

# CHAPTER ONE: **THE BOOK AND THE FINE PRINT**

**T**he Bible is a great spiritual treasury. Its message has enriched more than a hundred generations reaching all way back to the centuries before the birth of Jesus. But unless you are one of those fortunate few who can read the Bible in its original languages, you need a find a good translation to gain access to its riches. Fortunately there are many translations available in English. This chapter will help you discover a translation of the Bible that you find comfortable and accessible.

Let's imagine you are walking into a bookstore for the first time to buy a Bible. What will you see? Probably (and this, of course, depends on the specialty of the store you enter) you will find at the very least several shelves full of Bibles of many different colors and sizes. Some Bibles will be boxed; some will not. Some will have leather or leather-like covers; some will come in paperback. It can all be pretty intimidating at first glance. How do you begin sorting through all the options?

## **CHOOSING A TRANSLATION**

Take your time and step back. You will notice that for the most part there are only a handful of different translations represented on the shelves in front of you. One of the titles you will certainly see is the

Revised Standard Version. This one has been around for a long time. This is a revision of the “standard version,” which is the King James translation going all the way back to 1611. Some publishers call the King James version the “authorized version.” Another Bible you will find on the shelf is a relatively recent arrival, the New International Version. You may also see the Today’s English Version, more popularly known as the Good News Bible. Another recent addition to the Bible shelf is the New Living Translation (NLT). Some stores may also carry

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*You might think picture Bibles are something new. But already in the time of Saint Francis of Assisi picture books based on the Bible were very popular. A biblical scene was often paired with another scene from everyday life. By comparing the two the reader discovered a rich lesson in moral virtue.*

the New English Bible and the recent Contemporary English Version (especially good for young readers). Catholic readers will be familiar with the Jerusalem Bible and the New American Bible (NAB). This last one should sound familiar to Catholics since it is the one most parishes use for the Sunday readings.

This is the list of translations you are most likely to see on a bookstore shelf. If you see others, just ask your friendly bookseller to give you some assistance.

Now, beyond all of these translations, you will notice that each translation comes in several different packages, or editions. You will find deluxe editions (the kind you might consider for wedding or anniversary gifts), pocket-sized editions, coffee-table editions (those really big ones) and everyday-use editions. Don’t worry about which edition to choose just yet. Your first task is to find a translation with which you are comfortable.

Use your favorite Bible passage as a way of testing out each translation. Pick a translation and read your favorite passage aloud to yourself (but not so loudly as to distract the person next to you who may be doing exactly the same thing). Listen to the way it sounds. Do you like it? Or is there something missing for you? Pick up a different translation and do the same thing. Keep going until you have gone through all the translations you care to consider.

A wonderful test-passage is Psalm 23. Here is the beginning of the psalm in two translations:

The New Living Translation:

The Lord is my shepherd;  
I have everything I need.  
He lets me rest in green meadows;  
he leads me beside peaceful streams.

The New American Bible:

The Lord is my shepherd;  
there is nothing I lack.  
In green pastures you let  
me graze;  
to safe waters you  
lead me;

I like the natural sound of the first translation. The verse “I have everything I need” appeals to me because it is such a strong assertion of faith in God, the sort of ideal faith I am constantly struggling for in my own life. I also like the quiet and peacefulness of the second verse. Green meadows and peaceful streams are just what I need on a hectic day. Even if I can’t get to such places on a given day, this verse at least lets me think about them.

The language of the NAB is a little more formal. “There is nothing I lack” is not the way I speak normally. But then again, maybe it’s a good thing to make the Bible sound a little less like ordinary speech since the Bible is, after all, the word of God. The second verse in the NAB does not present as restful a scene as the one in the NLT. Instead of resting, I’m grazing in the green grass. And the phrase “safe waters” is a little puzzling. What makes them safe? Are they less deep than other waters? Are they free from pollution? Are they free of sharks or pirates? On the other hand, the more I read over the NAB translation of this psalm, the more I find attractive about it. I hear the repetition in the words “lack,” “let” and “lead.” This gives the psalm a greater poetic quality.

