit.

(2 Peter 1:21)

Sometimes God seems to have inspired what they said word for word to the point when they did not always understand what they wrote (see 1 Peter 1:10–12). At other times, the writer seems to have had more freedom of expression although the thoughts expressed were inspired by God. For example, the writings of Paul are distinctive in their style and language used, but were still inspired by God.

The canon of Scripture

The “canon of Scripture” means those writings which are inspired. How do we know what books are part of inspired Scripture and what books are not? Some Bible writers stated explicitly: “This is the word of the LORD” or “This is what the LORD says . . .” (e.g., Jeremiah 2:1; Joel 1:1). Other books do not claim to be inspired but they quickly became recognized as inspired because the person who wrote them was accepted as a prophet of God (e.g., Genesis, Song of Solomon).

The Bible provides two tests for deciding whether a prophet is inspired:

1. he should predict the future accurately (Deuteronomy 18:21–22); and
2. he should not teach people to turn away from God (Deuteronomy 13:1–5).

The Old Testament was well-established by the time of Jesus. The books had been accepted for centuries because they were recorded by prophets of God such as Moses, Isaiah and Ezra. These men had visions from God and made prophecies that came true. Therefore what they said and what they wrote were accepted as the work of God.

It did not take long for the New Testament writings to be considered “Scripture” also. For example, the gospel of Luke was considered Scripture by the time Paul wrote his first letter to Timothy (see 1 Timothy 5:18). Similarly, the writings of Paul were considered Scripture by the time Peter wrote his second letter (see 2 Peter 3:15–16).

The Apocrypha

Most Bibles contain the 66 books mentioned in Chapter 1. But some Bibles, particularly Catholic Bibles, contain several additional Old Testament books. Most Catholic Bibles will contain an additional seven books in the Old Testament and several additions to other books. Some Bibles add up to seventeen extra books or parts of books.

These additions to the Old Testament are known as the “Apocrypha” (meaning “hidden” books). Protestants reject these books as uninspired—not part of the revealed word of God. They were written between about 200 BC and AD 100, well after the Old Testament was completed.

Old Testament Apocrypha	
Title	Approximate date of writing
Psalm 151	200 BC?
Ecclesiasticus	180 BC
Tobit	180 BC
The Prayer of Manasseh	150 BC
Judith	150 BC
1 Esdras	150 BC
Additions to Esther	100 BC
Song of the Three Young Men	100 BC
Susanna	50–100 BC
Bel and the Dragon	50–100 BC
1,2&3 Maccabees	50–100 BC
4 Maccabees	AD 40
The Wisdom of Solomon	AD 40
2 Esdras	AD 100
Baruch	AD 100

Some of the books of the Apocrypha are mainly historical: for example, 1&2 Maccabees describe the history of the Jews about 150–100 years before Jesus. Other books are pure fiction: Tobit tells the story of a man named Tobit who travels with his guardian angel, Raphael, and fights off the demon Asmodeus with the organs of a fish! Another fictional story, Judith, contains major historical blunders: it says Nebuchadnezzar was the king of Assyria in Nineveh instead of the king of Babylon. Many of the books falsely claim to be written by people mentioned in the Bible. For example, Baruch claims to be written by Jeremiah’s friend but was certainly written much later. Similarly Ecclesiasticus and the Wisdom of Solomon were written hundreds of years after Solomon, not by Solomon himself.

It is clear why some of these book should not be considered “canonical” (i.e., part of the inspired word of God). They contain historical and doctrinal errors and were not written by the person they claim. But others, like 1 Maccabees, seem reasonably factual and accurate. So why shouldn’t these be part of our Bibles?

None of the books of the Apocrypha came from prophets and so they were never accepted by the Jews as inspired. The Jews sometimes quoted from the Apocrypha, but in the same way that we would quote Shakespeare—interesting literature but

definitely not the work of God.

It seems that about 100 years after Jesus, some non-Jewish Christians didn't understand that the books of the Apocrypha were not generally accepted, and thought they were part of the Old Testament. In this way, they came to be part of the Bibles of some Christians and are still used today.

