

## “The Blessing and the Confusion of Bible Manuscripts and Bible Translations”

- The Bible is the inspired, infallible, inerrant Word of God (II Timothy 3:16).
- The Bible is the most valuable material possession we have. It is “a mirror” that reveals the sins and imperfections in our lives (James 1:23-24). It is “a fire” that purifies us (Jeremiah 23:29). It is “a hammer” that breaks up the hard places in our hearts (Jeremiah 23:29). It is the only book in all the world that is alive. The Bible truly is “living and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword” (Hebrews 4:12).
- We don’t have the original manuscripts that Moses, David, Matthew, John, Paul, and the other biblical writers wrote. Those manuscripts have long since been lost, burned, or in some other way destroyed. What we have today are Bibles that came to us through manuscripts that were copied from other manuscripts, that were copied from other manuscripts, that were copied from other manuscripts, etc., etc., that can ultimately be traced back (because of the authenticity, consistency, and the sheer numbers of the copied manuscripts) to the original manuscripts that the Bible authors actually wrote themselves.
- There are no original manuscripts from any literature in the ancient world. This is true of all ancient literature, not just biblical literature.
- The original manuscripts are validated and verified by the manuscripts that were made by copying the original manuscripts. If significant numbers of manuscripts are discovered, and if the content in the manuscripts match each other, it is assumed that the manuscripts can be traced back, either directly or indirectly, to the original source.
- The classic example of this is Homer’s *Iliad*, a poem written by Homer in the 8<sup>th</sup> century B.C. While the original manuscript no longer exists, approximately 2,000 manuscripts do exist. This far exceeds any manuscript evidence that exists for any other non-biblical literature from the ancient world.
- Let’s consider the numbers of biblical manuscripts that have been discovered:
  - The Hebrew Old Testament** – Approximately 10,000 manuscripts, or fragments of manuscripts, were discovered in a synagogue in Cairo, Egypt.
  - The Septuagint** – This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Septuagint was translated and compiled in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century B.C. so that those who spoke Greek could read the Hebrew Bible. Over 2,000 manuscripts of the Septuagint have been discovered.
  - The Dead Sea Scrolls** – Approximately 1,000 scrolls have been discovered in caves near the Dead Sea. The first discovery was made in 1947 when a young shepherd boy threw a rock into

a cave and heard some pottery breaking. He went into the cave to discover that inside the broken pottery were Old Testament manuscripts. This became the greatest archaeological discovery of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Eventually, approximately 1,000 Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered representing every book in the Old Testament except for The Book of Esther. These manuscripts matched up to the accepted Hebrew Old Testament approximately 95% of the time. The other 5% of differences were very minor and had to do with things like the spelling of names which is not unusual at all because in the ancient world many names had different spellings.

-**New Testament Greek manuscripts** – Over 5,800 complete manuscripts or fragments of manuscripts have been discovered.

-**Latin New Testament manuscripts** – Approximately 10,000 of these manuscripts have been discovered.

-**New Testament manuscripts in other languages** – Approximately 9,300 of these manuscripts have been discovered.

-Obviously, the number of biblical manuscripts far exceeds the manuscripts that have been found for Homer's *Iliad*. That is an understatement. For this reason, the Hebrew Old Testament and the Greek New Testament have been more than archaeologically and historically verified and validated.

-As the years and centuries passed, these manuscripts were passed on to subsequent generations.

-In the 1500s, a Catholic priest by the name of Erasmus became, for all practical purposes, the first editor of the New Testament. As he studied and compared the New Testament manuscripts available to him at that time, he put together what was known as the Textus Receptus. The Latin words "Textus Receptus" literally mean the "Received Text." It was his conviction that as he compiled his edition of the Greek New Testament that he actually had the manuscripts that could be traced back to the apostles themselves. In other words, he had "received the text" that they had originally written even though he didn't have the original manuscripts. The Textus Receptus, to be clear, only refers to the Greek New Testament, not the Hebrew Old Testament.

-The manuscripts that Erasmus was working with can be traced back to the 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. Obviously, those manuscripts came from older manuscripts, but the ones he was actually working with are dated as 12<sup>th</sup> century A.D. manuscripts.

-The Textus Receptus became the basis for the Greek New Testament that would appear in subsequent Bibles for the next four centuries.

