



# **Choosing a Bible:**

## **A Guide to Translations and Study Bibles**

Contributors:

Wilma Ann Bailey  
Holly E. Hearon  
Carolyn Higginbotham  
Marti J. Steussy  
Ronald J. Allen

Added Addendum for Common English Bible

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Editing by Joyce Krauser

“What Bible do you recommend?” “What’s the best translation?” “What’s the best study Bible?” These questions are simple to ask but complicated to answer. Who will use this Bible, for what? The best Bible for public reading is not necessarily the best Bible for detailed, word-by-word Bible study. Avid readers and those who struggle with reading are likely to prefer different Bibles. A study Bible loaded with suggestions for the leader of a church prayer group may not serve the needs of a student in a college Bible course.

Furthermore, the Bible we like the best may not serve us best. A translation that agrees with our own theological perspective, for instance, or a study Bible that relates everything to popular concepts, may not help us grow beyond our ruts and prejudices. Readers tend to like Bibles that “make everything clear” and “aren’t confusing,” but what if the passages in question really are unclear and confusing? Should we trust a translation that smoothes them over?

On the following pages, the Bible professors of Christian Theological Seminary (Wilma Ann Bailey, Holly E. Hearon, Carolyn Higginbotham, Marti J. Steussy, and Ronald J. Allen) review a number of different Bible translations and study Bibles. A translation, such as *NIV* or *NRSV*, is a rendering of the actual biblical text. A study Bible usually contains some standard translation plus explanatory articles and notes and perhaps other helps such as maps. A translation, such as the *NRSV*, may be used in several different study Bibles, and a set of study notes, such as the “Life Application” helps, may be published in company with a variety of translations.

In the reviews which follow, you will encounter the terms “grammatical equivalence” and “dynamic equivalence.” When most people think of translation, they think of going through the Hebrew (for instance) words one by one, converting each to some equivalent English word—a “grammatical equivalence” or “literal” translation. Translators themselves soon learn, however, that all translation is interpretation. No translation, whatever its method, can exactly capture the meaning contours of the original. Many translators today argue that a more accurate translation can be produced by the “dynamic equivalence” or “idea by idea” method. For instance, in the *King James Version* of 1 Sam. 25:22, an angry David swears to kill “any that pisseth against the wall” in the household of the rich landowner Nabal. This follows the Hebrew phrasing very closely but (aside from the fact that it is not the sort of language people expect to hear in church) is a little confusing to most English-speaking readers. In the *New Living Translation*, David’s oath against Nabal says that David will not spare “even one man.” This grammatical equivalence translation makes David’s meaning much clearer.

In general, dynamic equivalence translations are easier to understand and work well for reading aloud, while grammatical equivalence translations are more useful for detailed Bible study. Other factors such as the difficulty of the vocabulary and sentence structure also affect the usefulness of a given Bible for various purposes. In real life, any translation is a mix of grammatical and dynamic equivalence; the reviews will indicate the direction in which each particular Bible tends.

We have considered many such nuances in our following reviews of Bibles and study Bibles. We hope that our comments on them will help you make a good Bible choice for the person(s) and purpose(s) you have in mind.

## The Revised Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version

The *RSV* and the *NRSV* were sponsored by the National Council of Churches. Both were the work of about 30 scholars representing a variety of mainline denominations. A Jewish scholar was a member of the *NRSV* team. He also helped with the translation of the TANAKH (see entry).

The *Revised Standard Version Bible* was published in 1946 (NT) and 1952 (OT). It was a fairly literal translation in contemporary, but not trendy, language. The translators of the *RSV* took into account not only the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts available up to that time but also the more precise understandings of grammar and vocabulary based on ancient texts in related languages that were not known to earlier translators.

The *RSV* chose to not include obsolete words or words whose meanings had significantly changed over the centuries. For example, the *RSV* did not use “thee” and “thou” (except in certain prayers or when addressing God) or words like “behoove.” Ruth 1:16d reads “for where you go I will go” where the *King James Version* read “for whither thou goest, I will go.” The *RSV* recognized that the meaning of English words has changed over the centuries. An example, in the Preface, was the word “comprehend.” It no longer meant “overcome.”

The *RSV* quickly became controversial because of its iconoclastic translations of certain words and phrases such as “young woman” in Isa. 7:14 instead of “virgin.” The Hebrew Bible translators of the *RSB* had attempted to be faithful to the text without being unduly influenced by later Christian scriptures and interpretations, and this was offensive to many conservative Christians. Nevertheless, the *RSV* became the preferred translation among mainline scholars because of its careful attention to the text.

The *RSV* was primarily a Protestant translation when it was first introduced. Later, Roman Catholic scholars were added to the committee. A Roman Catholic edition of the *RSV*, which included the Deuterocanonical books, was issued after the Protestant version.

Work began on a revision of the *Revised Standard Version* in 1974. In addition to the usual task of updating the language and including new learnings, the committee, in order to be faithful to the original intent of the text, used inclusive language where that most faithfully rendered the Hebrew or the Greek. For example, Exod. 21:12 in the *RSV* reads “Whoever

strikes a man so that he dies shall be put to death.” The *New Revised Standard Version* reads “Whoever strikes a person mortally shall be put to death.” Matt. 6:1 in the *RSV* reads “Beware of practicing your piety before men...” In the *NRSV*, it reads “Beware of practicing your piety before others...” However, the *NRSV* often preserves masculine language for God. For example, Ps. 2:4 reads “He who sits in the heavens laughs...” This could have been translated “The one who sits in the heavens laughs...” There is no independent “he” pronoun in the Hebrew in this verse.

The *NRSV* solves the problem of which ending to use for the Gospel of Mark by including just about all of the possible endings in a note attached to the text. “The Woman Caught in Adultery” text (John 8:1-11) is included but with brackets and a note informing the reader that it does not appear in most ancient manuscripts. The *NRSV* re-instated the passage about King Nahash and the gouging out of the eyes of the people of Jabesh-gilead (1 Sam. 10:27) because it was found to be the better reading. It appears in the Dead Sea Scrolls but was accidentally removed by a careless scribe.

The *NRSV* shows greater sensitivity to race consciousness than most other translations. Witness Song of Sol. 1:5 “I am black and beautiful” versus the *RSV*’s “I am very dark, but comely.” The “but” hints at an incompatibility between being dark and being comely. However, it misses the mark in Ps. 23:4 when it translates “Even though I walk through the darkest valley,” a reading adopted by many modern translators. The translation “valley of the shadow of death” (*RSV*) is undoubtedly better. The fearful thing is not darkness but death.

The primary weakness of the *NRSV* is that its translators did not give as much attention to the aesthetics of the language. It strains so much for accuracy that reading a passage of any length, you are more likely to find yourself tripping over your tongue in this translation than in some others.

The translators of the *NRSV* wrote that their aim was to be “as literal as possible, as free as necessary.” It succeeds in this. The *NRSV* is an excellent Bible to use for serious study. Most mainline scholars recommend the *NRSV* as the preferred English translation.

## The New American Bible

In 1943 Pope Pius XII issued the encyclical *Divino afflante Spiritu* that gave papal endorsement to rigorous critical study of the Bible. In response, the Bishops' Committee of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine commissioned the Catholic Biblical Association to produce a translation "from the original languages or from the oldest extant form of the text" that renders "the sense of the biblical text in as correct a form as possible." The *New American Bible* was first published in 1971.

The editorial board numbered approximately fifty members and included some Protestant scholars, although the majority was Roman Catholic. Their collaboration resulted in a fresh translation of the Bible that "aims to convey as directly as possible the thought and individual style of the inspired writers." This dual concern for thought and style suggests an interest in striking a balance between dynamic and grammatical equivalence. The criteria for achieving that balance were shaped by the requirement that translation be equally appropriate for three distinct uses: public reading in worship, private devotional reading, and scholarly study.