There is also a New Testament Apocrypha which is not so well known. No-one suggests these books are inspired and they are not included in any Bibles.

New Testament Apocrypha	
Title	Approximate date of writing
The gospel according to the Hebrews	AD 65–100
Epistle of Barnabas	AD 70–79
Epistle to the Corinthians	AD 96
The seven epistles of Ignatius	AD 100
Didache, teaching of the twelve	AD 100
Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians	AD 108
Shepherd of Hermas	AD 115–140
Second epistle of Clement	AD 120–140
Apocalypse of Peter	AD 150
Acts of Paul and Thecla	AD 170
Epistle to the Laodiceans	AD 350

Old Testament manuscripts

The Old Testament was written mainly in Hebrew between about 1450 BC and 400 BC. It has been copied by scribes, many times (there were no printing presses), then later translated into English. Can we be sure that the Bible we read today is a true record of God's words in the original?

It was the job of scribes to copy out the Old Testament onto scrolls of parchment or animal hides, and later into books. The process of copying was carried out with extraordinary care.

For example, several copies of the Old Testament have been found dating from about AD 900. These were produced by a group of Jews known as Masoretes who followed a number of precise rules when copying (see the box on the following page). As long as such rules were followed, it was highly unlikely that

Masoretic rules for copying the Old Testament

1. the whole scroll must be carefully ruled before a word is written
2. the ink must be black, made from soot, charcoal and honey
3. each line is to contain 30 letters exactly
4. each column is to contain an even number of lines, the same number throughout the scroll
5. no letter or word is to be written from memory
6. each word must be studied in the original manuscript and spoken aloud before being copied
7. the document is to be carefully checked using word and letter counts
8. the entire scroll is to be checked by a supervisor

errors crept in. However, there are some places in the Old Testament where there appear to have been minor copying errors.

Dead Sea Scrolls

The Dead Sea Scrolls are a large collection of scrolls discovered in the Dead Sea area. The first scrolls were discovered in early 1947 by three Bedouin shepherds. Eventually, some of the scrolls made their way into the hands of archaeologists and Hebrew scholars who were amazed to find an entire copy of Isaiah which they dated to the first century BC. At that time, this was about 1000 years older than the next oldest manuscript of any part of the Bible. About 800 different manuscripts have since been found in this area. There are manuscripts or fragments of every book in the Old Testament except Esther. Several copies of some books were found including Isaiah, Psalms, Deuteronomy and Genesis.

All the manuscripts are dated between 150 BC and AD 250. Until this discovery, all translation was based on the Masoretic text which is a little over 1000 years old. The Dead Sea Scrolls are about 2000 years old! Yet when compared with the Masoretic text, there was hardly any difference. Because of their great age, they provide amazing evidence that the Bible has been faithfully copied by scribes for centuries. So accurate has this copying been, that it provides compelling evidence that God has preserved his word for future generations.

When the Isaiah scroll was discovered, the translators of the

RSV had already completed their translation of Isaiah. They compared what they had done with the Isaiah scroll and made a total of 13 changes. That is, in only 13 places did they think the Dead Sea Scrolls were more accurate than the later Masoretic text. All changes were minor.

Since then, many more manuscripts have become available and have been used in more modern versions such as the NIV.

The scrolls are also interesting because they help to date prophecies. Before the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered, some critics said that prophecies about Jesus, such as those in the Psalms and Isaiah, were written after the event. The Dead Sea Scrolls proved that they were true prophecies which predated Jesus, and we know they were fulfilled. Again, this gives further evidence that God inspired the Bible, and preserved it for us to read.

New Testament manuscripts

The New Testament was written in Greek. Its accuracy is also well supported by the manuscript evidence. In fact, there are thousands of surviving New Testament manuscripts from the first few centuries after Jesus. When compared with other ancient writings from the time of Jesus and before, the evidence for the New Testament is overwhelming.

Professor F.F. Bruce (University of Manchester) has written:

The evidence for our New Testament writings is ever so much greater than the evidence for many writings of classical authors, the authenticity of which no-one dreams of questioning. And if the New Testament were a collection of secular writings, their authenticity would generally be regarded as beyond all doubt. *The New Testament Documents*, 1960, p.15.