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*Early printed Bibles featured lots of notes in the margins. In time these marginal notes became so controversial that the translators of the King James Bible were forbidden to include any, except those necessary to explain the meaning of a word*

Choosing between these two translations is not easy. There are things to recommend them both. Honestly, I would probably buy both of them. But at least I have given you an idea of the sort of thoughts that might go through your mind as you test out different translations.

You may discover that you have difficulty deciding on one translation. If you can afford it, it might be good to have more than one translation. It is like having more than one recording of a favorite piece of music. You have choices depending on your mood.

## **THE BOOKS OF THE BIBLE**

One important thing to keep in mind when choosing a Bible is that some Bibles include more books than others. To explain this, a very quick and simplified history review may be of help.

In its early years the church knew the entire Bible in the Greek language. This should not be too surprising since the Gospels and Paul's letters were written in Greek. Ordinary church members were probably not even aware that some books in their Old Testament were not included in the Bible heard and read by the Jews.

But informed people, like Saint Jerome for example, knew that some books of the Greek Old Testament could not be found in the Hebrew Bible. Saint Jerome had a personal preference for those books that were in Hebrew. But his preference had no impact on the actual appearance of the Bible. When the books of the Bible were bound in a single volume—and we have some of these from as far back as the fourth century—the books of the Old Testament appeared as a unit with no visual separation of those in the Hebrew Bible from those that were not. This was the tradition for centuries.

In the early sixteenth century reformers in the church returned with renewed interest to the differences between the Greek Bible and the Hebrew Bible. And they took those differences a step further. For the first time the Old Testament books in the Hebrew Bible were visually separated from those that were not. A complete Bible printed in 1534 was among the first to include a new and separate section entitled “The Apocrypha.” Into this new section were gathered all the books not in the Hebrew Bible. This new section was placed after the Old Testament prophets and before the New Testament. Readers now saw a Bible with three main parts instead of the traditional two. Within

a century this new and separate portion of apocrypha was being dropped altogether from some printed editions of the Bible.

The Roman Catholic Church retained the Bible in its traditional form. But for the first time church leaders found it necessary to list in a formal way the books traditionally belonging to the Bible so there would be no confusion about it for Catholics. And so in 1546 the Council of Trent listed the books in a formal decree. Unlike the reformers at that time, the council made no distinction among the books of the Old Testament with regard to origin, stating simply that it accepted as the word of God all the books of the Old and the New Testament.

So when you choose your Bible you must make certain you get what you want. If you are a Roman Catholic, you will definitely want to have a Bible that includes all the books traditionally belonging to the Old Testament. A Bible produced by Catholics will, of course, include them. For English speakers that means the New American Bible or the Jerusalem Bible. Many Bibles generated by other denominations also include them though they separate them from the rest of the Old Testament and print them under the heading Apocrypha.

A Catholic edition of the Revised Standard Version, published originally in 1966 and now available from Ignatius Press, includes all the Old Testament books in their traditional places. The same is true of a Catholic edition of the New Revised Standard Version, published in 1999.

Somebody came up with this clever phrase for remembering the Old Testament books that do not appear in the Hebrew Bible: "J. T. Web and the two McCabes." When we unpack the phrase we get Judith, Tobit, Wisdom, Ecclesiasticus, Baruch, and I and II Maccabees. This is helpful as far as it goes. But just remember, in addition to these seven books there are also additions to Esther and Daniel.

