

# Bible FAQs

**Seminar notes given at**

**'The School of the Bible'**

**Faith Mission Bible College, Edinburgh**

**by**

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Given the unique nature of Scripture and its importance as the revelation of an otherwise unknowable God it is of great benefit to us to have some awareness of how the Bibles we possess and read today came to us down through the years.

- a. How did the Bible come to be written?
- b. What form did the books of Bible originally take?
- c. What original manuscripts are there still in existence?
- d. Where did the chapters and verse divisions come from?
- e. How did the 66 books come to be finalised?
- f. What is the Apocrypha and why is it not in our Bibles?
- g. Why are the books of the Bible arranged as they are?
- h. Why so many versions?

**a. How did the Bible come to be written?**

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| i. at first, and indeed for a long time, God communicated to man by word of mouth, speaking directly to his servants   | Gen.4v6; 12v1  |
| ii. later, God's spoken word was written down for us so that we could have a permanent record of what God has said   |  |
| iii. until comparatively recently, Moses was universally believed to be the author of the first five books, or Pentateuch, of the Bible and is the first person mentioned in Bible as writing. There is much evidence from various texts, Old and New Testament passages and historians to affirm Mosaic authorship. | Ex.17v4; 24v4; 34v27<br>Num.33v2; Deut.31v9;<br>Deut. 32vv1-43 |
| iv. Joshua succeeded Moses and recorded history  | Josh.24vv25-26   |
| v. later other men of God, like Samuel, Isaiah and Jeremiah, wrote both history and prophecy   | 1 Sam.10v25; Jer.36v2  |
| vi. the Old Testament Scriptures were finally assembled into a recognised collection about 400 BC  |  |
| vii. the New Testament books were written, either by one of the apostles or by someone closely associated with an apostle between AD 50 and 100  |  |
| viii. they were received and read in the public church services and circulated among the churches  | 1 Thess.5v27; Col.4v16   |
| ix. the Council of Carthage in AD 397 recognised what had already, in practice, been accepted as the final selection of New Testament books.   |  |

**b. What form did the books of Bible originally take?**

i. The Old Testament

The Old Testament books would have been written in ink, using a pen made out of a pointed reed, and written on to scrolls which almost certainly would have been made out of animal skins and sometimes referred to as 'vellum'.

Almost all the thirty nine books of the Old Testament were written in Hebrew, one of a large family of Semitic languages and closely related to Aramaic, Syriac and Arabic. Hebrew is written from right to left and until the seventh century AD did not use vowels, punctuation or spaces between words!

A Hebrew version of Luke 4vv18-19, written, of course, in Hebrew script would have looked like this:

DRLHTFRLBTPCCMLCRPTDSSRPPRHWSHTYTRBLTTST  
DNLBHTTTTHGSFYRVCRDNSVTPCHTTYTRBLMLCRPTDT  
RHNKRBTLHTMTNSSHHRPHTTLPSGHTHCRPTMDTN  
NSHHSCBMNPSDRLHTFTRPSHT

("The Spirit of the LORD is upon me, because He has anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he has sent me to heal the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed; to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD.")

After the time of the exile, around 500 B.C., Hebrew was replaced by Aramaic as the common language of the Jewish people and this continued to be the situation for centuries. A few of the later portions of the Old Testament were actually written in Aramaic rather than Hebrew and the New Testament records in Aramaic some expressions used by Jesus.

Neh.8v8

Dan.2v4-7v28  
Ezra 4v8-6v18; 7v12-26  
Mk.5v41; 7v34  
Matt.27v46

ii. The New Testament

The New Testament writings would originally have been on papyrus rolls or sheets, made from the papyrus plant which flourished along the banks of the Nile and which was also used for making shoes, boats and baskets among other things. Sheets made from the papyrus pith would have been joined together to make scrolls, the average size being about 30 feet long (one did measure 133 feet!) and 9 or 10 inches high.

Normally, the writing would have been on just one side of the scroll, but sometimes both sides were used.

The writing was set out in columns and usually the inner edge of the scroll was attached to a wooden roll to make opening and closing both possible and easy.

The New Testament was written in Greek, although Aramaic was the spoken language of Jesus and his contemporaries. This was probably because Greek was the common language of the Roman world and made the spread of the New Testament documents and teachings much easier. New Testament Greek is very different to classical Greek and the Greek spoken by the people of Greece today.

**c. What original manuscripts are still in existence?**

None of the original manuscripts of the Bible have survived; surely so intended by God to avoid them becoming objects of veneration and worship as the Israelites did, for example, with Moses' bronze snake.

2 Kings 18v4

However, early believers painstakingly copied and shared manuscripts and many of these are still in existence.

**i. Old Testament manuscripts**

Until 1946, there were about 800 known manuscripts of the Old Testament in existence, the earliest dating to the ninth century A.D. The discovery of the Qumran, or Dead Sea, Scrolls by a Bedouin shepherd boy in 1946 revealed a total of 40,000 manuscripts representing 500 separate scrolls, a few of which were almost perfect and untouched. The material dates back to more than 100 years before Christ and every Old Testament book, including a complete scroll of Isaiah, other than Esther is among the writings.

