

IN THIS CHAPTER

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Chapter 1

From Moses to Modernity: Introducing the Good Book

The Bible is the ultimate publishing phenomenon. It's been atop the best-seller list ever since Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the printing press, ran the first copies some 500 years ago. Since then, it's been translated into more languages and sold more copies than any other book in history. Recent statistics indicate that well over 150,000 new Bibles are sold or given away *each day!*

So what is the Bible, who wrote it, and how did we come to possess it? In this chapter, you discover the answers to these and other important questions. In addition, you get some helpful tips for finding the Bible that's right for you.

Tracing the Bible from Old Scrolls to the Bestseller of All Time

In the movie *The Gods Must Be Crazy*, a man from a remote village discovers a soda bottle that was dropped from a passing airplane. He's convinced that this mysterious object is from the gods, and much of the rest of the movie chronicles his quest to find its owner (don't worry, we won't give away the ending). Many people have a similar view of how we got the Bible. One day, Moses or Jesus was walking along when all of a sudden — “thud!” — there it was: the Bible, air express from heaven. These holy men then gave it to their followers, who, in turn, passed it on to their followers, who eventually passed it on to us. And we've been on a quest to find its Owner ever since.

That's not exactly how it happened (except, perhaps, for that last part). Nor is it really correct to think of the Bible as a single entity.

What is the Bible?

The word *Bible* comes from a Greek word, *ton biblion*, which means “the scroll” or “the book.” This word derives from the ancient city of Byblos, located in what is today modern Lebanon. Byblos was the official supplier of paper products to the ancient world, and as a result, the city became so intimately associated with the production of paper goods that its name became synonymous with the word “book” or “scroll.” This is similar to today, where a word like Kleenex has come to mean “tissue,” no matter what brand.

Yet, the Greek word for the Bible is actually plural — *ta biblia*, which means “the scrolls” or “the books.” Although we tend to think of the Bible as a single work, those bringing these books together understood it for what it really is — a collection of works by a variety of authors. And it's quite a diverse collection at that!

The Bible includes legal texts, history, poetry, philosophy, music, personal correspondence, and prophecies. Those who wrote the Bible were also a diverse bunch, and include shepherds, kings, farmers, priests, poets, scribes, prophets, and fishermen (to name a few). There is also quite a moral diversity among the biblical authors, from morally upstanding citizens, to, let's say, morally challenged individuals. For example, among those contributing to the Bible, you find traitors, embezzlers, adulterers, murderers, and — brace yourself — ancient IRS workers (yes, we were shocked, too). We discuss how this motley crew found common cause in the Bible throughout this book



Only much later were the books making up the Bible brought together into a single volume, and in Judaism and Christianity, different books were included in their respective libraries.

Where did the Bible come from?

In order to better understand the Jewish and Christian Bibles, it's important to know a little something about the history of their development, as well as what you can expect to find in each library.

The Hebrew Bible (or Old Testament)

The books making up the Jewish Scriptures are often called the *Hebrew Bible*, because, with few exceptions, this material was originally written in Hebrew. In Christian tradition, these same books are referred to as the *Old Testament*.

According to Jewish tradition, Moses wrote the first five books of the Hebrew Bible (also known as the *Torah*, from a Hebrew word meaning “instruction” or “law,” or the *Pentateuch*, from a Greek word meaning “the five scrolls”). The Five Books of Moses, as this material is also called, covers everything from the creation of the world (see Chapter 3) and humankind's early history (see Chapter 4), to the emergence of ancient Israel's ancestors (see Chapters 5 and 6) and their formation as a nation under Moses (see Chapter 7).

Following Moses, Jewish tradition maintains that the history of ancient Israel was preserved by various authors, most of whom were near contemporaries to the events they describe. For example, Joshua himself penned the account of Israel's conquest of its Promised Land under his leadership (see Chapter 8). The era following Joshua, known as the Period of the Judges, was recorded by Israel's last judge, Samuel, who also composed half the Book of Samuel (until his own death). The remaining material in Samuel was composed by Samuel's contemporaries, including two prophets, Gad and Nathan, as well as Israel's great king, David (see Chapter 9). The history of Israel's kings after David (see Chapter 10) was preserved by royal scribes, who recorded matters of state; priests, who wrote mostly about Israel's religion; and prophets, who, besides recording their own prophecies, also recorded their interactions (read: “confrontations”) with Israel's kings. (Prophets and kings rarely got along, as Chapter 13 explains.)