Other support for the reliability of the New Testament comes from early believers who quoted it. For example, Ignatius (Bishop of Antioch, AD 70–110) quoted from Matthew, John, Acts, Romans, 1 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, James, 1&2 Thessalonians, 1&2 Timothy and 1 Peter. Others such as Justin Martyr, Irenaeus, Clement, Origen and Tertullian quoted thousands of times from the New Testament. These quotations can also be used to check the accuracy of the surviving manuscripts.

Professor Bruce Metzger has written:

Manuscripts of Ancient Documents

Author	Written	Earliest copy	Time span (years)	Copies
Caesar	100–44 BC	AD 900	1000	10
Livy	59 BC – AD 17	?	?	20
Plato	427–347 BC	AD 900	1200	7
Tacitus	AD 100	AD 1100	1000	20
Pliny the Younger	AD 61–113	AD 850	750	1
Thucydides	460–400 BC	AD 900	1300	7
Suetonius	AD 75–160	AD 950	800	8
Herodotus	480–425 BC	AD 900	1300	8
Horace	?	?	900	8
Sophocles	496–406 BC	AD 1000	1400	193
Lucretius	55 BC	?	1100	2
Catullus	54 BC	AD 1550	1600	3
Euripides	480–406 BC	AD 1100	1500	9
Aristotle	384–322 BC	AD 1100	1400	49
Aristophanes	450–385 BC	AD 900	1200	10
Homer	900 BC	400 BC	500	643
New Testament	AD 40–100	AD 125	25	24000

Taken from *Evidence that demands a verdict*, Josh McDowell, revised edition 1979, p.42–43.

Indeed so extensive are these citations that if all other sources of our knowledge of the text of the New Testament were destroyed, they would be sufficient alone for the reconstruction of practically the entire New Testament.

The Text of the New Testament, 1968, p.86.

