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Choosing a Bible Some Pointers for Navigating the Maze Stuart Moran

There is no "one size fits all" answer to the question of which Bible to use. This depends on lots of factors: Is this Bible for an adult, teenager or child? Is it for personal devotion and prayer, or for academic study? Will the Bible be used in a setting where the differences between Catholic, Orthodox and Reformed traditions are important?

Before we consider some of those factors, it's important to understand what "the Bible" is. Its title comes from the Greek word for "book" (*biblion*) but an ancient *biblion* was nothing like a modern book. A *biblion* was a handwritten scroll of papyrus or parchment. Written on one side only and operated by rollers at both ends, ancient scrolls were fairly unwieldy. It is somewhat ironic, and lovely, that in the 21st century we have returned to reading books by "scrolling" through them! Fortunately, our "e-scrolls" are much easier to navigate around than the ancient ones. However, what the ancient form of book reminds us is that the "books of the Bible" were once exactly that: individual books (scrolls) written by different people in different times and places. The idea of a single "book" in which all the books of Scripture could be found was unknown to ancient Israel and the early Christians.

By the time of Jesus the people of Israel had a sense of which of their spiritual and religious books counted as "Scripture". These books included the Torah or Pentateuch (the first five books in our Old Testament), the Psalms, and many of the books attributed to the great prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel. When people in the New Testament mention "the Scriptures", they are talking about this unofficial collection of books. A similar process then began in early Christianity, with communities sharing writings that recorded the teachings of Jesus and their interpretation for the infant churches. Gradually, some of these writings, such as the Gospels according to Mark, Luke, Matthew and John, as well as Paul's letters, came to be given the same kind of recognition as the Scriptures of Israel.

The collection of books recognised as Scripture is called the "canon". While it is difficult to be certain, many scholars think that the Jewish canon was complete by the end of the first century, while the newer Christian canon by sometime in the third century. We'll have more to say about "canon" in a moment. Of course it is only once the early Christians began treating their own writings as Scripture that an "Old Testament" and a "New Testament" come into being, and naturally only among Christians. What Christians call the "Old Testament" Jews refer to as the Tanak (an acronym from the initial letters in Hebrew for Torah, Prophets and Writings), or simply as the Bible. Most of the modern Bibles from which teachers, parents and students will be choosing will be ones produced by and for Christians and hence include both Testaments. However, it's worth noting that there are some fine English translations of the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the Jewish Publication Society's Tanak.

While the idea of a collection of scrolls had been around for some time, each scroll still typically contained only a small part of what we today call the Bible: either an individual book or a mini-collection of books, such as the Torah or the Gospels. The technological leap that brought the whole collection together into a single place was the Roman invention of the codex. The codex is the kind of book we know today, a block of pages bound together with a single spine. This form of publication meant that pages could be written on both sides and the reader could easily flick back and forth through the codex.

By the end of the third century, Christians were producing codices containing the whole of the Old and New Testaments. These books were huge volumes due to the unavoidable thickness of papyrus or parchment and the size of the handwriting, but they were still more convenient than having to juggle a whole collection of scrolls.[1] Interestingly, the early Christian codices continued the practice, found in the scrolls, of writing in multiple columns rather than in lines right across each page. We can imagine that, just as many people today want their e-reader to mimic as much as possible the look and feel of a "real" book, the first codex readers also wanted a high-tech version of what they were familiar and comfortable with. Even today most printed Bibles continue the practice of arranging each page in two columns. Some modern editions have done away with this practice, making the Bible appear in print more like an ordinary book.

Although the idea of the Bible as a single book goes back at least to the third century, before the development of movable type printing in Europe in the mid-15th century the laborious and expensive process of producing handwritten Bibles meant that most people, even if literate, could not afford to own their own Bible. Most European Christians down to the 15th century had contact with the Bible through hearing its Latin (Vulgate) translation read in church, and depended upon priests and preachers for its explanation. The convenient miniaturisation and mass production of Bibles begun by Johannes Gutenberg in 1455 had a profound effect on the relationship of Christians to the Bible. As Bibles came within the purchasing power of ordinary people and rates of literacy rose, so too did the demand for translations into vernacular languages. For the first time, ordinary Christians could read the Bible for themselves in their own language and draw conclusions that might differ from what they heard in homilies and sermons.

While the Protestant reformers of the 16th century enthusiastically promoted the idea of individual Bible reading, Catholic authorities were cautious. The very enthusiasm of the reformers, together with their theological idea that Scripture alone should be the source for Christian faith, tended to force the Catholic Church in the opposite direction. As a result, the availability of vernacular translations of the Bible in the Catholic world lagged behind that of Protestant countries. While it is a caricature to suggest that Catholics believed in the sacraments and tradition while Protestants believed in the Bible, there is certainly a sense that Catholic leaders sought to ensure that the Bible remained, in the first place, the *Church's* book and subject to the Church's final interpretation. This remains the position of Catholic faith today, although with the polemics of the Reformation long gone Catholics are now very much encouraged to use the Bible for private reading, study and prayer.[2]