## **CHOOSE AN EDITION THAT'S RIGHT FOR YOU**

Once you find a translation you like, the next step is to select an edition that will meet your needs. First, choose the size and style you like best. Then you can begin to consider the subtle differences in content. Some Bibles offer a fairly simple rendition of the text. Others can be very elaborate. Even the simplest edition will probably have some

notes at the bottom of each page. Most of the time such notes are there to clarify a word or passage, or to inform you of alternative readings. Take, for example, a simple edition of the Revised Standard Version. On the bottom of the first page there is a note explaining that another way to translate the first line of Genesis is “When God began to create...” instead of the standard “In the beginning God created...” Another footnote on the same page suggests that it might be interesting to compare the first line of John’s Gospel with the first line of Genesis.

Of course, some Bibles can include a lot more than a few simple notes. Some editions include an introduction to each book of the Bible, lists of words and their explanations and even colorful maps. In recent years, study Bibles have become popular. They typically include many pages explaining each book of the Bible (historical background, outline, principal themes and so on) so that you can really get a grasp on what you are reading. Some editions include a running commentary to help you apply the text to your life or help you meditate on its meaning. This is typical of Bibles that have words like “meditation” or “life application” on their covers. Choose the edition that you find most inviting.

## **READING THE FINE PRINT**

What about all those tiny notes? Are they worth reading? Or are they full of jargon so technical no ordinary person could understand it? They are definitely worth reading. And, with some time and practice, you will master all those numbers and abbreviations that look like gibberish at first glance.

The fine print in most Bibles offers two things that are very useful for the Bible reader: footnotes and cross-references.

Footnotes cover many interesting points. Very often they offer explanations of details within the main text: the meaning of a name, for example, or a word-play in the original language. Sometimes they clarify a passage that might be obscure. In almost every case, your appreciation of the text will be enriched by taking the time to read the notes.

The second feature offered by the fine print is, I think, even more interesting: cross-references. These are lists of other passages in the Bible that connect in some way with the passage you are actually reading. At first glance they are a little daunting: abbreviated titles of bib-

lical books followed by chapter and verse. But if you take the time to look up these cross-references, you may discover some real gems.

Let's take a closer look at the fine print. Each Bible handles the fine print a little differently. To be most helpful, here we will consider each of the translations American Catholic readers are most likely to use.

## THE NEW AMERICAN BIBLE

If you glance at the bottom of a page of biblical text, you will normally see the two sets of notes divided from each other by a blank space.

The first set is in sentence or paragraph form preceded by a reference to the chapter and verse the note comments on. For example, on the first page of Genesis you will see a note at the bottom that begins: "1,1—2,4a: This section introduces..." This note comments about the entire portion of Genesis starting at chapter one, verse one and concluding at chapter two, verse 4a. (The *a* means the first part of the verse. Sometimes verses span ideas or, as in this case, even paragraphs.) It explains that these verses present God as making order out of chaos. The note also says this section introduces the entire Book of Genesis, suggesting to me that maybe a good way to think about God as we read this book is to think of God as making sense out of the confusion people introduce in the world.

The next paragraph begins: "1,2: The abyss..." This note comments on the meaning of this fascinating word found in Genesis 1:2. At first reading we might associate the word *abyss* with some deep dark hole in the ground. But actually, as the note explains, it refers to the great expanse of water the ancients believed surrounded this world.

As you can see, there is a wealth of information in such notes. Your reading of the Bible will be enriched by taking the time to read them. Wherever you see an asterisk (\*) in the biblical text, look for a footnote about that text.

The second set of notes is a little more confusing at first because there are no sentences or even words. Instead you see abbreviated titles to various books of the Bible followed by chapter and verse numbers. These are cross-references. The editors of your Bible have identified for you other passages from the Bible that connect in some way with the passage you are currently reading.

Let's look at the first cross-reference. It reads this way: "a Gn 2,1.4: Pss 8,4; 38–39; 90,2; Wis 11,17..." and so on. The little *a* at the beginning matches a little *a* in the text you are reading. See it floating above the line after "the heavens and the earth" in the first verse of Genesis 1? If you take the time to look up all the passages listed in this note, you will discover many more references to the creation of heaven and earth in the Bible. And you will have so much more material to feed your meditation and prayer on this first verse of the Bible.