-The King James Version, published in 1611, uses the Textus Receptus for the New Testament portion of the Bible. Several centuries later, in 1982, the New King James Version would also use the Textus Receptus for the New Testament portion of the Bible.

- The Textus Receptus is sometimes referred to by scholars as the Byzantine Text because it came from the Greek world.
- In the late 1800s, Greek New Testament manuscripts were discovered in Egypt. These manuscripts became known as the Alexandrian Text because of the location of their discovery. Others called them the Critical Text. For our purposes today, they are known as the NU Text. The NU derives its name from the Nestle-Aland Greek New Testament United Bible Societies. The “N” obviously come from Nestle, and the “U” comes from United. The NU dates to the 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup>, and 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D., so it is obviously a much older text than the Textus Receptus. In fact, it is somewhere between 800 and 1,000 years older.
- For this reason, the majority of those in the academic world today consider the NU Text to be a more reliable text than the Textus Receptus. Their logic is obvious: The older the manuscripts, the closer they were to the original manuscripts.
- While that logic is certainly good, it should also be noted that the Textus Receptus came from other older manuscripts that have currently been lost. It should also be noted that were it not for the Textus Receptus, and more specifically the manuscripts from which it came into being, the world would have had no Greek New Testament between the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D. and the time the NU Text was discovered in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. So whichever Greek text you prefer, you must acknowledge that were it not for the Textus Receptus, and the manuscripts upon which it was built, the world would have had no Greek New Testament for approximately 1,500 years. It is hard to believe that God would have allowed that to happen. We owe the Protestant Reformation, the ministries of John Bunyan, John Wesley, Charles Wesley, George Whitefield, Charles Spurgeon, Dwight Moody, Billy Sunday, and Billy Graham to the Textus Receptus. Their ministries were built upon the Textus Receptus and upon the manuscripts from which it was derived.
- The Old Testament portion of the Bibles that we have today have come to us largely from the accepted Hebrew Old Testament manuscripts, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls.
- The New Testament portion of the Bibles that we have today have come to us largely from the Textus Receptus and the NU.
- We owe a great debt to the scribes, compilers, and editors of these manuscripts. Our Bibles today have come to us through their hands.
- Before commenting on the major Bible translations that we have today, perhaps a broad and simplified overview of how the Bible has developed through the centuries would be helpful:
  - The Septuagint**—3<sup>rd</sup> Century B.C.—This is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament.
  - The Vulgate**—4<sup>th</sup> Century A.D.—This is the Latin translation of the entire Bible. The word Vulgate means “common speech.” The idea here is that by translating the Bible into Latin it was being translated into a language that many of the people of that day could read.

-**The Gutenberg Bible**—1455—This Bible is the earliest mass-produced major book ever printed in Europe. The Gutenberg Bible is a printed edition of the Latin Vulgate. It was named for Johannes Gutenberg, the inventor of the Gutenberg printing press. The printing press changed the world of books as we know it today.

-**The Luther Bible**—1534—Martin Luther translated the Bible into the German language so that the people in the German-speaking world would have the Bible in their own language.

-**The Great Bible**—1539—The Great Bible is the first authorized Bible to be printed in English. It is named “The Great Bible” because the pages are very large. It was a huge Bible. The Bible was chained to specific locations in the churches of that day so that the members could read the Bible for themselves. If someone was wealthy enough, they could have purchased their own copy of The Great Bible. Because of the size of the Bible, it would have been cost prohibitive to many others.

-**The Geneva Bible**—1560—The Geneva Bible was the first English Bible made available to general public. Interestingly enough, it is the first Bible that ever used chapter and verse divisions. Additionally, the Geneva Bible used an extensive cross-reference system along with book introductions and study notes. The Geneva Bible was one of the Bibles that came to America on the Mayflower.

-**The King James Version**—1611—The King James version was published in 1611 because King James I of England did not like some of the study notes in the Geneva Bible. For that reason, he commissioned a Bible to be translated into English that did not have study notes.

-As we think about the Bible translations available to us today, we obviously owe a great debt to those who have gone before us. The Bibles mentioned above owe their existence to the manuscripts that were available to them at the time they were assembled. Today, we are blessed to have more manuscripts at our disposal than they had. The manuscript discoveries have largely contributed to the significance of many of the translations we have today.