The result is a translation that is eminently readable but still reasonably close to the original text. The verses are organized into paragraphs according to thought units, except for poetic passages which are indented from the rest of the text and organized by strophe. The vocabulary is no more difficult than is necessary to express the meaning of the passage. It should be easily comprehended by both teens and adults.

The translation reflects moderate theological assumptions. In general it is consistent with the conclusions of modern critical study of the Scripture, although at certain points a more traditional interpretation prevails. Thus, for example, the presence of two creation stories in Genesis is highlighted by the division of Gen. 2:4 into two sentences and the insertion of the heading "Second Story of Creation." Likewise in Ps. 82, the translation does not obscure the implication that other (subordinate) gods exist: "God arises in the divine assembly; he judges in the midst of the gods." On the other hand, Isa. 7:14 reads "the virgin shall be with child," a reading that is influenced by the quotation of the text in Matthew.

Since the *New American Bible* is a Roman Catholic translation, the deuterocanonicals, also known as the apocrypha, are incorporated into the First Testament. In Esther the Hebrew verse numbering is maintained; the sections that appear only in the longer Greek text are labeled A-F with their own internal verse divisions. In Daniel the final two chapters, which do not appear in the Hebrew/Aramaic text, are labeled "Appendix."

## New Jerusalem Bible

The *New Jerusalem Bible*, 1985, is a study Bible produced by British Roman Catholics. It is based upon the 1973 edition of the French *Bible de Jérusalem*, produced by Roman Catholic scholars at the French *École biblique* (School of the Bible) in Jerusalem. While the *NJB*'s study helps and notes are closely based upon the French work (updated in a few cases), its translation of the biblical text has been made by scholars in direct consultation with the Greek and Hebrew texts.

The *New Jerusalem Bible* uses a more dynamic (thought for thought) translation style than do the Bibles of the King James family (including *NRSV*). Because it was prepared as a study Bible, however, emphasis lies on accuracy rather than easy understandability—this version is not a paraphrase which attempts to “explain” confusing passages. The translators have also sought consistency in the rendering of key terms, so that the reader can follow the plays on key words (contrast the *REB*, which is similar in many ways but much more free in adapting the translation of a given term to context). Some effort has been made to use gender-inclusive English terms in cases where the original meaning seems inclusive, but *NJB* is less thorough than *NRSV* in this regard. One unusual feature of the *NJB* translation is that it renders the Hebrew name for God “Yahweh,” rather than “the LORD.”

Study helps include introductions to major sections of the Bible, extensive page-bottom notes, maps, timelines, and other tables, and indexes of persons, places and major topics covered in the footnotes. The notes are primarily intended to help the reader understand the Bible as a collection of historical documents; they discuss such matters as archeology, ancient literary forms, probable sources of the text and puns and wordplays in the original languages. They also comment upon the relationship of the texts to later Christian beliefs, including Catholic doctrines, but the primary concerns are historical-critical and literary.

The *NJB* translation may be recommended for both liturgical reading and study, and the study helps are appropriate for college and seminary students and educated lay readers interested in how biblical scholars understand the text. However, the vocabulary and syntax are fairly sophisticated—this is not a Bible for poor readers—and it is not the right choice for a reader primarily interested in devotional comments.

## Revised English Bible

The *Revised English Bible*, published in 1989, was commissioned and overseen by a consortium of churches of the British Isles, including the Salvation Army and the Roman Catholic Churches in England and Wales, Ireland and Scotland. It undertakes a thorough review and revision of the *New English Bible* published in 1961 (NT) and 1970 (full Bible).

The original *NEB* translators as well as the *REB* revisers were expert scholars working from the Hebrew and Greek texts; they received input on their drafts from literary advisors and members of the ecumenical Joint Committee. The resulting translation seems more concerned with faithfulness to the particulars of individual verses than with conformity to an overarching theological position.

The revision was undertaken partly in order to take account of new manuscript findings such as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The sponsoring churches also desired a text well suited to reading aloud. Finally, the revision is more sensitive than its predecessor to the need for gender-inclusive English translation in passages where the original language appears to include both genders.

Translators sought, in the words of the introduction to the New Testament section, “to use consistently the idiom of contemporary English, employing its natural vocabulary, constructions, and rhythms to convey the meaning” of the original language texts. This means that the *REB* provides a thought-by-thought dynamic equivalence translation rather than a word-by-word rendering. Where *KJV* translates “he shall not judge after the sight of his eyes, neither reprove after the hearing of his ears” (Isa. 11:3), *REB* says “he will not judge by outward appearances or decide a case on hearsay.” A given original-language word may be translated by different English words in order to capture the differing nuances of different occurrences.

The idiomatic English of the *REB* packs a punch in public worship. Good readers may find this an excellent Bible for personal devotion. However, its relatively complex vocabulary and syntax may trouble less fluent readers. Students interested in details of word order and repetition should choose a translation which leans more in the direction of grammatical equivalence.

## TANAKH- The Holy Scriptures

This translation is a product of the Jewish Publication Society. It started as a revision of the earlier 1917 *JPS* version, but quickly became a new translation. It was published in sections and individual books starting with the Torah in 1962 and ending with the Writings in 1982. The stated goal was to “reproduce the Hebrew idiomatically and reflect contemporary scholarship, thus laying emphasis upon intelligibility and correctness” (Preface xvii). In contrast to the Christian translations, the TANAKH attempts to “rely on the traditional Hebrew text” (Preface xvii). This particularly means that the TANAKH avoids turning to the *Septuagint* (an early Greek translation) when the Hebrew text is less than clear. (Alternate Septuagintal readings are sometimes cited in notes.) It also discarded archaic language, such as “thee” and “thou,” that appeared in the 1917 version.

Christians reading the TANAKH will notice that this translation does not contain the New Testament, and the book order is not the same as in the Christian translations. The traditional Jewish order is followed. A table of contents at the beginning of the TANAKH will inform the reader as to where to find the books. Further, the verse divisions are not always the same. If the verse is not in a familiar place, look before and after it. It will usually be only one or two verses variant with the Christian translations.

The TANAKH tends to be very careful in its translation of the Pentateuch. Gen. 16:4 accurately reads “her mistress was lowered in her esteem.” This contrasts with harsher language used in many translations: *NRSV* “contempt,” *NIV* “despise,” *NAB* “distain.”

Emendations by the translators are helpfully indicated by brackets. For example, Neh. 3:25 reads in part “the upper [tower] of the prison compound...”

The TANAKH does not claim to be an inclusive language Bible, and it is not. For example, Prov. 23:17 reads “Do not envy sinners in your heart, But only God-fearing men, at all times.” The absence of the word “men” and the use of a feminine form of fear in the Hebrew make “God-fearing men” an inappropriate translation. On the other hand, in Ezekiel, the TANAKH translates “mortal” wherever *ben adam* appears, rather than the literal “son of man.”

Christians will find the TANAKH to be a useful addition to their collection of translations, not because it always provides a better or more accurate translation (sometimes it does, sometimes it does not), but because its origin in a different tradition will enrich their understanding of the text.

## Today's New International Version

*Today's New International Version* is the “inclusive language” version of the *NIV* and, like that version, has been produced by the Committee on Bible Translation, an ecumenical and international group of scholars. As yet, only the New Testament is available, published by Zondervan (2002).

The translation is based on the *New International Version* but includes revisions made in response to new insights in biblical scholarship. Among these are attention to language that is inclusive of both men and women where it is clear that the text is speaking about or addressing both genders. So, for example, Matt. 16:24 reads “Those who want to be my disciples must deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.” Similarly, the address “brothers” is rendered “brothers and sisters” (so, Rom. 7:1). Particularly notable is the use of “Junia” (a female name) rather than “Junias” (a male name) in Rom. 16:7. Junia is identified as “outstanding among the apostles.” Although both manuscript and inscriptional evidence supports the reading “Junia,” some translations (including the *NIV*) continue to favor “Junias.” The effort to avoid gender-specific language does not extend to God, who is referred to as “he.”