All English translations which have been made directly from the Hebrew have been based on *The Masoretic Text* which was formulated in the seventh century A.D. by a group of Jewish scholars, the Masoretes, who invented vowel points to make reading and translating the ancient Hebrew texts easier.

The most important translation of the Old Testament is the *Septuagint*. This is a Greek translation of the Hebrew and was produced in Egypt during the late 3<sup>rd</sup> and early second centuries B.C. by a group of 72 learned scholars. The word Septuagint comes from the Latin for seventy. The Septuagint at once became the Bible of the Greek-speaking synagogues and, what is even more important for us, it was the version used by the early Christians.

Many of the New Testament quotations taken from the Old Testament are based upon the Septuagint.<sup>1</sup>

ii. New Testament manuscripts

There is a vast number of New Testament manuscripts in existence, at least 5,000, though no complete copies. Hand-produced copies of the whole New Testament would have been too bulky for practical use and copies were usually collected in four groupings:

- the four gospels
- Acts and the non-Pauline epistles
- The Pauline epistles
- Revelation

Most manuscripts are written in *cursive* form, i.e. 'joined up handwriting', but the more important ones, because earlier, are written in capital letters and are known as uncials. When the New Testament was first written, both uncial and cursive styles of handwriting were in use, and it may well be that the dictated letters of the New Testament were written cursively. However, when they were copied in book form, uncial writing was used, with manuscripts written in capital letters without spaces between the words and with no punctuation marks.

The opening sentence of Paul's letter to the Romans may well have looked something like this, except, of course, that it would have been written in capital Greek letters, rather than English:

PAULASERVANTOFCHRISTJESUSCALLEDTOBEANA  
POSTLEANDSETAPARTFORTHEGOSPELOFGODTH  
EGOSPEL  
HEPROMISED BEFOREHANDTHROUGH HISPROPHE  
TSINTHEHOLYSCRIPTURES

Of the many New Testament manuscripts available, the earliest are the most important and these Greek manuscripts are complete or almost complete copies. Of these, the most important are:

- The Vatican Manuscript (in the Vatican Library) dates from the fourth century and is believed to be the earliest of the uncials
- The Sinaitic Manuscript (found in a monastery on Mt Sinai) dates from the middle of the fourth century and is stored in the British Library
- The Alexandrian Manuscript (from Alexandria in Egypt) is not of as good a quality as the Vatican and Sinaitic.

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<sup>1</sup> Edwards p158

- The Codex Bezae (named after John Calvin's colleague, Theodore Beza) was based on a text produced by Erasmus, one of the greatest Greek scholars of the sixteenth century. It was an edition of this text, printed in Paris in 1550 that became known as the *Textus Receptus* or *Received Text* and this formed the basis of the 1611 King James Authorised Version in English.

Since the time of Erasmus thousands of Greek manuscripts, some of them only fragments, have been discovered, and these have all added to our knowledge of the early writings and the production of an accurate New Testament text.

**d. Where did the chapter and verse divisions come from?**

Not everything in the pages of our Bibles is inspired and comes directly from God. As we have already seen, the original form of the biblical writings was very different to what we are familiar with today. There were, for example, no breaks between the words and all the letters were written in upper case. Also, the chapter and verse divisions that we are so familiar with were not part of the original writings and don't bear the same authority as the text of the Bible. But where did they come from and when?

It was probably not until about the 13<sup>th</sup> century AD that chapter divisions were used in the Old Testament, though the verse divisions seem to have appeared about 400 years before that. As far as the New Testament is concerned, it was in 1248 AD that a Cardinal Hugo de Sancto Caro added chapter divisions and in 1550 when Robert Estienne introduced verse divisions. They first appeared in English language Bibles in 1560, with the publication of the Geneva Bible and all our translations since then have followed the same pattern.

The divisions were made to make study and reference much easier and indeed it would be difficult to find your way around the Bible without them. However, they are only aids and not totally reliable and there are times when they are actually misleading and break the flow of thought or argument of the biblical writer.

We ought to note one important exception to the above and that is the Book of Psalms. These, by nature, were written in unit forms and have remained in that way, though with some differences in that in a few cases Psalms which were originally one unit have been divided into two. However, it is interesting to note that in the original writings, what appears in our English versions as a word of explanation or background appear as the first verse in many original manuscripts and generally ought to be regarded as part of the text of the Psalm and therefore authoritative.

**e. How did the 66 books come to be finalised?**

This brings us to the subject of the 'canon' of Scripture. The word 'canon' comes from a Greek word which in turn comes from a Hebrew word for a reed. The reed was used as a ruler or measuring line and so the word 'canon' came to be used as a rule or standard. In the Christian church, the word came to denote the authoritative list of books which alone are to be regarded as God-breathed Scripture. To say that a book is 'canonical' is to say that it is part of Scripture; while to say that it is 'non-canonical' is to say that it is not part of Scripture.