-Below is a very brief and concise overview of the most well-known Bible translations in use today. Much, if not all, of the information given here can be found in the introductory section of each of these Bibles. We want to make clear that we believe all of the translations mentioned here are excellent. Hopefully, this will be helpful for you as you seek to discover which Bible translation is best for you:

-**The King James Version (KJV)**—1611—The KJV was the most scholarly and accessible of all translations at the time it was published. It is still very popular today although some of the old English words are difficult to understand. The New Testament portion of the KJV was translated from the Textus Receptus.

-**The New King James Version (NKJV)**—1982—130 Bible scholars, pastors, and theologians put this Bible together to update the vocabulary of the KJV while at the same time preserving the beautiful literary style in which the KJV was written. The New Testament portion of the

NKJV was translated from the Textus Receptus.

- New American Standard Bible (NASB)**—This Bible was an update of the American Standard Version (ASV) of 1901. The NASB was first printed in 1971, reprinted in 1995, and again in 2020. It uses a different New Testament manuscript than the KJV and the NKJV use. The NASB uses the NU text for the New Testament as opposed to the Textus Receptus. The NASB translates the Hebrew and Greek very literally. While this has many advantages, it can often make for bumpy reading.
  
- New International Version (NIV)**—The NIV first came onto the world scene in 1973. Subsequent editions appeared in 1978, 1984, and 2011. The NIV is probably the most popular translation today. It tries to strike a balance between a “word for word” translation and a “thought for thought” translation. The NIV uses the NU for its New Testament.
  
- New Living Translation (NLT)**—The NLT came onto the world scene in 1996 with subsequent editions in 2004 and 2015. It is a very “easy to read” Bible. The process of putting this Bible together began as an attempt to update The Living Bible which is a paraphrase of the Bible which was written by Kenneth Taylor in 1971 in an attempt to make the Bible more understandable for his young children during their nightly family devotional time. But as the process went along of putting what would become the NLT together, the scholars involved in this project decided to make this an actual translation instead of just an update of Taylor’s paraphrase. It has become an extremely popular Bible in today’s world. The NLT uses the NU for its New Testament.
  
- English Standard Version (ESV)**—The ESV made its appearance onto the world scene in 2001 with a subsequent edition in 2016. The purpose for this was to get back to a more “word for word” approach to translation. The ESV says of itself that it is “essentially literal” meaning that as a general rule it translates from Hebrew and Greek into English in a very literal sense, but if something is unclear it seeks to give clarity to the passage. The ESV is more literal than the NIV, but not as literal as the NASB. It is a very popular translation in academic circles today. The ESV is a much improved version of the Revised Standard Version (RSV). The ESV uses the NU for its New Testament.
  
- Christian Standard Bible (CSB)**—This Bible owes its beginnings to the Holman Christian Standard Bible (HCSB) and for all practical purposes has taken the place of the HCSB. The CSB was first printed in 2017 with a subsequent edition in 2020. It describes its translation approach as “optimal equivalence” meaning that it translates “word for word” when deemed best, and it translates “thought for thought” when deemed best. The CSB uses the NU for its New Testament.

### What About Capitalized Pronouns for God?

-The only major Bible translations that use capitalized pronouns when referring to God are the NKJV and the NASB. None of the other translations capitalize pronouns for God. While this may seem

disrespectful, actually it isn't. The first reason the other translations do not capitalize pronouns for God is because the manuscripts themselves do not capitalize pronouns for God. The second reason is that it is not always clear when a pronoun refers to God or when it might refer to someone else. An example is Matthew 3:16. Here the second "He" in the verse is capitalized in the NKJV but not capitalized in the NASB because the NKJV translation committee felt like that pronoun referred to Jesus while the NASB translation committee felt like that pronoun referred to John the Baptist. Another example is Psalm 22:1. The NKJV translation committee chose to capitalize the first-person pronouns in that verse because they took them to be a reference to something Jesus said on the cross, so the first-person pronouns, in their minds, refer to Jesus. The NASB translators, on the other hand, chose not to capitalize the first-person pronouns in that verse because, while recognizing the future messianic significance of the text, they also realized that in their original context the first-person pronouns applied to David long before they applied to Jesus.

-The point is that it is not always easy to tell when a pronoun refers to God or when it refers to someone else. For that reason, all the manuscripts, with the exception of the NKJV and the NASB, have chosen not to capitalize pronouns for God.