*Today's New International Version* continues the commitment of the *NIV* to render the text in contemporary English while striving for a grammatical translation. This version, published in 2002, has introduced revisions to the text of the *NIV* in an effort to reflect shifts in English idioms and expressions. The result is a text that is easy to read and intended to “meet the spiritual needs of today's generation.”

Although the translators do not state their theological assumptions, they are “united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God's word in written form.” The evangelical leanings of the translation are indicated by its origins in a study sponsored by the Christian Reformed Church and National Association of Evangelicals.

This version is intended for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorization, and liturgical use. A concordance is included in the volume. With its attention to inclusive language, *Today's New International Version* will offer a welcome alternative to the *NIV* for many individuals.

## New International Version

A committee formed from members of the Christian Reformed Church and National Association of Evangelicals undertook a study during the early part of the twentieth century and determined that a need for a new translation of the Bible existed. Under the sponsorship of the International Bible Society, a Committee on Bible Translation was formed, and over one hundred scholars from around the world were invited to participate in the production of the *New International Version*. The translators worked from the best available Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. The *NIV* was first published in 1973, then again in 1978 and 1984.

The goal of the translators was to render a text in contemporary English that was, at the same time, “accurate” and faithful to “the meaning of the biblical writers.” Each subsequent edition has tried to improve on earlier versions, attending to new insights in biblical scholarship as well as changes in English idioms and expressions. Discerning the “meaning of the biblical writers” is an art rather than a science. Some may question, for example, the translation of “flesh” as “sinful nature” (as in Rom. 7:5). However, the overall result is a text that is easy to read and accessible to a large audience.

The translators represent a broad spectrum of denominations and by this have endeavored to avoid sectarian bias. They are, however, “united in their commitment to the authority and infallibility of the Bible as God’s word in written form.” The evangelical leanings of the translation are suggested by the origins of the *New International Version* in a study sponsored by the Christian Reformed Church and National Association of Evangelicals.

The translators have rendered YHWH as “LORD” and *Adonai* as “Lord.” Where these two words occur together, they are translated as “Sovereign LORD,” while “Lord of hosts” becomes “the LORD Almighty.” The translators follow the tradition of using masculine language, such as “brothers,” where the text addresses both men and women.

This version is intended for public and private reading, teaching, preaching, memorization, and liturgical use. A concordance is included in the volume.

## The New American Standard Bible

The *New American Standard Bible* was commissioned by the Lockman Foundation (a private non-profit corporation) as a revision of the *American Standard Version* of 1901. The foundation determined that the *ASV* was falling out of use and needed to be “rescued” from obscurity. The foundation engaged an anonymous editorial board of linguists, Greek and Hebrew scholars and pastors to produce the new translation. (The anonymity of the board reflects the foundation’s principle that the work not be “personalized” in order to “give the Lord Jesus Christ His proper place”). It first appeared in 1963.

The translators used the best available Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic manuscripts. The goal was to update the language of the *ASV* while preserving its character. The *NASB* retains the literal rendering of the *ASV* except where the translators felt that it would prove a stumbling block to the modern reader. In those cases the word-for-word rendering appears in a marginal note.

The commitment “to adhere as closely as possible to the original language of the Holy Scriptures” is reflected in the guidelines for translating Greek verbs. A strict distinction is maintained between the Greek aorist and imperfect. The aorist is rendered by the English past (“did”) and the imperfect by the English past progressive (“was doing”). When the context requires that the imperfect be translated as an inceptive (“began to do”), “began” appears in italics to distinguish this from passages in which the verb “to begin” occurs in the Greek. As a result, the reader is almost able to re-translate from English back into the original language.

The *NASB* is designed more for study than for public reading. Each verse appears separately, rather than being organized into paragraphs according to thought units. In addition, the emphasis on grammatical equivalence sounds awkward when read aloud.

The theological assumptions of the translators are largely unstated, except for the pronouncement that “the words of Scripture as originally penned in the Hebrew and Greek were inspired by God.” Nevertheless, a conservative theology clearly informs the choices made by the translators. In Isa. 7:14 “virgin” appears in the main text and “maiden” in the margins as an alternative translation. In Gen. 2 the disjuncture between the two creation accounts is smoothed over.

The *NASB* is useful when a literal rendering of the original languages is desired, for instance if a beginning language student wants to check her/his translation of a passage or if a literary analysis depends on the exact wording of a passage.

## The King James Version

The *King James Version* was first published in 1611. Scholars estimate that 85 percent of the New Testament of the *KJV* and much of the Old Testament was copied from the earlier William Tyndale Bible (1526 NT, 1536 OT). Tyndale was a wordsmith of the first magnitude. The majesty and beauty of the *KJV* is largely due to Tyndale. Dearly beloved phrases that appear in the *KJV*, such as “let there be light,” were coined by Tyndale. King James I of England ordered that a new translation of the Bible be undertaken because he did not like the popular translations of the day (particularly the popular *Geneva Bible*). He saw them as anti-king and anti-state church. For example, Tyndale used words such as “congregation” where the *KJV* translated “church.” Tyndale used “elder” where the *KJV* used “bishop.” The *KJV* was designed to support the monarchy and the state church by using language that had a specific and different meaning in seventeenth century England than the NT authors intended.

The *KJV* is not sensitive to issues of race or gender. For example, Song of Sol. 1:5 reads “I am black, but comely ...” This conveys the idea that being black and comely is the exception to the rule. Masculine language is used for God and human beings throughout this translation, even when the intent of the text is inclusive.

A strength of the *KJV* is the beauty of its language and its greater sensitivity to a culture that is more physical in its daily life. For example, the *KJV* translates “sorrow” rather than “pain” in Gen. 3:16 “I will greatly multiply thy sorrow” and Gen. 3:17 “in sorrow shalt thou eat of it...” Sorrow, not physical pain, is what will be multiplied. Moreover, most modern translations obscure the fact that the same Hebrew word appears in the punishment of the woman and man. The *KJV* preserves it.

The *KJV* is a fine example of seventeenth century English literature and is an excellent primary resource for those interested in post-Reformation history or early English Bible translation, but it is not adequate for today for three reasons: 1) Older and better Hebrew and Greek manuscripts such as the Dead Sea Scrolls, Codex Sinaiticus, etc., are extant today that were not known to the *KJV* translators. 2) The English language has changed significantly. For example, in seventeenth century English the word “conversation” meant “conduct” as in how one conducted business affairs. “Charity” was an archaic word for “love” even in that century. It was used to lend an authoritative voice to the translation. 3) The *KJV* was a political translation slanted to support the monarchy and the church structure as they existed in the seventeenth century.

## Contemporary English Version

The *Contemporary English Version* was initiated by the American Bible Society and was first published in 1995. It is a translation from the Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek languages. The complete translation includes the apocrypha.

The translation was made by an ecumenical committee of biblical scholars who are experts in the original languages.

The preface notes that many people today hear the Bible more than they read it (presumably because their primary contact with the Bible is in worship). Translators further note that half the adults in the U.S. have “very limited reading and writing skills.” The scholars sought to create a version that is especially suitable for ease of reading aloud and for hearing without misunderstanding.

The translation leans in the direction of dynamic equivalence. The translators studied each phrase and sought a simple expression in English that allows today’s reader to grasp the meaning.

Other than honoring the Bible as God’s word, the translators do not state the theological assumptions behind this translation. However, it seems to be informed by a moderate open-spirited orthodox Christian theology.

This version makes use of inclusive language with respect to women by replacing masculine pronouns (used in some earlier versions for both genders) with ways of speaking that are not tied to particular genders. For example, Matt. 16:24 traditionally reads “If anyone wants to follow me, he must deny himself,” whereas *CEB* reads “If any of you want to be my follower, you must . . . .”

This version is useful for public and private reading. For detailed study, a formal grammatical translation should be read alongside.

## The New Living Translation

The *New Living Translation*, 1996, was commissioned by the Tyndale Charitable Trust. The translators were charged with revising the text of the *Living Bible* to reflect accurately the Greek and Hebrew texts as understood by contemporary evangelical scholars.