But then tragedy struck. In 586 B.C.E., the Babylonians destroyed Jerusalem, including its royal palace and temple. There's no telling how much of Israel's library was lost, but many scrolls survived and were taken to Babylonia by Jerusalem's exiles. (For the stories of those living in exile, see Chapter 11.)

In Babylon, these documents were edited and compiled. Although this process involved many people, the person credited with heading up the project was the

scribe and priest Ezra (see Chapter 12). Not long afterwards, Ezra brought these scrolls back to the now rebuilt Jerusalem, where he instigated a religious reform based on these Scriptures (around 450 B.C.E.). During this period, additional works were penned and included in this library, eventually resulting in a relatively complete edition of the Jewish Bible. Beyond Jerusalem, copies of these scrolls could be found in the other great centers of Jewish learning — in particular, Egypt and Babylonia.

Here are the books that ultimately made it into the anthology of the Hebrew Bible. (*Note:* Because these books are ordered differently in Jewish and Christian Bibles, we give you both lists for ease of reference and comparison.)

<i>The Hebrew Bible</i>	<i>The Christian Old Testament</i>
The Law (or Torah)	The Pentateuch
Genesis	Genesis
Exodus	Exodus
Leviticus	Leviticus
Numbers	Numbers
Deuteronomy	Deuteronomy
The Prophets	History
<i>The Former Prophets</i>	Joshua
Joshua	Judges
Judges	Ruth
Samuel (1 scroll in Hebrew)	1 and 2 Samuel
Kings (1 scroll in Hebrew)	1 and 2 Kings
	1 and 2 Chronicles
<i>The Latter Prophets</i>	Ezra
<u>Major Prophets</u>	Nehemiah
Isaiah	Esther
Jeremiah	
Ezekiel	Poetry and Wisdom Literature
	Job
<u>The Twelve (1 Scroll in Hebrew)</u>	Psalms
Hosea	Proverbs

<i>The Hebrew Bible</i>	<i>The Christian Old Testament</i>
Joel	Ecclesiastes
Amos	Song of Songs
Obadiah	
Jonah	The Prophets
Micah	<i>Major Prophets</i>
Nahum	Isaiah
Habakkuk	Jeremiah
Zephaniah	Lamentations
Haggai	Ezekiel
Zechariah	Daniel
Malachi	
	<i>Minor Prophets</i>
The Writings	Hosea
Psalms	Joel
Proverbs	Amos
Job	Obadiah
Song of Songs	Jonah
Ruth	Micah
Lamentations	Nahum
Ecclesiastes	Habakkuk
Esther	Zephaniah
Daniel	Haggai
Ezra-Nehemiah (1 scroll in Hebrew)	Zechariah
Chronicles (1 scroll in Hebrew)	Malachi

The three-part structure of the Hebrew Bible — Law, Prophets, and Writings — has given rise to another name for this work: the *Tanakh* (sometimes spelled *Tanakh*), which derives from the first letter of the Hebrew words for these sections: *Torah* (Law), *Nevi'im* (Prophets), and *Ketuvim* (Writings).

The Apocrypha

With the spread of Greek culture throughout the ancient Near East in the wake of Alexander the Great’s conquests (around 330 B.C.E.), fewer and fewer Jews could read or understand Hebrew, the primary language of their scriptures. (For an account of this period, see Chapter 16.) This circumstance, along with a request by a Greek king of Egypt, resulted in the translation of the Hebrew Bible into Greek beginning around 250 B.C.E. This work came to be called the *Septuagint*, a Greek word meaning “70” and reflecting the tradition that 70 (or, in some traditions, 72) scribes, although working independently, produced the exact same translation of the Torah. This “coincidence” confirmed that the Greek translation was reliable, and even divinely inspired. Eventually, however, the Septuagint came to include a number of Jewish historical and religious writings that were not part of Ezra’s Bible. Although most Jews held these works in high esteem (some even considering them a part of the Bible), these works were ultimately rejected as not being divinely inspired — a decision that, according to tradition, was given official expression by a group of Jewish scholars at Yavneh, a city about 25 miles west of Jerusalem (around 90 C.E.).