The Reformation (and counter-Reformation) highlighted two issues that remain important even today when selecting a Bible. The first issue is the problem of canon. For Jews, the canon consists of the books written in Hebrew and Aramaic. Christians, of course, add the 27 books of the New Testament to their canon. It sounds simple, but most people are at least vaguely aware that there are different "Catholic", "Protestant" and "Orthodox" Bibles. While all three groups of Christians agree on the canon of the New Testament, there are slight differences with regard to the content of the Old Testament canon. How can we explain this? In the couple of centuries before Christ, Greek-speaking Jews in Egypt developed their own Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures which today we call the Septuagint. Most early Christians were also Greek speakers – even among non-native speakers, Greek played the part of English today as a kind of widespread second language and language of international affairs. The Septuagint was thus a ready-made Greek version of the Old Testament which the early Christians began to use. However, the Septuagint included not only books translated from Hebrew, but also some books which, although Jewish in origin, were thought to have been composed in Greek and somewhat later than the Hebrew books. These included books such as Wisdom, Sirach (Ecclesiasticus), the books of the Maccabees and some additions to the book of Daniel. Following the destruction of the Jerusalem Temple in AD70, these extra books have never been considered canonical by Jews.

Generally speaking, the Protestant reformers also decided that these later Greek books did not have the same scriptural status as the older Hebrew books. Essentially, the Protestant Old Testament contains only the Hebrew and Aramaic books accepted by Judaism. But the Catholic and Orthodox Old Testament continues to include the extra books from the Septuagint (with the Orthodox in fact containing even a few more additions). Catholics call these additional books "deuterocanonical", while Christians in the reformed traditions tend to refer to them as "the apocrypha". Non-Catholic Christians are not saying that these books are harmful or "fake" but merely that they do not hold them to be inspired Scripture as Catholics do. A modern ecumenical translation of the Bible such as the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) is usually published including the deuterocanonical/apocryphal books. In such a Bible, these books will tend to be grouped together in a section between the Old and New Testaments so that they can be easily distinguished from the books which everyone agrees are canonical. On the other hand, in a Bible translation produced by Catholic scholars such as the New Jerusalem Bible (NJB) or New American Bible (NAB), the deuterocanonical books are usually interspersed through the Old Testament in the order found in the Septuagint. There's no magic to the order, of course, particularly when we remember the one volume "Bible" is simply a

conveniently packaged library of individual books. However, translations produced exclusively by Protestant scholars such as the New International Version (NIV) will not include these books at all.

The second issue which the Reformation highlighted is that of translation. The books of the Bible were originally written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. The need for translations into the languages of ordinary Christians became acute at the time of the Reformation as the printing press made the Bible easily available to all. English speakers are familiar with the King James Bible or "Authorised Version" which became the official translation of the Anglican Church in the early 17th century. An early Catholic English translation is the Douay-Rheims Bible which dates from the late 16th century. While these translations are important in the history of the Bible, to modern ears the antiquated style of English makes it sound as if the Word of God is largely addressed to our distant ancestors rather than to us. In addition, biblical scholarship has come a long way, identifying ancient manuscripts that help us get closer to the original text and clarifying what that text really means. Good modern translations are almost always preferable for personal use and for study.

This brings us to today and the multitude of Bibles to be found online and in stores. The first thing to note is that there are really only a limited number of translations or versions; we've already mentioned the main ones such as the:

New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

New American Bible (NAB)

New Jerusalem Bible (NJB)

New International Version (NIV).

Each of these versions is the result of a team of biblical scholars working together to produce a consistent, agreed translation into readable modern English. Not an easy task! The NRSV continues to be a very widely used version, particularly for more serious study. The NAB and NJB are both excellent Catholic translations; the NJB has a familiar feel because it is an updated version of the translation we hear in the Australian lectionary. The NIV is a fine translation and is one of the versions found in many different formats, however it needs to be remembered that this is a version which will not include the deuterocanonical books. It is also important to distinguish a translation from a mere paraphrase such as the Good News Bible. The Good News Bible has its place as a simplified form of the Bible. However it tends to smooth over difficulties. The text of Scripture is often challenging and those of us who teach and grapple with it should see this as something exciting rather than something to be avoided!

A version can of course be published in all kinds of formats: large, pocket-sized, soft or hard-cover. Some publications are designed to appeal to kids while others are more formal. It should always be clear from the cover page exactly which version is the basis for the Bible you're looking at. In the end, the translation or version is more important than the packaging. Once you've thought about what version you want, by all means be guided by an attractive format.

One final consideration, particularly for teachers, parents and middle to senior secondary students, is to look for an edition with extensive notes and introductions such as an "annotated" or "study" Bible. When teaching Shakespeare we wouldn't dream of just handing students the bare text; instead we encourage the use of editions with explanations in footnotes and sidebars of concepts and language that aren't readily understood by a 21st century reader. Even in modern translation, the Bible is still a document much more ancient and foreign than any Shakespearean play. As attentive hearers of the Word of God contained in its pages, we need to do all we can to attune not only our hearts but also our minds to its challenges.

Endnotes

[1] You can see exactly what such a codex looked like online. One of the most famous and important early codices is Codex Sinaiticus. So called because it was rediscovered in the 19th century in St Catherine's

Monastery on the Sinai Peninsula. The major part of the codex is held today in the British Library and can now be viewed online.
Retrieved 7 March 2016, URL: www.bl.uk/onlinegallery/sacredtexts/codexsinai.html

[2] The latest positive statement of the Catholic position on the use of the Bible in the Church's life and mission, including the lives of individuals, can be found in Benedict XVI's document *Verbum domini*. See especially paragraphs 72-87.
Retrieved 7 March 2016, URL: http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20100930_verbum-domini.html

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