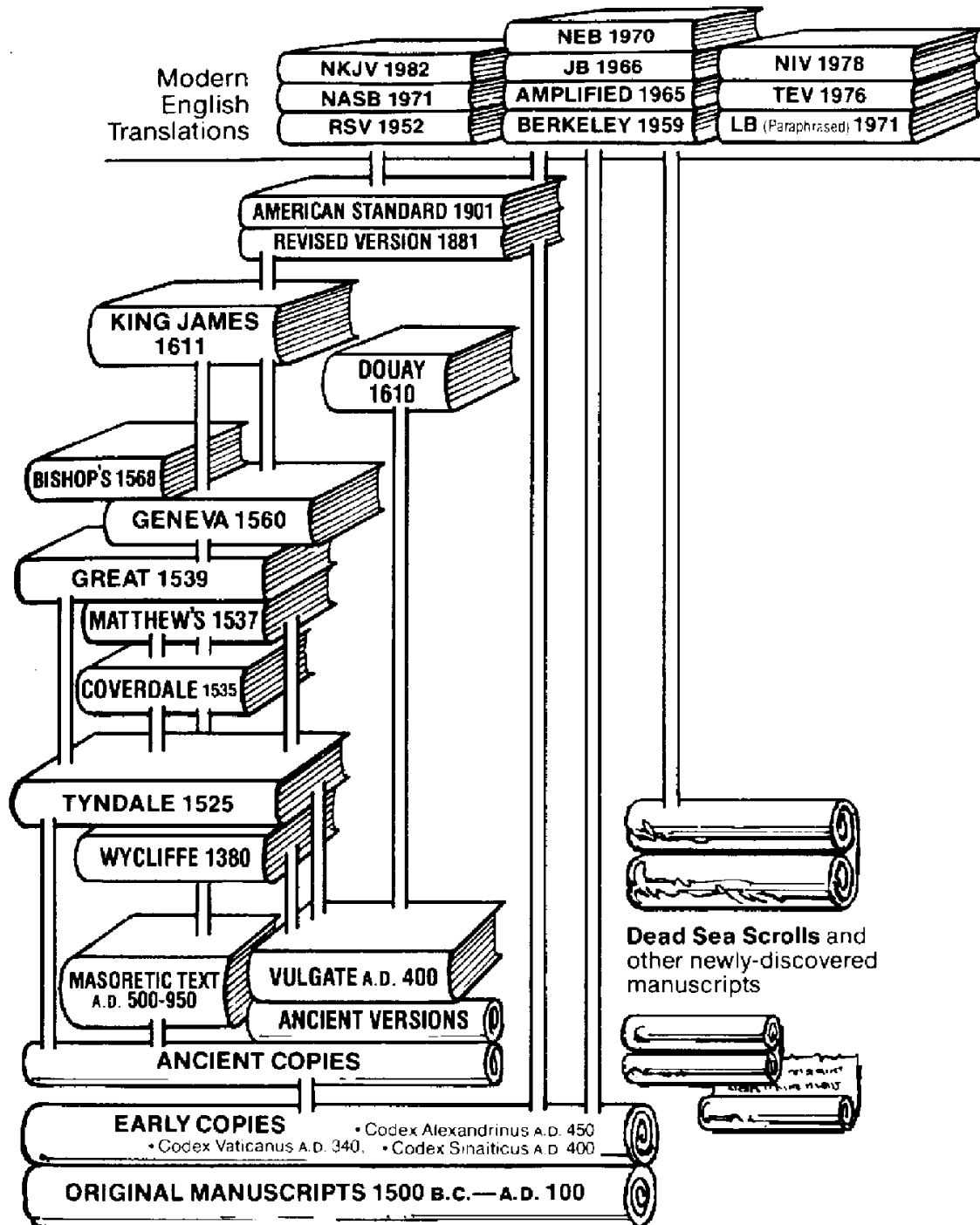
The first English Bibles

There are several translations of parts of the Bible into English dating back to the 7th century. However, English has changed so much that we would not be able to understand any of these!

John Wycliffe

The first translation of the entire Bible into English was in the 14th century by John Wycliffe in 1382. Wycliffe did not translate from the Hebrew and Greek but from a Latin edition of the Bible known as the Vulgate. For the first time, the common

The origin and growth of the English Bible



people could hear the Bible in their own language for the first time. They quickly realised that the church leaders were astray from the Bible in both what they taught and how they lived. Wycliffe and his followers met with great opposition from the church for their work and many were killed. Forty years after Wycliffe died, his bones were dug up, burned, and the ashes thrown into a nearby river. This was meant to be a lesson for others who might attempt unauthorised translations.

Wycliffe's Bible was handwritten in manuscript form. It took about ten months for each copy to be produced and cost an educated man a year's salary. Of course, most people could not afford a copy themselves but were thrilled to be able to hear it read by one of Wycliffe's followers. Wycliffe's Bible was one of the first to include chapters (but not verses).

In the 1450s, the first printing press was developed by Gutenberg. It is difficult to overestimate the importance of printing for Bible believers. Suddenly, the Bible was widely available to be read by almost anyone who wanted to.

William Tyndale

Towards the end of the 15th century there was a resurgence of the study of Greek. By 1500, Greek was being taught at Oxford. When Tyndale graduated from Oxford in 1515, he had studied the Scriptures in both Greek and Hebrew. He developed a strong desire to translate the Bible into English, from the original languages.

Due to Church opposition he was forced to relocate to Hamburg in Germany, where he completed his translation of the New Testament in 1525. Bibles arrived in England in 1526, where they were gladly received by the common people, and burned by the Church!

After finishing the New Testament, Tyndale began work on the Old Testament, but was martyred before he could complete it. Tyndale continued to work abroad, revising and reissuing his translation until his arrest and imprisonment in 1535. After over a year in prison, he was first strangled, and then burned at the stake, in 1536. At the time of his death, he had completed the Pentateuch, Jonah, and some of the historical books.

Miles Coverdale was an assistant to Tyndale. He had worked with Tyndale, on the translation of the Pentateuch. During Tyndale's imprisonment, he continued the work of translating the entire Old Testament. This was completed in 1537.