Meanwhile, between the translation of the Septuagint (around 250 to 100 B.C.E.) and the decision at Yavneh, a little thing known today as Christianity happened. Because the early Christians used the Greek Septuagint, many Christian communities embraced these additional works as part of the Bible. However, when the Church father Jerome (fourth to fifth centuries C.E.) eventually translated the Bible into Latin, the absence of these additional books in the Jewish Bible earned them the designation “Hidden,” which in Greek is *Apocrypha* (although some scholars think *Apocrypha* might refer to the hidden or esoteric teachings of these works). Although Jerome, following Jewish tradition, believed that these books were valuable, he also believed that they shouldn’t be considered part of the Bible. (To find out more about these “hidden” books, and the history behind them, see Chapters 16 and 17.) Yet many Christian leaders disagreed — a view that eventually won out. It wasn’t until the Protestant Reformation in the sixteenth century that these additional books were removed from the Old Testament, and then only in Protestant Bibles (and even this wasn’t done universally). Today, Catholic and Eastern Orthodox churches still consider the majority of these “hidden” books or the Apocrypha to be part of the Bible.

Here’s a list of the material making up the Apocrypha:

<i>The Apocrypha</i>	
Tobit	Prayer of Azariah and the Song of the Three Jews
Judith	Susanna
Additions to Esther	Bel and the Dragon

<i>The Apocrypha</i>	
Wisdom of Solomon	1 and 2 Maccabees
Ecclesiasticus	1 and 2 Esdras
Baruch	Prayer of Manasseh
Letter of Jeremiah	
Eastern Orthodox Additions to the Apocrypha	
3 and 4 Maccabees	
Psalms 151	

The New Testament

The history of the New Testament’s composition is much briefer, it being written within a period of about 50 to 75 years (as compared to about 1,000 years for the Hebrew Bible). Yet the process of deciding which books should be included in the New Testament is no less interesting.

The writings of the New Testament, written in common, or *Koine, Greek*, consist of histories of the life of Jesus (called *gospels*, from a word meaning “good news”; see Chapters 18 and 19), a history of the early church (called the Acts of the Apostles; see Chapter 20), and letters written by leaders of the early church (the apostle Paul and various other first-century-C.E. Christians; see Chapters 21 and 22). The final book of the New Testament, Revelation, falls into its own category, called apocalyptic literature, from a Greek word meaning “to reveal” and referring to end-time prophecies (see Chapter 23).

By tradition, these works were written under divine inspiration by Jesus’ close followers (called *disciples*) and other leaders of the early church (called *apostles*, though this designation can refer to disciples as well). Yet, by the second century C.E., questions arose about whether all the books claiming to be written by these early church leaders actually were. These questions required that the church determine which writings were authentic and which were not — a process known as *canonization* (from a Greek word, *canon*, meaning “rule” or “measure”). By the end of the second century C.E., most of the books that now make up the New Testament were determined to be authentic. However, it wasn’t until the fourth century C.E. that St. Athanasius, bishop of Alexandria, Egypt, made an authoritative pronouncement fixing the number of New Testament books at the present 27.

Here are the books that make up the library of the New Testament:

The New Testament	
History	Letters
<i>Gospels (Life of Jesus)</i>	<i>Paul's Letters</i>
Matthew	Romans
Mark	1 and 2 Corinthians
Luke	Galatians
John	Ephesians
	Philippians
<i>Life of Early Church</i>	Colossians
Acts of the Apostles	1 and 2 Thessalonians
	1 and 2 Timothy
	Titus
	Philemon
<i>General Letters</i>	Apocalypse (Future Events)
Hebrews	Revelation
James	
1 and 2 Peter	
1, 2 and 3 John	
Jude	



This overview is based largely on Jewish and Christian traditions. Today, scholars question many parts of these traditions, and we discuss the more important questions scholars are raising throughout this book.

How did we get the Bible?

It's important to point out that we don't possess any of the original writings of the biblical texts — Jewish or Christian. No first printings, no limited editions, and certainly no autographed copies. We lack these original writings because the material upon which the biblical books were written (usually *papyrus*, made from the tall water plant of the same name) deteriorated over time. Because photocopiers were in short supply 2,000 years ago, the books making up the Jewish and

Christian Bibles had to be copied and recopied by hand to preserve them. Yet, the popular notion that this continual copying means that the books we now possess are hopelessly corrupted is inaccurate.