Ninety scholars were involved in the translation project, and each biblical book was worked upon by scholars who are expert in its particular language and issues. The resulting translation has far more respect for ancient understandings and historical context than did the original *Living Bible*. Where the *Living Bible*, for instance, put Christ into Ps 2:2 (“A summit conference of the nations has been called to plot against the Lord and his Messiah, Christ the King”), the *NLT* speaks simply of kings and rulers plotting “against the LORD and against his anointed one,” respecting the fact that the Psalm was probably originally an ancient Judean coronation psalm. Still, theological agendas remain close to the surface: in Ps 2:7, a footnote on the phrase “You are my son” suggests the possibility of capitalizing the word “Son,” and the “gods” on whom God pronounces judgment in Ps 82:1 become “judges.”

The *NLT* is explicit and aggressive in its use of a dynamic equivalence translation approach. In Ezra 7:9 the date given as “the first day of the fifth month” in most English translations appears as “August 4” in *NLT*. Various possible translations of original language words are chosen to provide the closest fit in context, which makes it easier to understand particular verses but more difficult to track literary patterns and to understand the relationships between, for instance, the concepts of love, grace, and loyalty (which are all possible meanings of the Hebrew *hesed*, translated in *NRSV* as “steadfast love”). An effort has been made toward gender-inclusive translation of terms with gender-inclusive meaning. Targeted to the reading level of a junior high school student, this translation reads smoothly aloud.

For students in historically-oriented Bible courses, both the theological slant of this translation and its position far to the dynamic end of the translation spectrum may make the *NLT* problematic. Devotional readers who want a Bible with an evangelical slant may be quite happy with it. It is undeniably a great improvement upon the *Living Bible*, and devotees of that paraphrase should be encouraged to explore this alternative.

## The Message

*The Message* is a user-friendly, colorful, and creative interpretation of the biblical text in contemporary mainstream American English. It is easy to read and understand. It is perhaps best described as a well crafted sermon on the Bible rather than a translation. Biblical language is explained rather than translated, using images and references that are familiar to mainstream North Americans living in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. A sample: Matt. 27:34 reads “They offered him a mild painkiller (a mixture of wine and myrrh).”

Peterson is well aware of controversies surrounding certain “trigger” texts, and he attempts to gingerly step around them or to compromise. For example, he retains the word “virgin” in Isa. 7:14 while discouraging a Christocentric interpretation: “A girl who is presently a virgin will get pregnant. She’ll bear a son and name him Immanuel (God with us).”

*The Message* attempts to be sensitive to gender issues in language. Ps. 23, for example, uses second person “you” language for God rather than third person “he” language. Patterson also works to be inclusive when referring to human beings. For example, Exod. 21:15 reads, “If someone hits father or mother....”

*The Message* reads better than it speaks. The author paid a lot of attention to individual phrases but not to poetics in terms of rhythm and balance. There is a lot of choppiness in the phrasing. The *NRSV*’s “Blessed are the Peacemakers, for they will be called children of God” becomes “You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate rather than compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family.” The wonder of *The Message* is also its bane. Some of the language is already outdated. Words and phrases such as “saloon” (Ps. 1:1) and “fly off the handle” (1 Cor. 13:5) are a bit dated in modern English. Another problem is illustrated by his Luke 15:16 “He was so hungry he would have eaten the corncobs ...” The problem is that there were no corncobs in the ancient Near East. Corn is indigenous to the Americas and was not brought to Europe and the Middle East until the explorers returned. Peterson makes the Bible so twentieth century, middle class American that you would never know that its original context was a different culture, time period, and language. In a sense, it almost erases the original culture from history.

As a sermon, *The Message* is engaging, stimulating, beautifully written and relevant. But it ought to be read alongside a translation that is closer to the text.

## Amplified Bible

The *Amplified Bible* was commissioned by the Lockman Foundation (a private group) and Zondervan Press and appeared in the late 1950s through mid 1960s.

This version is a translation from Hebrew and Greek that is intended to be “true to the original” languages, “grammatically correct,” and “understandable to the masses.” The translation was made by scholars of the biblical languages.

The planners of the *Amplified Bible* attempt to “bring out the richness” of the original languages by giving not only an English “equivalent to each Hebrew and Greek word but also “any other clarifying meanings that may be concealed by the traditional translation method.” The translators intend to “amplify” by giving words that convey the full meaning of the original.

For instance, the Greek verb *pisteuō* is usually rendered “believe.” The scholars behind this version think that this translation “hardly does justice to the meanings contained in the Greek. They reflect the broader spectrum in John 11:24. “I am [Myself] the Resurrection and the Life. Whoever believes in (adheres to, trusts in, relies on) Me, although he may die, yet shall he live.”

An evangelical theology is in the background of the translation. Indeed, the translators intend to “give the Lord Jesus His proper place,” which is “the place which the Word gives Him.”

The translation gives the impression of being a good resource for study. However, it should be used cautiously because the translators sometimes indiscriminately associate general meanings with specific words without giving attention the specific literary and theological contexts of the biblical material. Indeed, they sometimes read their own theology into the translation.

## The Living Bible

The *Living Bible* is a paraphrase produced in the 1950s and 1960s by Kenneth Taylor for his family because they found the *King James Version* of the Bible difficult to understand. The *Living Bible* has been popular for its plain English and straightforwardness, but those are also the reasons why readers should be wary of it.

Taylor did not consult the original Greek and Hebrew texts. Instead he paraphrased from English into simpler English. The problem with his project of making things easier to understand is that some passages of the Bible are *not* easy to understand, in some cases because there is a problem understanding the language (if there has been a copyist's mistake or we don't know the ancient vocabulary well enough) and in some cases because what the language says isn't what we expect or what seems appropriate. In "correcting" such passages, Taylor reads his own evangelical theology into them. For instance, the *KJV* of Ps 2:2 says "The kings of the earth set themselves, and the rulers take counsel together, against the LORD, and against his anointed." In *TLB* the verse says "A summit conference of the nations has been called to plot against the Lord and his Messiah, Christ the King." This locks the reader into seeing the Psalm as a prophecy regarding Christ. It rules out the possibility (preferred by most scholars) that the Psalm originated as a liturgy about God's support for a Judean king of David's line centuries prior to Jesus.

The problem with paraphrasing the Bible to make it a clear communication of one's faith is that the resulting "Bible" can no longer challenge that faith: it has been pressed into conformity with what the paraphraser already knows (or thinks he or she knows). This blocks spiritual growth. The *Living Bible*, however clear and understandable, cannot be recommended as anything other than a commentary. Taylor himself has perhaps recognized this, for his Tyndale House press has since commissioned a scholarly remake, the *New Living Translation*, which is much preferable to the original *Living Bible*.

# Study Bibles

## The Interpreter's Study Bible

Published in 2003, The *Interpreter's Study Bible* is a premier work. It is based on the *New Revised Standard Version* of the Bible and includes the apocrypha. It was assembled by an ecumenical team of more than sixty scholars who employ the latest and best approaches to biblical interpretation.

Each book of the Bible is preceded by the longest introductions found in the current generation of study Bibles. These introductions focus on authorship, time, place, literary forms, and current viewpoints in scholarship. The upper part of each page prints the *NRSV* while the lower part contains notes on the historical, literary, and theological content of the passage. The notes are more full than those found in the typical study Bible.

Two features are unique among study Bibles. One is the inclusion of "special notes" in the commentary at the bottom of the page. These notes provide more archeological, historical, or other kinds of background information than the commentary proper can accommodate. For instance, a "Special Note on Hosea 6" explains the relationship between sacrifice and justice in the theology of the Hebrew people. The excurses are extended discussions of larger themes and topics that help the student understand the text. For example, an excursus on John 9 offers an interpretation of the relationship between the Fourth Gospel and Judaism.

This book also contains a glossary, chronologies of the biblical world, and maps, along with "Guides for Interpretation" on the reliability of scripture, the authority of the Bible, the inspiration of the Bible, guidelines for reading and interpretation, varieties of approaches to biblical interpretation, and an overview of culture and religion in the biblical world.