By the time this translation was issued, Henry VIII had broken all ties with the Roman Church. He was ready to tolerate an English translation. He endorsed Coverdale's Bible without knowing that it was essentially the work of Tyndale, which he had previously condemned!

Geneva Bible

When King Henry VIII died, his daughter Queen Mary succeeded him. She was a Roman Catholic and instituted a bitter persecution of Bible translators and readers. Coverdale escaped to Geneva in Switzerland, where he began work on a fresh translation which was to contain explanatory notes, some additional charts, maps and illustrations, and the first use of verse divisions. It is also the first Bible to use our Roman type face and to have cross-references.

The Geneva Bible was published in 1560 and is the one Shakespeare quotes from in his plays. It is popularly known as the "Breeches Bible" because in Genesis 3:7 it states that Adam and Eve sewed fig leaves together and made themselves "breeches".

King James Version

The Geneva Bible was immediately popular and acknowledged as the best translation to that time. However, the marginal notes in the Geneva Bible reflected Calvinist theology which was not welcomed by the Church of England.

In 1604 King James I convened a church conference which resolved

that a translation be made of the whole Bible, as consonant as can be to the original Hebrew and Greek; and this to be set out and printed without any marginal notes, and only to be used in all Churches of England in time of divine service.

In 1611 his resolution bore fruit in the most loved English Bible ever, the King James Version or Authorised Version (KJV or AV). It became the universally accepted version for the English speaking world, and remained so for 350 years.

However, the KJV has not been without amendment. A new edition in 1613 contained over 400 such variations. Countless others have been added over the centuries since.

Some famous mistakes

Some of the most famous early English editions are known for printers' errors or unusual translations. For example, in the very first edition of the KJV in 1611, Exodus 14:10 is repeated, word for word.

Then there was the unfortunate "Adultery Bible" of 1641 where the printer left out the word *not* from Exodus 20:14! He was fined 300 pounds.

In 1702 a Bible was printed where Psalm 119:161 read "Printers have persecuted me without cause." (It should have read "princes".)

Modern translations

Towards the end of the 19th century it was considered crucial to perform a new translation as so much of the KJV needed explanation. Changes were needed for two reasons: additional ancient manuscripts had come to light since 1611, and many English words had changed meaning so significantly as to cause confusion for the ordinary reader. As a result, in 1885 the Revised Version (RV) was published in the UK and in 1901 the American Standard Version based on the same texts. The RV is recognised as one of the most accurate Bibles ever, but its readability left much to be desired.

The twentieth century has seen many new translations of the Bible. More than 70 new versions have been produced since 1948. These newer versions have the advantage of being based on more extensive manuscript evidence and contain more modern language which is more easily understood by current readers. The most widely used of these newer versions is the New International Version (NIV), first released in 1978.

Choosing a Bible

Once there was no choice. The only English Bible was the King James Version (KJV) and the only colour was black. These days there is a bewildering array of English translations. Some of them are shown in the table on the next page.

Each version has its good and bad points. Some have been

Some Bible versions in English		
King James Version	KJV	1611
also called Authorised Version	AV	
Revised Standard Version	RSV	1952
New American Standard Bible	NASB	1960
New English Bible	NEB	1970
Living Bible	LB	1971
Good News Bible	GNB	1976
also called Today's English Version	TEV	
New International Version	NIV	1978
New King James Version	NKJV	1983
New Revised Standard Version	NRSV	1989

designed for easy reading in modern English, others stick very closely to the original text but are more difficult to understand, some have more study helps available, and so on. There are also versions that are published by specific denominations. These tend to emphasise certain doctrines that are held by that denomination, often at the expense of accuracy. Many of the popular, readily available translations will be suitable for reliable everyday use.

When selecting a Bible to use, remember:

- what is best for one person, is not necessarily the best for another;
- a study Bible is not necessarily a good reading Bible, and vice versa.
- reading with children may be different from reading with adults or reading on your own;
- using several versions is helpful.

Whichever Bible version you read from regularly, you will often come across words, or verses, or ideas, that are not entirely clear. It is an enormous help to have several Bible versions so that you can compare them.