At this point you may be wondering how I know such wonderful mysteries. No magic really. I found an explanation of all this in the introductory material. Just look at the page bearing the roman numeral xii.

## THE JERUSALEM BIBLE

The Jerusalem Bible also has two sets of notes, but the editors have arranged them differently. At the bottom of the right-page of biblical text are notes explaining something about the text you are reading. For example, on the first page of Genesis you will see this at the bottom: "1 a. This narrative...." The number 1 refers, of course, to the first chapter of Genesis. The letter *a* matches the little *a* at the end of the subheading in the text. All this means that this first footnote tells you something about the portion of Genesis with the subheading "The first account of the creation."

Where are the cross-references in the Jerusalem Bible? They are in the margins on the right and the left edges of the book as it lies open in front of you. Personally I find this arrangement a little more accessible since the relevant passages are easy to see.

## REVISED STANDARD VERSION: CATHOLIC EDITION

If you turn to the first chapter of Genesis, you will find two sets of notes. They are sitting there below the right-hand column of most pages. The first set of notes is introduced by a small letter corresponding to a small letter in the text of the Bible on the page. The first note reads: "a Or: When God began to create". This note presents you with an alternative translation of the first line of the Bible. If we translate the line according to this alternative reading, the first thing God does is speak the words, "Let there be light." And that offers a fascinating parallel with the first line of John's Gospel, "In the beginning was the

word.” This, of course, is the point of the second set of notes introduced by the citation: 1.1 and then referring you to John 1:1.

Such notes have great value for leading you to new and deeper insights about the text of the Bible you happen to be reading at the time. I can only encourage you to get into the habit of taking full advantage of the notes in your Bible. It will definitely add a richer dimension to your reading.

Now you are equipped to go out and shop for a Bible that is just right for you. The important thing is that you find at least one translation of the Bible that you find appealing. And just remember that the same translation of the Bible may appear in many different editions, each one offering a little something different to help you get the most out of your reading.

Here is a handy summary of things to keep in mind when you look for a Bible:

- † Keep reading until you find a translation with which you are comfortable.
- † Make certain it offers all the books of the Bible, including additions to Esther and Daniel.
- † Look for an edition of your translation that best serves your interests. You may want a simple edition or you may want one with a lot of extras.

And here is a handy summary of things to help you get more out of reading your Bible:

- † Get into the habit of scanning each page of your Bible for markers alerting you to the fine print on the page.
- † Read those footnotes.
- † Take the time to look up at least some of the other Bible passages listed in the cross-references.

## **PRAYING WITH THE BIBLE**

If you read Revelation 10:8–11, you will discover a fascinating scene. John is directed by a voice from heaven to eat a scroll handed to him by an angel. He does so, finding it sweet in his mouth but bitter in his stomach. The message seems to be that receiving the word of God is a pleasant thing but putting it into practice can be a challenge. Have you found this true for you? Think about the “sweet” passages of the Bible

you have discovered over the years. Now think about the challenges each one presents for you. Offer a prayer to God asking for the strength to truly live out the word of God in your life. You might even find it helpful to make bookmarks for your favorite passages. Write on each one what you found sweet about it and what you found bitter.

## **FOR REFLECTION**

Invite members of the Bible study group to tell the story about how they got their Bibles. Ask them to “sell” their Bibles to the rest of the group. What are the most attractive features? What are their favorite passages to read. Make it a real show-and-tell experience.

Choose a passage from the Bible. If you have trouble deciding where to start, try “The Wedding at Cana” in 2:1–11 of John’s Gospel.

Invite the members of the group to read the notes their editions include on this passage. How do they help them understand the passage? How do they help make the passage more vivid?

Divide among the group the cross-references on this passage. Ask each member to look up his or her reference and read it aloud to the rest. Talk about the insights each reference contributes to the reading. How does each reference help them appreciate the passage on a deeper level?