The *Interpreter's Study Bible* is essentially a short one-volume commentary on the whole Bible. It is highly recommended.

## The HarperCollins Study Bible (NRSV)

The *HarperCollins Study Bible*, published in 1993, is one of a series of volumes produced by HarperCollins in conjunction with the Society of Biblical Literature, an international society of more than five thousand biblical scholars committed to historical, critical, and open scholarly study of the Bible.

The sixty-one contributors to this volume include Protestant, Roman Catholic, and Jewish scholars, each chosen for his or her expertise with respect to the particular section of scripture being commented upon. The purpose is not to explain how each section of scripture should affect the life of a reader in a particular faith tradition but to help the reader enter “into another world of meaning” (p. xviii), that of the ancient writers and their audiences.

While contributors are unified in their commitment to scholarly exegetical study of the Bible, the word “diversity” captures a key feature of the volume they have produced. The contributors are diverse in background and in method, some emphasizing the literary qualities of the present form of a biblical book, some attending closely to the signals which suggest that the book may have looked different at other points in its history, still others full of information about the relationship of a book to archeological findings. They understand the Bible itself to be diverse. They do not attempt to interpret all books from a single standpoint, and in some cases they may even disagree with each other about matters of interpretation and dating.

In addition to introductory statements about each book and bottom-of-the-page notes on specific texts, this *Study Bible* supplies a wealth of charts, tables, and maps. It explains the different numbers and orders of books in the Bibles of different faith traditions, provides a comprehensive timeline, charts rulers, and dates for different biblical periods, provides the reader with a guide to parallel passages in the Gospels, and gives an extensive guide to the quotations of Jewish Scriptures in the New Testament.

For the college or seminary student and for educated general readers who want to understand the Bible in relation to its historical context, this is a superb study Bible. It is not the right study Bible for those interested only in the Bible’s application to their own lives.

## The New Oxford Annotated Bible

The third edition of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* appeared in 2001 under the guidance of Michael D. Coogan for Oxford University Press. It employs the text of the *New Revised Standard Version* and represents a thorough revision of earlier editions. Significantly more space is devoted to introductory articles, annotations, and study materials.

The scholars who contributed to this edition reflect “a wide diversity of backgrounds and of scholarly approaches to the biblical traditions.” All bring a high level of expertise and insight to the volume. Both men and women, as well as people of color, are represented.

Recognizing that the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* is used by both Jews and Christians, the editors refer to the first portion as “The Hebrew Bible,” rather than the “Old Testament,” and cite all dates as B.C.E. (“Before the Common Era”) or C.E. (“Common Era”) rather than B.C. (“Before Christ”) or A.D. (*Anno Domini* “in the year of our Lord”).

The annotations fill the lower portion of each page. Chapter and verse numbers are set in bold type, and in some cases headings are provided making consultation easy. The annotations offer insight for interpretation by providing information on historical, social, and literary issues. For example, it is noted in connection with Ps. 147 that “the reference to the rebuilding of Jerusalem (vv. 2-3) reflects the postexilic situation.” Footnotes call attention to differences in textual readings and alternative translations.

Each unit of material (i.e., the Pentateuch, Prophets, Gospels, Letters of Paul) is accompanied by an introductory essay, while each book receives its own introduction focusing on the “book’s structure, major themes, literary history, and historical context.” Diagrams and maps are located throughout the text for easy reference.

Distinctive features of the *New Oxford Annotated Bible* are the essays, tables, and bibliography at the end of the volume. These include an introduction to the different canons of the Bible, extended essays on “Textual Criticism,” and “The Translation of the Bible into English,” a comprehensive essay on interpretation of the Bible describing both the history of interpretation as well as contemporary methods, a discussion of the geographical and cultural contexts represented in the Bible, a timeline, charts for weights, measures, and calendars, a list of parallel texts, an index to the study materials, a concordance, and maps.

## The Access Bible

The *Access Bible*, published by Oxford University Press (1999), is an *NRSV*-based study Bible intended to help even the first-time Bible student make sense of the text “in its contradictions and complexities as well as in its comfort and inspiration.”

The twenty contributors are well-respected scholars chosen for their expertise rather than their doctrinal commitments (a Jewish woman provides the commentary on Matthew and Luke). Their comments help the reader understand the ancient world and the unfamiliar aspects of its literature; they are not particularly directed at telling the reader how to “apply” the Bible to Christian life. The comments on the opening chapters of Genesis, for instance, identify the “us” of Gen 1:26 as “God and God’s divine advisers,” present reasons for reading the seven-day and Eden stories as two different creation stories, and explain that the serpent “is not an alien being but simply one of the garden’s more intelligent and crafty animals.”

Reader helps in this study Bible include introductory articles on Bible study, the books of the Bible, the nature and formation of the canon, and a page or so of introduction to each biblical book. Section-by-section comments, sidebars, maps pertaining to particular texts, and some tables are interspersed with the biblical text in a manner which may be a little distracting to those who are used to having text and commentary assigned their own special parts of the page. A glossary and indexed color maps appear at the end of the volume. The *Access Bible* also contains a partial concordance to the *NRSV*, but it is highly selective (for instance, only two of the nine occurrences of “abyss” in the full Bible with apocrypha are listed) and may be misleading to readers who think they are getting a full concordance.

The *Access Bible* provides the same general type of information (commentary with an emphasis on historical-critical and literary understanding) as the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*. The *NOAB* provides a greater number of general essays. The *Access Bible* has a trendier layout and slightly better cross-referencing; readers may find the glossary particularly helpful. Oxford seems to market the *NOAB* as a study Bible for college and graduate school use and the *Access Bible* as a volume for the general reader, but students, too, may find the *Access Bible* helpful.

## The Jewish Study Bible

The newest entry into the study Bible market is the *Jewish Study Bible*. This *Study Bible* is based upon the translation of the Jewish Publication Society called the TANAKH (see review). A variety of highly respected Jewish scholars provided the essays and background material for this book. It is directed to both Jews and non-Jews.

What is most striking about this *Study Bible* is its layout. Each page with the biblical text surrounded by commentary mimics the layout of the *Talmud*. This layout allows for greater commentary on a single page, when a text warrants it. The commentary includes insights from traditional Jewish sources and modern critical scholarship.

The *Study Bible* indicates where traditional Christian and Jewish interpretations of critical texts differ. For example, the commentary for Isa. 7:14 reads, “Young woman (Heb. *almah*). The *Septuagint* translates as “virgin,” leading ancient and medieval Christians to connect this verse with the New Testament figure of Mary. All modern scholars, however, agree that the Hebrew merely denotes a young woman....”

Sometimes the commentary on a verse is fairly dense. For example, Lev. 14:53 “Make expiation for” (Heb. *kiper*) is used anomalously here (see 16.1-34n.) to refer to the decontamination of a person. No purification of the sacred sphere is prescribed, since if the *tsara`at* is deemed severe the house is destroyed before the impurity spreads to the sanctuary.” Explanations of unfamiliar terms are given, but the reader will have to work to find them.

The commentary is accompanied by twenty-four essays that explain ancient, medieval, and modern methods of biblical interpretation, the use of the Bible in Jewish liturgy, Jewish women scholars’ biblical interpretations, biblical purity, textual criticism, the use of the Bible in Jewish mysticism, and the history of Bible translation. In addition, there are charts of weights and measures, a time line, list of rulers of Egypt, Assyria, Babylonia, Persia, Israel, Syria, and Rome, a calendar, a list of the weekly Bible readings, a list of the differences in numbering of verses, a very helpful glossary that not only defines terms but also includes brief biographies of significant Jewish scholars related to Bible translation or interpretation, an index, and colorful maps.

Christians should be aware that this book covers only the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). This *Study Bible* is indispensable for pastors and teachers in Christian traditions. It is highly recommended.