### **What About Red Letter Editions?**

-Some Bibles put the words of Jesus in red letter print. Other Bibles don't. Why is this?

-The Bibles that print the words of Christ in red do so to give prominence to the words of Jesus. There is something tender and sweet about seeing His words in red. It sets them apart as special.

-The Bibles that don't put the words of Jesus in red don't do so because they don't want in any way to imply that the words of Jesus are more inspired than any other words in the Bible. They are right on this. In other words, the words of Jesus are no more inspired than the words of Moses, Matthew, Peter, or Paul. Every word in the Bible is inspired, and there are some who fear that putting the words of Jesus in red letters gives the impression that His words have more authority than all the other words in the Bible.

-We actually prefer the words of Jesus to be in red letter print for sentimental reasons, but we fully recognize that all of the words in the Bible are equally inspired, infallible, inerrant, and authoritative.

### **Which Bible Translation Should You Use?**

-Determining which Bible translation is right for you is not necessarily an easy thing to do. We will attempt here to make a recommendation for you that has more to do with *you* than it does with the actual translations themselves. We say that because we believe that all of the major translations are excellent. People, though, are different, and that is, in part, what has motivated so many of the Bible translations through the centuries...trying to get a Bible in people's hands that they can easily understand and apply to their lives. With that in mind, our recommendations are as follows:

-If you want to read the **Bible in the most literal translation, closest to the original Hebrew and Greek languages, we recommend the NASB.** It is an excellent translation. Many pastors, preachers, and teachers use the NASB because of its literalness and precision.

-If you want to read the **Bible in the translation that is the easiest to understand, we recommend the NLT.** It is an excellent translation. It is simple and very easy to read. It is also very reliable and true to the original languages. It is very accurate. In fact, it has in no way sacrificed accuracy for readability. It is a wonderful Bible to read for your daily devotions. It is, without a doubt, the easiest of all the translations to read and understand. Interestingly enough, Chuck Swindoll now uses this Bible in his preaching ministry for the reasons we have mentioned.

-If you want to read the **Bible in the most poetic and beautifully written translation, we recommend either the NKJV or the ESV.** Both are excellent translations of the Bible. We find these translations to be easy to meditate on after you have read from them because the phraseology is written in a very memorable way. We also believe that these translations are the best and the easiest translations from which to memorize Bible verses. The poetic and majestic way in which these translations are written make memorization easy. Of these two translations, we prefer the NKJV. We have several reasons for this. First, we both began reading the NKJV when it first came out in 1982, and we have been reading it ever since. For this reason, the overwhelming majority of the verses we have memorized come from the NKJV. Second, we slightly prefer the wording of the NKJV over the ESV in certain classic verses such as: Psalm 47:4; Psalm 107:1; Isaiah 53:5; Nahum 1:7; John 3:16; John 14:1-3; Romans 8:28; and Colossians 2:10. Third, while many regard the Textus Receptus as an inferior Greek text to the NU, we are not convinced that it actually is. We respect and highly regard both Greek texts, and in some passages, such as Matthew 17:20, we believe that the Textus Receptus is actually more accurate than the NU. There are certainly other passages, and perhaps even the passage just mentioned, that could be argued the other way. In a nutshell, the reason we slightly prefer the NKJV over the ESV is because of its historical significance and because of our own long personal history with it. It is just that simple. Had we begun with the ESV and memorized large numbers of verses from that translation, we would most likely prefer it over the NKJV. This demonstrates that our primary reason for preferring the NKJV is our familiarity with this particular translation. We cannot stress strongly enough that both translations are excellent.

-If you want a **Bible translation that attempts to make the most out of both the “word for word” approach and the “thought for thought” approach, we recommend either the NIV or the CSB.** Both are excellent translations of the Bible. They are accurate and dependable. For decades, Rick Warren has used the NIV in his preaching ministry while Tony Evans’ new Study Bible is in the CSB.

-We encourage you to pray this matter over thoroughly and to make the decision that is best for you. As John Piper, a respected pastor, stresses, it is best to have one main translation that you read from each day. You can then use the other translations as commentaries. Let the other translations shed insight onto your main translation if there is a passage that is unclear to you. By settling on one primary translation, you will find it easier to memorize Bible verses. If you are reading from a different translation every day, it will be virtually impossible for you to memorize Scripture. That said, we should indeed view the other translations as our friends, too. We should let them work with our main

translation to help us more fully understand the words that God has spoken to us.