In the case of the New Testament, for example, we possess thousands of handwritten manuscripts of the books making up this collection, allowing scholars to determine with a fairly high degree of certainty what the earliest manuscripts said. In addition, early Christian writers quoted the New Testament extensively in their writings, giving us more data to determine whether the manuscripts we have are accurate. Finally, from a very early period, the New Testament manuscripts were translated into a number of different languages, giving us still another external check on their reliability.

The case of the Hebrew Bible is a bit more complicated given the antiquity of the texts involved. For example, much of the Hebrew Bible was written anywhere from 500 to 1,000 years before the New Testament. Another complication is that, in contrast to early Christian communities, Jewish communities kept tighter control over who could possess or handle biblical manuscripts. Part of the reason for this tight control was the sacred nature of the text itself. Jewish communities wanted to make sure that those copying the text did so accurately. Yet, herein lies one of the main checks on the accuracy of the Hebrew Bible's manuscripts: quality control. According to Jewish sources, manuscripts were copied with the utmost care, and even the most minor errors had to be fixed or a manuscript was discarded. Another check on the reliability of the Hebrew manuscripts is by comparing them with the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible (the Septuagint), which was produced between 250–100 B.C.E.

Yet, even with these various checks, most scholars found it a little unnerving that the oldest copies of the Hebrew Bible (called the *Masoretic text*, after the Jewish scribes responsible for its production) dated to around the tenth century C.E. — well over 1,500 years from the time many of the books of this library were written!

But then, a little over 50 years ago, the most amazing discovery took place: the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Discovering the Dead Sea Scrolls



REMEMBER

The story of the Dead Sea Scrolls is straight out of Hollywood, only it didn't take place under the lights and cameras of Tinseltown, but in the arid desert of Israel. In 1947, as the story goes, a young shepherd boy was watching his flock when he threw a rock in an attempt to corral his straying sheep. His rock flew into a cave and landed with a crash. Entering the cave, the shepherd saw something that would change the study of the Bible forever. His errant throw had uncovered a cache of 2,000-year-old scrolls of the Bible and other ancient writings stored in ceramic pots.



WHO WROTE THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS?

Scholars still debate who wrote the 2,000-year-old scrolls found in caves near the Dead Sea. However, most agree that the scrolls belonged to the community living adjacent to the caves. Although the exact origin of this group is unknown, they seem to have belonged to a Jewish separatist group known as the Essenes. Their own documents say that they were founded in the mid-second century B.C.E. by someone called the “Teacher of Righteousness.” The movement he established was largely monastic in character, with those being initiated vowing to give up worldly pursuits and possessions. The Essenes believed that they alone followed God’s law, and they awaited the day when God would overthrow the corrupt priesthood in Jerusalem, as well as the political powers of their day. This overthrow would be accomplished by a divinely appointed deliverer or *Messiah* (from a Hebrew word meaning “anointed one”). Until then, the community dedicated itself to studying the Bible and living a life of ritual and moral purity. The Dead Sea Scroll community was eventually destroyed by the Romans during a Jewish uprising known as the Jewish Revolt (66–72 C.E.). It’s thought that the community hid its writings in these caves for protection. And protected they were, lying undetected for nearly 2,000 years!

Eventually, 11 caves were discovered containing numerous biblical and non-biblical scrolls, as well as thousands of fragments of the Hebrew Bible. These manuscripts dated to before the time of Jesus, providing scholars with Hebrew manuscripts of the Bible more than 1,000 years older than any previously possessed. In many cases, these manuscripts demonstrated just how carefully scribes copied the biblical text over the centuries. Yet, there were also some interesting differences, giving biblical scholars plenty to investigate.

If you ever find yourself at the Dead Sea, we highly recommend visiting the caves and the remains of the community at what is today called Qumran. You can even enter several of the caves (we know what you’re thinking — we’ve looked, and we didn’t find anything). The Dead Sea itself is a fascinating place. It’s the lowest body of water on earth, with a salt content around 30 percent. As a result, nothing can live in its waters (hence the name). Today, the Dead Sea, far from being “dead,” is a very lively place. Resorts dot its shores, because the mineral deposits in this unique body of water are believed to rejuvenate the body and soul. The salt content is so high, in fact, that you can float on the water without effort — though we strongly recommend that you don’t shave before going in.