## The Learning Bible

The *Learning Bible*, created under the auspices of the American Bible Society, is available in both the *Contemporary English Version* and the *New International Version*.

The interpretive helps in this study Bible were made by scholars who make use of contemporary critical methods of historical and literary interpretation of the Bible.

The *Learning Bible* contains introductions dealing with the date, historical circumstances at the time of writing, literary features, and distinctive theological themes for the major sections of the Bible and for each biblical book. This volume contains fifteen long background articles on the interpretation of the Bible (e.g., “The Ancient World: Peoples, Powers, and Politics”), and more than 10,000 in-text notes explaining geography, people and nations, objects, plants, animals, history and culture, ideas and concepts, and cross references. Mini-articles, also inserted in-text, provide more sustained studies (e.g., “Justice). Time lines, charts of data from biblical times (e.g., weights and measurements), and maps are here. More than 500 illustrations, photographs of biblical sites, and materials help readers picture the worlds of the Bible.

Questions for reflection facilitate the use of the book for group study as well as devotional reading. Two Bible reading plans and verses for memorization further enhance use.

Moderate theological assumptions support the study notes. The interpreters respect differences among biblical authors and texts.

This study Bible is highly recommended. Its scholarship is up to date and informative. The layout is lively and colorful. With wide margins and dark type, the text is easy to read, especially since it is pitched at about an eighth grade reading level.

## African American Jubilee Bible

This *Study Bible* is the fruit of a project undertaken by the American Bible Society. The essays and notes in the *African American Jubilee Bible* are accompanied by one of three translations: the *King James Version*, the *Contemporary English Version*, or the *Good News Bible*. The Bible translations themselves, the notes and maps, and other helps that directly accompany them, are unchanged from their standard presentations. What makes this *Study Bible* special is its attention to things of particular interest to the African American community. Prince Vuyani Ntintili writes that the purpose of his essay on “The Presence and Role of Africans in the Bible” is “to show that the Bible reveals the blessings God has for them” (p. 106).

This *Study Bible* opens with quotations from Lev. 25:8-12 (the text that describes the Jubilee), Isa. 61:1-4, and Luke 4:16-21. The first essay focuses on the concept of Jubilee in the Bible and how that concept might be useful for today. It is followed by a series of well written essays on African American history, including church history and music, African cultures, Africans, slavery, and Blacks in the Bible and Antiquity.

Readers will gain much knowledge about African American history and culture from the essays in this book. There is a nice map showing the patterns of emigration (forced and non-forced) from Africa. A chronological table traces African American history from 1619 when the first Africans arrived until 1999 when Rosa Parks received a Congressional Medal of Honor.

Biblical passages that have traditionally been misinterpreted, such as Gen. 9:18-29 and 1 Cor. 7:21, are carefully exegeted to prove that there is no basis for using them to promote the inferiority of African or Black people.

In an article titled “Interpretation of Scripture,” Murray L. Newman writes that the Biblical authors/editors were “inspired” but used words that were “human and fallible” (p. 49).

The art work in the *Study Bible* includes stunning pictures of African and African American people, houses of worship and worship services. There is a photo of an Ethiopian biblical text from the fifteenth century, as well as photos that illustrate shofars and other objects mentioned in the Bible. They are colorful and beautifully presented.

A list of sources or bibliographies cited after each essay will direct the reader to more information about a given topic. The essays in this Bible are highly recommended. Reviews of the *CEV* and *KJV* appear elsewhere in this booklet.

## The Thompson Chain-Reference Study Bible

Frank Charles Thompson developed the early editions of the *Thompson Chain-Reference Study Bible* for the *King James Version*. It is now also available with some updated information and photographs for the *New King James Version*, the *New American Standard Version*, and the *New International Version*.

The main body gives the text of the Bible. Alongside this text are numbers that refer the reader to entries in the back of the *Study Bible* where further information is found about names, places, events, doctrines and where the chain topics and scripture passages are listed. The back of the *Study Bible* also contains Bible readings for devotional use, outlines for the study of the Bible, studies of biblical characters, harmonies of the Bible, illustrated studies (e.g., of the journeys and life of Joshua), photographs of archaeological sites important to understanding the Bible, maps, and a concordance.

A distinctive feature is the combination of analytic and synthetic methods. The analytic approach analyzes the Bible as a whole and each book, chapter, verse, character, and topic according to occasion, purpose, and teaching. The synthetic, or chain system, assembles verses that relate to a doctrine and brings them together in a chain to show how they harmonize. The book contains 4,129 chains on persons, doctrines, symbols, characters, places, etc.

The book can be used for personal or group study.

A conservative theological viewpoint informs this work.

This *Study Bible* provides much information in an easy to use format. It will prove useful to readers who assume that the material in the Bible is all internally consistent and, therefore, that one part of the Bible can interpret another.

## The Original African Heritage Study Bible King James Version

The *King James Version Bible* (reviewed elsewhere in the booklet) is the base text for the contributors to this *Study Bible*. According to the introductory materials, this *Study Bible* is an attempt to correct misinterpretations of Biblical texts and to highlight the contributions of African people to the biblical story; a noble enterprise.

James Peebles, publisher of the book, writes, “Much of the information in this volume which brings out truth and justice was not written by people of color” (p. 7), which is unexpected in light of the contributors listed. At times, speeches or articles written in the nineteenth century are quoted at length without reference to an author. The tone of the editor’s remarks is often polemical, providing more heat than light.

A series of very colorful and very beautiful photographs of Black people re-enacting the Biblical story appear in the *Study Bible*. In the New Testament, these are supplemented by drawings. A colorful, if inaccurate, map appears on the last page (Jericho is east of the Jordan on the map. Beersheba is south of the Dead Sea). There is no table of contents or index, which makes finding essays in the book difficult.

Following the book of Revelation is a series of articles. Some titles are “African Edenic Women and the Scriptures,” “The Ancient Black Christians,” “Early Martyrdom of African Christians,” “The Africology of Church Music” including texts musical notation for a number of spirituals, and “101 Favorite Bible Verses in the African Diaspora.” Authors are not named for any of the articles.

Other helps include a list of personal and place names with translations. Those referring to African or Black people, in the opinion of the editors, are in bold.

Textual notes appear in footnotes at the bottom of a page from time to time. For example, a note attached to Matt. 15:22 reads, “A Syrophoenician was a native of Phoenicia at the time when it was a portion of the Roman province of Syria, northeast Africa.”

While it is commendable attempt on the part of the authors and editors of this volume to highlight the place of African and Black people in the Bible, it might have been done with greater attention to accuracy, better organization and fewer diatribes.

The *African American Jubilee Bible* published by the American Bible Society is a better choice.

## Women of Faith Study Bible

The *Women of Faith Study Bible* is published by Zondervan under the guidance of the general editor Jean E. Syswerda. It employs the text of the *New International Version*.

The study notes are written by women from a variety of backgrounds: seminar leaders, free-lance writers who specialize in devotional materials, and counselors. All are students of the Bible, while none are scholars of the Bible in an academic sense. Although no theological perspective is explicitly stated, the author of Genesis is identified as “generally thought to be Moses” and the date of the book as “during the 1400s B.C., at the time of Israel’s wandering in the desert.” These views would be shared by only the most conservative scholars and in contrast to the majority of scholars writing today.

While the overall approach might be termed conservative, an attempt is made to mediate difficult texts regarding the role of women. For example, the charge in 1 Tim. 2:12 that women must be silent is shown to be in tension with other passages where the ministries of women are lifted up. Similarly, the claim in 1 Tim. 2:15 that “women will be saved through childbearing” is restated in terms of Paul honoring “the headship God gave Adam at creation.”

Each book is introduced by a short essay highlighting the roles women play in the book and naming all the women who appear in the book. Cross references are listed in the left-hand margin of each page, while the right-hand margin features commentary on the text. Fifty-two weekly studies are scattered throughout. These studies encourage readers to identify with the text and reflect on how the text may challenge their own lives. In addition, major female characters are described in “character sketches.” Additional resources at the back of the volume include a timeline of women in the Bible, the genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew, a list of texts in which Jesus encounters women, a dictionary of terms found in the *NIV*, and a concordance.