- A good example of using different translations for different reasons can be found in the life and ministry of Billy Graham. He typically preached from the KJV. When quoting Scripture in one of his books, he typically used the NIV. When having his own daily quiet time, he typically read from The Living Bible. He found that each translation had its own strengths, and he used them accordingly.
- As you reflect upon the information that is shared here, our prayer is that it would give you a deeper appreciation for the Bible. Additionally, we pray that you would have greater confidence than ever before in the reliability of God's words. Manuscript evidence, along with the evidence of millions of changed lives through the centuries, says to us that God's Word is indeed real and can be trusted in every season of life.

### What About Study Bibles?

- The Life Application Study Bible** is considered one of the best Study Bibles of all time. This is a very well-rounded Study Bible and would be a nice edition to anyone's personal library.
- The Life Application Bible for Students** would be a wonderful gift for an older child or teenager.
- The Charles F. Stanley Life Principles Bible** is also an excellent Study Bible. It is devotional in nature and is a wonderful Bible to use when having your daily quiet time. It is loaded with practical information as well as scholarly content. This is our favorite devotional Study Bible.
- The MacArthur Study Bible** is also an excellent Study Bible. This Bible is more academic in nature. It is a tremendous resource when preparing sermons, Sunday School lessons, or when you are just wanting to know more of the historical background and theological ramifications taught in God's Word. It is also filled with much material that will be easily applicable to your life. This is our favorite academic Study Bible.
- Additionally, David Jeremiah, Chuck Swindoll, and Tony Evans have recently released their own Study Bibles. They are all excellent. They are filled with tremendous background information, theological explanations, and practical suggestions for daily Christian living.
- One of the benefits of a good Study Bible is the clear, concise introductions they give to each book in the Bible. In addition, they are loaded with historical background information, theological truths, interpretations of difficult biblical passages, and instructions for victorious Christian living.
- The translation choices for Study Bibles will be limited as Study Bibles are published in a smaller number of translations than regular Bibles.
- We must always remember that the study notes in a Study Bible are not inspired. Only the actual biblical text is inspired, infallible, and inerrant. We should focus more on the biblical text than on the study notes. Let the study notes help you, but never place them on the same level as the Bible itself.

## A Closing Word

- The Bible has providentially come to us through the work of scribes, scholars, pastors, and theologians. Supervising the entire process, of course, has been the Holy Spirit Himself. The Bible, as we have seen, is the most verified and validated written work in human history.
- The Bible is God's unchanging Word. It is settled for all eternity (Psalm 119:89). Additionally, it is the light on the path of our lives that shows us the next step to take (Psalm 119:105).
- We are blessed to have the Bible. The question is: Will we believe it and obey it? That is a question we must ask and answer every day of our lives.
- We believe that the God who *inspired* His Word has also *preserved* His Word through the centuries. We also believe that He still uses His Word to *convict* the lost, *convert* those who repent of their sins and trust Christ, and *conform* believers into the image of His Son, Jesus Christ.
- We encourage you to read God's Word daily, think about it deeply, meditate on it thoroughly, and apply it to your life personally. Let the Bible be God's voice to you. As John Calvin said, "When the Bible speaks, God speaks."
- Billy Graham said he never felt lonely when he was reading the Bible. Upon reflection, neither do we. We encourage you to make the Bible your closest tangible friend.

## Two Concluding Statements

- The above information was compiled and prepared by Charles Redmond and Jon Redmond in conjunction with a 3-week Wednesday night study on Bible manuscripts and Bible translations. The study took place at First Baptist Church in Pasadena, Texas, in the fall of 2021.*
- It would be virtually impossible to document all the sources from which the information presented in this handout was derived. It was as though one source led to another source which led to another source thus making documentation exceedingly difficult. The sources themselves are closely related to each other and at times differ slightly from each other. Additionally, some the information included here came from people and sources we can no longer even remember. That said, special acknowledgement should be made for the research and writings of F. F. Bruce, Bruce Metzger, Clayton Jones, Josh McDowell, Sean McDowell, and all those who have devoted their lives to the in-depth study of God's Word. We certainly acknowledge that none of the information shared here is original to us. We have learned it from others and are forever grateful for their knowledge.*