Fathoming the Importance of the Bible

It’s remarkable that a library containing books written over a 1,500 year period, by countless authors and editors, who lived on three different continents, and who

wrote in three different languages, still affects you on a daily basis. But it does! Whether it's debates about the ethics of human cloning, abortion rights, the constitutionality of saying prayers or the pledge of allegiance in public schools, or posting the Ten Commandments in public places, the Bible is front-page news. (And this is to say nothing of the "battle of the bumper stickers," where fish alternately represent Jesus and Darwin!)

Moreover, understanding the times in which we live is difficult without some knowledge of the Bible. The Bible informs the traditions of three of the world's major religions — Judaism, Christianity, and Islam — and a familiarity with its message and meaning can help you understand the similarities and differences between these religions, as well as the prospects for peace (see Chapter 24).

Finally, you can't fully appreciate many works of art and literature without some basic Bible literacy. Whether it's the great paintings of Michelangelo or Leonardo da Vinci or the literary masterpieces of Shakespeare and Milton, biblical themes and imagery fill our world. Even movies borrow extensively from the Bible. (We discuss Bible movies, as well as other influential works of art and literature in Chapter 25.)

Finding a Translation You Like

Reading the Bible in translation has been compared to kissing through a veil: It's not as good as the real thing, but it's better than nothing at all. Yet, few people have the time or inclination to learn several ancient languages to facilitate their reading of the Bible. So how do you find a translation that's right for you?

First, you need to determine what's most important to you when reading the Bible. Some people like to read the Bible to appreciate its literary genius. Some read the Bible for study or research. Still others read the Bible for its entertainment value. (And some, like us, read it for "all of the above.") So the first question you need to ask and answer when picking a Bible translation is, what do you want from your Bible reading? Different translations accomplish different things. The following sections offer some advice.

Literary versus literal translations

If you want to read the Bible for study, such as for a class or Bible study, you'll probably want a translation that's fairly literal. Literal translations try to convey the original language as closely as possible while still remaining readable. Some time-tested literal translations include: King James Version (KJV), New King James Version (NKJV), Revised Standard Version (RSV), New Revised Standard Version (NRSV), New American Bible (NAB), New American Standard Bible (NASB),



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THE HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH BIBLE

With the increased intellectual freedom brought on by the Renaissance, as well as a growing discontent among many Europeans with the established Church, there existed an increased desire to translate the Bible from Latin, which only the highly educated could read, into the common language of the people. However, there was also considerable opposition to this enterprise for fear that the untrained might distort or misinterpret the Bible's message. Unfortunately, this opposition sometimes had violent manifestations, and many involved in translation were imprisoned or even executed. Eventually, however, the Bible was translated into the common languages of Europe. Although each story is worth telling, here's a brief history of the Bible's translation into English.

- **Around 700–1350:** English church clerics translate portions of the Latin Vulgate (mostly the psalms and the gospels) into Anglo Saxon and Middle English.
- **1380–1397:** John Wyclif and his associates produce the first translation of the entire Bible into English, using the Latin Vulgate. Although Wyclif was not executed, it was not for a lack of desire on the part of those opposed to his work. In fact, not long after his death, his bones were exhumed and burned as punishment for his translation work and “heresies.”
- **1526:** William Tyndale produces the first New Testament translation from the original Greek language, which also becomes the first printed edition of the New Testament in English.
- **1530–1531:** Tyndale produces the first English translation of the Torah and the book of Jonah from the original Hebrew.
- **1535:** Miles Coverdale translates the entire Bible into English using two Latin versions, Tyndale's English work, and Luther's and Zwingli's German translations. This translation becomes the first entire Bible to be printed in English.
- **1536:** Tyndale is burned at the stake for his translation work.
- **1537:** The Thomas Matthew Bible, containing the entire Bible in English, is published. “Thomas Matthew” was actually a pseudonym for Tyndale's friend, John Rogers, who used Tyndale's and Coverdale's translations.
- **1539:** The Great Bible, which is Coverdale's revision of the Matthew's Bible, becomes the first *authorized* Bible printed in English. King Henry VIII orders that copies be placed in every church.
- **1560:** The Geneva Bible, a revision of the English Bible, is produced in Geneva by those finding refuge from Queen Mary's actions against Protestants. This becomes the first English Bible to use numbered verses and is the Bible used by Shakespeare. This Bible is also the one that the Pilgrims brought to America in 1620.