This *Study Bible* is designed for devotional uses, either individually or in a group. The suitability of this *Study Bible* for that purpose will be dependent on the theological perspective of the individual. However, the complete lack of attention to current scholarship and even misinformation supplied by some of the notes (for example, the note on p. 1968 stating that the notion that a women should study was “a revolutionary idea in a time when Greeks and Jews alike considered women to be either uneducable or not in need of an education”) should serve as a caution to potential readers. The *Women of Faith Bible* cannot be recommended for the purposes of serious study.

## The Life Application Study Bible

The *Life Application Study Bible* is a devotional study Bible with page-bottom “application notes” and other helps. The *Life Application* study materials, trademarked by Tyndale House Publishers (founded by Kenneth Taylor, author of the *Living Bible* paraphrase), have been published in combination with *NIV*, *NLT*, *NKJV*, *NASB*, *KJV*, and *NRSV* English Bible texts in study Bibles issued by World Bible, Tyndale House, and Zondervan.

According to the introductory explanation, the compilers of the *Life Application Study Bible* intend to help the reader see connection between “the timeless principles of Scripture and the ever-present problems of day-by-day living.” “Applying God’s word,” the introduction explains, “is the evidence that we are obeying him,” and the bulk of the study notes are intended to help the reader with such application. For instance, the introduction to Esther (a book which does not explicitly mention God a single time), says that the book “is an example of God’s divine guidance and care over our lives. God’s sovereignty and power are seen throughout this book.... We must have faith that God is in control ... so that we can serve him effectively.”

The historical and linguistic interpretive material is conservative but not fundamentalist in character. Moses is listed, without further discussion, as the author of Genesis through Deuteronomy. We are told, however, that the biblical view of creation “is not in conflict with science or with various evolutionary theories.” The commentators often present later interpretations as the simple meaning of texts: for instance, we are told that the serpent of Gen. 3 (one of the wild animals, according to the biblical text) is “an angelic being who rebelled against God and was thrown out of heaven.”

This *Study Bible* is a poor choice for college and university students or persons interested in historical understanding of the Bible. It has been popular with devotional readers, but the very clarity and simplicity of its “application” suggestions are likely to blind readers to other possible ways of understanding the Bible and applying it to their lives. The notes and character sketches seem saturated with punishment/reward theology: the discussion of themes in Genesis, for instance, says that “living God’s way makes life productive and fulfilling” and “the only way to enjoy the benefits of God’s promises is to obey him.” This may not leave enough room for God’s outrageous graciousness and the reality of suffering in Christian life.

## The Matthew Henry Study Bible

This *Study Bible* is based on the one-volume commentary by Matthew Henry, a late seventeenth-early eighteenth century pastor and scholar. The translation is *KJV*.

Henry approaches the text with the traditional pre-critical, often typological, perspective typical of his era. The focus of the interpretation is on Jesus Christ; First Testament figures such as Moses and Joshua serve above all to typify Christ.

Readers will not, of course, find any mention of methods or concerns that have developed over the last century. Henry predates Biblical archaeology, the Dead Sea Scrolls, anthropology, and modern linguistics. He and his contemporaries were not interested in the analysis of Biblical texts as literary compositions.

Because the notes were compiled from Henry's commentary, the coverage of topics is uneven and inconsistent. Sometimes the results are confusing. For instance, although Moses is identified as the author of all of the books of the Pentateuch, Genesis, Numbers, and Deuteronomy are dated to 1400 B.C., whereas Exodus is dated to 1275 B.C.

Although the language of the revised edition has been updated to remove the archaisms of Henry's original, the notes would be difficult for someone with less than a high school education.

A brief introduction to each book discusses authorship, date of writing, purpose, and major theme. Cross-references appear in the center column. Extensive notes on the text are placed at the bottom of the page. These notes are periodically supplemented with boxes that elaborate on theological points. Maps and a concordance are found in the back.

The *Matthew Henry Study Bible* would be useful to a student of the history of Biblical interpretation. It offers a clear presentation of the scholarship of three centuries ago. However, the material is too out-dated to be useful for serious exegetical study by modern day students and pastors. It should be read only for antiquarian or devotional purposes.

## The Scofield Study Bible

This version of the *Scofield Study Bible*, based on the *New King James Version*, is a version of the famous *Scofield Reference Bible* published in 1909 by C. I. Scofield and updated in 1917, 1954, and 1967. The current edition (2002) does not revise the content of the 1967 version but merely reformats it.

Scofield was a fundamentalist who viewed history as a series of progressive revelations. Each historical period is a dispensation from God that reveals a piece of the revelation of God's purposes. During each dispensation human beings are tested with respect to their obedience to the demands of the dispensation. Scofield sees seven dispensations: 1) innocence, 2) conscience, 3) human government, 4) promise, 5) the law, 6) the church, and 7) the kingdom. The first four dispensations are found in Genesis. The fifth is from the giving of the Law to Pentecost, while the sixth extends to the Second Coming.

Scofield intended for this *Study Bible* to be the foundation of preaching, teaching, and personal devotional use

The *Scofield Study Bible* gives the scriptural text, footnotes that deal with matters of textual criticism, introductions to the sections of the Bible showing how each fits into progressive revelation, introductions to biblical books, book outlines, in-text headings keyed to dispensationalism, study notes at the bottom of the pages and in boxes, marginal notes intended to show that the Bible is internally consistent in history and doctrine, in-text maps, charts of monies etc, a subject index, and a small *NKJV* concordance.

This *Study Bible* is the epitome of imposing a preconceived theology onto the Bible. It cannot be recommended for persons who wish to hear the witnesses of the biblical texts in their historical, literary, and theological contexts.

## The Maxwell Leadership Bible (A Study Bible)

The biblical text used in the *Maxwell Leadership Bible* is the *King James Version*. The study notes were written by John C. Maxwell who is not a theologian but a consultant and motivational writer and speaker on leadership (especially on encouraging others to become leaders). He has written more than thirty popular books on subjects such as *The Twenty-One Irrefutable Laws of Leadership* and *The Leader Within You*.

The theological perspective is quite conservative. Maxwell believes that the Bible contains principles that are essential to becoming a transformational leader, that is, someone who can help other people change their lives from the inside out. Maxwell thinks that such leadership is based on character, conviction, and Christlikeness.

The entire book stresses how the Bible teaches principles of leadership. Biblical books are characterized from this perspective, as with Genesis “It All Begins with God: The Ultimate Leader” and “Mark: Jesus as Servant Leader.”

Maxwell provides boxes that relate passages to leadership as in “Choose Your Mentors Well: Elisha Risks the ‘Big Ask’,” “Desire: What Separates Leaders from Followers,” and “The Law of Influence: Paul Exercises Emotional Authority.”

The audience of this *Study Bible* is persons who want to become leaders in churches as well as secular settings (e.g. business).

This *Study Bible* cannot be recommended. For this author, the Bible exists for what it reveals about leadership. Not only does this work impose modern leadership theory directly onto the biblical text, but also it gives little serious attention to the historical, literary, and theological backgrounds of biblical books.

# Children and Youth

## Children of Color Storybook Bible

The *Children of Color Storybook Bible* was created by Nia Publications, an African American owned company in Atlanta, Georgia, that seeks to “promote interest in the African presence in the Bible” and that also publishes.

The text of the *Children of Color Storybook Bible* is from the *International Children’s Bible*, which is itself an edition of the translation called the *New Century Version*. The translation is free of archaisms and has a contemporary feel. For example, one of the beatitudes reads, “Those who work to bring peace are happy.”

The *Children of Color Storybook Bible* is for preschool children. Parents can read the stories aloud. Children who can read at about a third grade level can read the stories for themselves. It is designed “to build self-esteem in young people of African descent.”