Approaches to translation

One difference between versions is the approach they take to translation. The three main approaches are:

Exercise: paraphrases

Read Matthew 5:3–10. These verses are commonly known as “The Beatitudes”.

1. In groups of two or three, write a paraphrase of the verses. [Ask for help if you don't understand some words or phrases.]
2. How does your paraphrase help people understand the passage?
3. What things did you omit in your paraphrase? Did you insert any new ideas? Will your paraphrase mislead people?
4. Read the same passage from a paraphrase version such as the Living Bible. How does it compare with yours?

Formal equivalence: literal (word for word). (e.g., NASB)

Dynamic equivalence: thought for thought. (e.g., NIV)

Paraphrase: some interpretation involved. (e.g., LB)

Most versions lie somewhere on this continuum.

A formally equivalent translation attempts to translate each word into an equivalent word in English. A dynamically equivalent translation attempts to translate each thought or phrase into an equivalent thought in English. A paraphrase contains the same ideas as the original but doesn't follow the original text so closely.

For example, consider the first three verses of Psalm 23. The NIV reads

The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not be in want. He makes me lie down in green pastures, he leads me beside quiet waters, he restores my soul. He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake.

The LB reads

Because the Lord is my Shepherd, I have everything I need! He lets me rest in the meadow grass and leads me beside the quiet streams. He restores my failing health. He helps me do what honours him the most.

Paraphrases are popular for reading because they are designed to be easy to read and they can provide fresh insight into familiar passages. However, there is always a danger that the interpretations of the translator are wrong and you have no way of finding this out for yourself. Paraphrases are not good for study purposes either.

At first it might seem that the best approach is literal translation since that is “closest” to the original text. But that is not necessarily the case. Consider these two examples.

- In Luke 18:13, a man “beat his breast” in remorse. In Chokwe (a West Zambian language) this means to congratulate yourself—the opposite of what Jesus meant!. Therefore, in the Chokwe Bible, the phrase “beat his breast” has been translated “beat his brow”, which carries the idea of remorse. This is not a literal translation, but a “thought for thought” translation.
- In the Philippines, repeating a word shows you are not sure. So when Jesus said “Truly, truly . . .”, this would mean “I’m not sure of what I am about to say” instead of “I really mean this and want you to listen”. Again, a literal translation is not the best.

Other differences

Versions also vary in size of vocabulary, traditional or modern tone, use of archaic language, theological orientation and textual layout.

Textual layout means how the text is arranged on the page. A Bible with good textual layout:

- prints the text in the natural paragraphs (instead of printing each verse as a separate paragraph);
- includes subheadings to help the reader see the natural breaks in the text and know what is to follow;
- prints the poetic parts of the Bible in the natural stanzas rather than as prose or in the artificial verse divisions;
- gives lists of names or places in columns instead of as prose.

The NIV makes most use of textual layout to assist the reader. The KJV makes the least use of textual layout. Most other versions are somewhere in between.

Apart from the version, you will also need to consider the *format* of your Bible. It is worth buying one with wide margins around the text. This provides room for notes you may wish to make. Bibles with cross-references are very useful for finding related passages. Some Bibles also have charts and maps in the text which can be helpful.

Homework

1. Read the translations of Acts 1:10–11 below from the KJV and RSV. Find and read one other version of the same passage.

KJV: ¹⁰ And while they looked stedfastly toward heaven as he went up, behold, two men stood by them in white apparel;
¹¹ Which also said, Ye men of Galilee, why stand ye gazing up into heaven? this same Jesus, which is taken up from you into heaven, shall so come in like manner as ye have seen him go into heaven.

RSV: ¹⁰ And while they were gazing into heaven as he went, behold two men stood by them in white robes, ¹¹ and said, "Men of Galilee, why do you stand looking to heaven? This Jesus, who was taken up from you into heaven, will come in the same way as you saw him go into heaven."

- (a) Which do you prefer?
 - (b) Why?
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2. In your readings this week, use a few different versions if you have access to them. List what you feel are their strengths and weaknesses.