- **1568:** The bishops of the Church of England produce the Bishops' Bible, a revision of the English Bible, in response to Queen Elizabeth's injunction that Bibles again be placed in every church in England.
- **1611:** The King James Bible, begun in 1604 by command of King James I, is completed. This translation, still unrivaled for its combination of accuracy and literary beauty, involved 54 scholars working from Greek and Hebrew manuscripts and English editions of the Bible.
- **1782:** Robert Aitken's Bible (the King James Version without the Apocrypha) becomes the first English Bible printed in America.

And the rest, as they say, is history.

New Jerusalem Bible (NJB), New English Bible (NEB), New International Version (NIV), and, although it contains just the Hebrew Bible, the Jewish Publication Society's *Tanakh*. (*Note:* Many publications refer to these translations only by their initials, so we provide these acronyms here.)



WARNING

The downside of literal translations is that some people find them too wooden or stiff. As a rule, those Bibles with the word “New” in the title have tried to rectify this problem — some more successfully than others. In our opinion, if you want to appreciate the Bible's literary beauty, while still reading an accurate translation, there's no better Bible than the King James Version (KJV). Having said that, we realize that reading the King James Version, which is written in fairly antiquated English, can be even more difficult than reading Shakespeare (though no less satisfying when you get used to it). That is, for all the King James' literary beauty, you don't want your experience of reading the Bible in translation to be like kissing through a wall.

Contemporary versus paraphrase

If you've tried some of the literal translations we listed and found them difficult to understand, we recommend choosing a translation that tries to put the Bible into everyday language. The best known in this category is the *Good News Bible*, but others exist, and the best way to choose a favorite is to go to the bookstore or library and try some out.



WARNING

The danger with contemporary language translations, however, is that some, in trying to be too modern, obscure what's really being said or remove the cultural distinctiveness of the Bible. For example, some translations place the biblical events in modern America, where Jesus comes across more like James Dean in *Rebel Without a Cause* than anyone found in the Bible. Others try to be too hip, having Moses say something like, “Yo, dudes, let's chill it on the sleeping around scene.”

(Can you identify the commandment?) Okay, we made that example up, but it's not too far from how some translations take liberties with the biblical text.

The easiest-to-read Bibles are called *paraphrases*. These can be very helpful, especially for young or first-time readers of the Bible. The best known of this type is *The Living Bible*.



WARNING

However, we don't recommend paraphrases for those wanting to study the Bible, because they are, by definition, paraphrases or summaries of what the Bible says. Moreover, paraphrases usually summarize passages in units, so individual verse demarcations are lost. If you're reading a book that refers you to a particular verse in the Bible (such as *The Bible For Dummies*), you'll have a hard time finding it in a paraphrase.

Commentary versus unembellished

Some Bibles provide commentary or "study notes" on the Bible. These can be very helpful if you're reading the Bible for study, especially as a quick reference guide or to shed light on the use of a particular word or phrase. Yet the danger with study notes or commentary is that those who write them sometimes allow their particular beliefs to dictate what they write. We all have opinions, especially when it comes to the Bible. But you want to find notes that, as Sergeant Friday used to say, "stick to the facts," not that embellish the Bible with the doctrines of a particular religion or church.

The best way to avoid buying an overly biased Bible is to see who sponsored the translation and notes. The sponsor is usually spelled out in the introduction. (If it's not, don't use it.) Study notes by *interdenominational* (representing many different denominations within a particular faith) or *ecumenical* (representing many different faiths) committees are usually safe. But study notes sponsored by, say, The Church of Elvis Sightings in the Greater Graceland Area should probably give you cause for concern.

Gender-specific versus gender-neutral

A final thing to consider when choosing a translation is your own sensibilities. For example, most older translations of the Bible use masculine pronouns, even in cases where the author intends to be inclusive. Thus, rather than say "the children of Israel" or even "the Israelites," most older translations say "the sons of Israel," because, as in many languages, a mixed group is rendered in the masculine. We prefer gender-neutral Bibles, because, in many cases they come closer to what the biblical authors intended.