The book contains sixty-one stories (twenty-nine from the First Testament and thirty-two from the Second). The editors have added some material (printed in light type to distinguish it from the text of the Bible) to some of the stories to make transitions smoother.

In addition to stories such as the creation and Adam and Eve, the book contains stories particularly connected to Africans, such as the Queen of Sheba and the Ethiopian from the Book of Acts. Each story is richly illustrated with water-color-like pictures of persons. The characters are drawn with African accents.

The creators of this book are committed to “the infallibility of God’s word and our own human frailty.”

This book is useful for introducing children to key Bible stories. While designed for African American young people, children, and parents of other races and ethnicities could use it with profit.

## The Extreme Teen Bible

The authors of the *Extreme Teen Bible* are specialists in teen ministry rather than Biblical scholars or theologians; three are writers, one a pastor, and one the founder of Teen Mania Ministries (who holds degrees in counseling and psychology). The translation is *NKJV*.

Broadly speaking, the approach is evangelical, but it hardly represents the best of evangelical scholarship. The issues are oversimplified.

Although the introduction suggests that passages should be read in context, the structure of the study aids encourages the reader to consult verses in isolation. The most egregious example of this tendency is the “Quick Reference Finder” at the beginning, which consists of seventeen pages of questions about ethics (abortion, drinking, homosexuality), theology (demons, salvation, sin), and life problems (decisions, depression, loneliness). The answers are usually a single verse and rarely more than five verses in length.

Several features of the *Extreme Teen Bible* are clearly designed for a teen audience: the bright colors (most notably purple) splashed across the pages, the youth-oriented lingo (“byte-sized,” “awesome,” “bad vibes”), and the fancy scripts.

The study aids consist of two primary types: single page introductions to each book and boxes of varying lengths. The introductions cover the content of the book, its outline, its purpose, its primary theme, and the date when it was written. By “purpose,” the authors mean “moral.” For example, the “purpose” of Joshua is “obedience to God is the key to a success-filled life.” There is no discussion of critical scholarship in any of these sections. One might expect some explanation for the date of writing, but the dates are simply stated, e.g., “1 Corinthians, Spring A.D. 56.”

The boxes are scattered throughout the text. They consist of very brief explanations of ancient customs, short theological discussions of divine promises, exhortations to radical devotion, and full-page “people profiles” highlighting Biblical characters to be emulated. The people profiles emphasize the ways in which these individuals made a difference and encourage teens that “you can too!”

The *Extreme Teen Bible* is not recommended. It provides little that is of scholarly value. Its focus is theological and especially motivational, rather than exegetical. Its intent is to motivate teens to “trust God in the extreme.”

## A Brief History of the Translation of the Bible into English

The earliest attempt that history has recorded to translate the entire Bible into English dates back to 1382 and what has become known as the *Wycliffe Bible* (after John Wycliffe). It was translated from the Latin *Vulgate*. The second attempt was largely the work of William Tyndale, whose life was cut short by the flames of a heretic's stake. By Tyndale's time, Hebrew and Greek had been introduced into the university curriculum, and he knew both. Having published the New Testament, Tyndale was desperately trying to finish his translation of the Hebrew Bible when he was executed. His friend John Rogers smuggled the Bible from Tyndale's jail cell. A year later English copies of the Bible appeared on the black market in England. Wycliffe's bones were exhumed, and he was posthumously burned as a heretic. Owning a copy of a Bible in English was enough to get a person thrown into jail. Why? John Foxe, a younger contemporary of Tyndale, wrote that Tyndale once said to a cleric, "I defy the Pope, and all his laws' and added 'if God spared him life, ere many years he would cause the boy that driveth the plough, to know more of the Scripture than he did.'" <sup>1</sup> The problem was not that people had no access to the Bible; the problem was that poor people, the common folk that made up the vast majority of the English had no access to the Bible. The Bible had already been translated into most other European languages. The educated elite were fluent in languages such as French and Latin and could read Bibles in those languages. The common people, who spoke only English, were barred from direct access to the Biblical text. Tyndale's goal in Bible translation was to set forth a revolution in English society that in the words of the biblical Hannah would raise "the poor from the dust and the needy from the ash-heap to cause them to sit with nobles...." <sup>2</sup> A Bible in English in the hands of common people was a threat to the authorities and power structures of English society.

According to Foxe, Tyndale's last words were "Lord! Open the King of England's eyes." <sup>3</sup> The King of England in 1536 was Henry VIII. After the execution of Tyndale, Henry was presented with a Bible in English under the name of Thomas Matthew. Henry did not know that the *Matthew Bible* was the completed *Tyndale Bible*. Henry liked the *Matthew Bible* and approved its use in England's churches during Divine service.

Other translations followed, the most popular being the *Geneva Bible*.

King James I of England (1566-1625) abhorred the *Geneva Bible* because it, in his thinking, was anti-authoritarian and anti-monarchic, particularly in the notes that accompanied the text. For example, a note accompanying Exod. 1:19, where the midwives disobey the pharaoh's command to drown the boy babies, indicated that the midwives were not ethically wrong to do so. James believed that kings should always be obeyed. The

<sup>1</sup> *Foxe's Book of Martyrs*, prepared by W. Grinton Berry (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1926), p. 139

<sup>2</sup> Translation mine

<sup>3</sup> Foxe, 152.

midwives were wrong to disobey the pharaoh. James wanted a translation that supported monarchy and the establishment.

The *King James Version Bible* (1611) was not translated by King James but by a committee of respected scholars following his instructions. They chose words such as “bishop” to translate the Greek word “presbyteros” because “bishop” was the terminology used in the Church of England in the seventeenth century.

The Roman Catholic Church commissioned an English translation that appeared in 1609-1610 (*Douay-Rheims*). Catholic clergy had been improvising on translations, and the Church wanted a better and more standardized translation for them to use. Jews came relatively late to English Bible translation. Early efforts in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries consisted primarily of correcting the *KJV*. The first complete translation from Hebrew was published in 1917 by the Jewish Publication Society, followed by the TANAKH from 1962-1985.

Around the turn of the twentieth century, recognizing that the English language had significantly changed enough that people no longer understood the old translations and that a large number of Bible manuscripts (many hidden in monasteries) not known to the *KJV* translators had been brought to light, the *English Revised Version* (1881-1885), and its American counterpart, the *American Standard Version* (1901), were translated and published.

The Dead Sea Scrolls and a rapidly changing English language were the impetus for new translations following the Second World War. For example, the word “conversation” no longer meant “conduct” as it did at the time of the *KJV*. Translations started to use inclusive language where the original text warranted it.

There are more translations of the Bible into English than into any other language. There have been losses. We no longer speak a common language when quoting biblical texts. But on the whole, we have been enriched by the varied interpretations brought by the different translations.

## Addendum

When I was in seminary, I asked for a description of the Common English Bible from Marti Steussey who contributed on this document and was my Old Testament professor. This was her response. Glenda Survance

# Common English Bible

The CEB is a dynamic equivalence translation (takes the *idea* of a sentence and says it the way we would, rather than trying to say it the way an ancient Greek or Hebrew writer would). It translates Greek and Hebrew words according to what they mean in their particular contexts rather than always translating the same word the same way (since words do have different meanings in different contexts). It was intended to be a good Bible for reading out loud, meaning that the translators tried to keep sentences simple and avoid fancy words.

It is like the NRSV in that its translators tried to convey the simplest, most straightforward understanding of each individual section, and not choose a less obvious translation in order to get different sections to fit together (as the NLB and NIV sometimes do).

The CEB study Bible is aimed at church audiences (not scholars), so the commentary was intended to focus on questions that a Bible study group might ask, especially questions about how the text relates to our faith traditions. Sometimes the comments explain something about the ancient historical context, but they also address questions that rose later in the history of the church.

Because this is the most recent major translation, it takes advantage of the most up-to-date information about the ancient languages, including the evidence from the Dead Sea scrolls. This is why, in some verses, you may see a different interpretation than in other familiar translations.

Best,  
Marti Steussy  
2014