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SHAKESPEARE AND THE “BIBLE CODE”

It’s a remarkable fact that Shakespeare, arguably the greatest playwright of all time, was in the employ of King James when the King James Bible, arguably the greatest Bible translation of all time, was being prepared. It’s an even more remarkable fact that Shakespeare turned 46 the same year the King James Bible was completed (1611). Why is this remarkable, you ask? Well, if you go to Psalm 46 in the King James Bible (and this only works in the King James Bible) and count 46 words from the beginning of the psalm, you come to the word *shake*. Then, if you count 46 words from the end of the psalm, you come to the word *spear*. We’re not making this up.

So did Shakespeare put a secret code in the King James Bible to let future generations know that he helped with its translation? Most likely not. Yet this raises a related question about the so-called “Bible Code,” where some have argued that hidden in the Bible are prophecies of future events. You discover these hidden messages, people argue, by counting equally distanced letters in the Hebrew Bible (for example, every 12th letter). Among the things “predicted” by this method have been the assassination of Yitzhak Rabin and the AIDS epidemic. Many people have argued that these codes reveal the “fingerprint” of God upon the text. (Although some have even argued that space aliens wrote the code.)

So is there a Bible Code? Several considerations make this theory extremely unlikely. For example, the Hebrew manuscripts we possess have textual variations (words spelled differently, words arranged differently, different words altogether, and so on). By this theory, however, if you remove or add even one letter, the “prediction” is lost. Another consideration is that if you look long and hard enough at any book with thousands of words (the Hebrew Bible contains over 300,000 words), you’re destined to begin seeing things — if not predictions of future events, then little dots in front of your eyes. Finally, many of these “predictions” were made after the fact. That is, a major event would happen, and then, after countless hours of computers crunching every possible scenario — *voilà!* — there, in clear black and white, is the prediction.



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WHENCE COMETH THE CHAPTER AND VERSE DIVISIONS?

Although the Jewish scriptures had already been divided into sections for the purposes of study and liturgical use, the chapter divisions found in nearly all Bibles today, whether Jewish or Christian, were the work of Archbishop Stephen Langton from Canterbury, England, in the thirteenth century C.E. Archbishop Langton divided the text of the Latin Vulgate, which was then transferred to the Hebrew Bible. The present verse divisions, which, with few exceptions, are the same in both Jewish and Christian Bibles, were carried out in the sixteenth century C.E.

Other translations extend gender-neutral language to the Bible's presentation of God. Rather than saying "He," the translators use the generic "God" or use masculine and feminine pronouns interchangeably. The good thing about such translations is that they remind you that many people's view of God — including the biblical authors' (see Chapter 3) — transcends our notions of gender. However, our main hesitation with such translations is that by changing the way the biblical authors present God (who is almost always referred to by using masculine pronouns and imagery, although some notable exceptions exist — see, for example, Isaiah 49:15), they may change what the authors are attempting to communicate about God.

The final step: "Playing the field" of Bible translations

With the above guidelines in mind, we recommend that you approach finding the right translation the same way you might look for Mr. or Mrs. Right. "Date" a number of different translations. Take them out for coffee, have lunch together, enjoy candlelit dinners together. As is the case with dating, you'll find that some translations will repel you, others will interest you, and still others will captivate you. And who knows? Perhaps someday you'll find that special "someone" — a translation that brings out the best in you, makes you feel more alive when you're together, a translation that you just can't be without . . . even if you're still kissing through a veil.

WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE DANGERS OF TRANSLATION

God has many names in the Hebrew Bible. He is often called "God," from the Hebrew *Elohim* (less commonly *El*). Another designation, though far less common, is *El Shaddai*, typically translated "God Almighty." God's personal name, however, is rendered with the Hebrew consonants *YHWH*, from the verbal root meaning "to be." Thus, God's name seems to mean "He who is" or "He who causes to be." Most translations of the Bible render *YHWH* as "the LORD" (all capital letters). Since Hebrew is written without vowels (or, more accurately, "very, very few vowels"), no one knows for sure how God's name was pronounced (though most scholars think it was *Yahweh*). By the time vowels were inserted into the Hebrew Bible (by the Masoretes near the end of the 1st millennium CE), the divine name was no longer pronounced due to its sacred nature. To ensure that people didn't pronounce the divine name, the Masoretic scribes placed the vowels for the word "Lord," Hebrew *adonay* (a-o-a), between the consonants of *YHWH*, resulting in *YaHoWaH*. Those unaware of this tradition later mistook these vowels as the actual vowels of God's name, resulting in God's name becoming *Yehowah* or, in English, *Jehovah* — a name still found in many translations of the Bible.