A book's canonicity depends on its authority and the books of the Bible came to be included in the canon of Scripture because the Church, over a period of time, came to recognise that they contained the words of God. The books of the Bible don't have authority because they are included in the canon of Scripture; they are included in the canon because they have authority.

The process:

i. Old Testament

Long before the birth of Christ the books of the Old Testament had been agreed on and our Old Testament was the Bible of Jesus and his disciples. The 'benchmark' for authority and inclusion was that the book was written by Moses or one of the prophets

Moses: The constant reference to Moses' law by almost every Old Testament book after Moses' day shows that Moses' law was immediately received as authoritative and continuously recognised as such. The first five books of the Bible – the Pentateuch – were written by Moses and all throughout the Old Testament there is agreement on this point. The 'Law of the Lord' was synonymous with 'the Law of Moses'.

Ex.24v4; 34v27-28;  
Deut.31v9,v2,v24;  
1 Kings 2v3; 2 Kings 14v6;  
18v6; 21v8; 23v25;  
2 Chron.17v9; 23v18;  
25v4; Dan.9v11, v13;  
Ezra 6v18; Neh.8v1;  
Is.8v20; Jer.8v8

The Prophets: The most common designation for the rest of the Old Testament is 'the prophets' and the 39 books of the Old Testament were originally categorised under a simple two-fold division – 'The Law and the Prophets'. Christ himself referred to the whole of the Old Testament in this way.

Matt.5v17; 7v12; Lk.24v27

We need to remember that a prophet's ministry was not limited to 'fore-telling' but also included 'forth-telling', giving out the Word of God and by this definition David, Solomon, Ezra and Nehemiah were also prophets. Even the books whose authorship is unclear to us, books like Judges, Ruth and Job, were recognised and accepted by the Jews and by the Lord as coming from the hands of prophets.

In this sense, the prophets were involved in recording a continuous sacred revelation and history and as they wrote their writings were included in a growing collection of books which were regarded by the community as 'God-breathed' and therefore authoritative.

There were, therefore, three steps in the acceptance and collection of the Old Testament books:

- inspiration by God
- recognition by men of God
- collection and preservation by the people of God

## ii. New Testament

The early believers had clear principles which guided them in knowing which books were divinely inspired and which were not. In the Old Testament, the test of canonicity was authorship by Moses or one of the Prophets. In the New Testament, those who wrote Scripture must be apostles of Christ.

This test, including Paul as an apostle, immediately covers every New Testament book with just three exceptions – James, Jude and Hebrews. But what about Mark and Luke? Mark's Gospel carried Peter's authority. Tertullian, the early church leader says, "That which Mark had published may affirmed to be Peter's whose interpreter Mark was". We know that Luke was a close companion of Paul, indeed Irenaeus, writing around 180 AD says that Luke was "always attached to and inseparable from Paul...and with him performed the work of an evangelist and was entrusted to hand down to us a Gospel." Origen, in 230 AD, was even more clear on this point, asserting that Luke's Gospel was "commended by Paul".

James and Jude were almost certainly brothers of Jesus and came within the designation of 'apostle' as defined in Acts 1v21-22. The greatest uncertainty surrounds Hebrews and we are still not decided even today but it was, in Origen's view, the view of the 'ancients' that it was written by Paul, and Clement of Alexandria had no doubt "that the Epistle to the Hebrews is Paul's".

Various factors were involved in the development of an accepted New Testament canon, highlighting principles which still pertain today.

- a. the demands of the early church – which books could be read in church (1 Thess.5v27; 1 Tim.4v13) and which books could be used for teaching on theological and practical problems (2 Tim.3v16-17). Still, today, we need a rule or benchmark by which we know what is God-breathed and has that unique authority and what is not.
- b. The rise of heretical teachings and the existence of other writings. These factors forced the church to think seriously about the issue of which books were truly inspired and authoritative, and the need still exists today.
- c. The expansion of the church – as Christianity spread rapidly to other countries, necessitating translation into other languages, which books were to be translated?

By the end of the fourth century AD the church accepted all the 27 books of the New Testament as inspired and authoritative. In other words, these books, and these alone, were canonical and all others, however valuable they might be, were not.

### Summary

It's important to stress that the inclusion or otherwise of a book from the canon of Scripture was not the decision of a church council or committee. All they did was recognise what was the common acceptance and practice of the churches

In the case of both Old and New Testaments, the same principles were involved in the selection process. These principles could be put in the form of a series of questions:

- is it authoritative – did it come with the authority of God?
- is it prophetic – was it written by a man of God?
- is it authentic – did it tell the truth about God, man etc?
- is it dynamic – did it come with the life-transforming power of God?
- was it received, collected, read and used – was it accepted by the people of God?

**f. What is the Apocrypha and why is it not in our Bibles?**

The Apocrypha is a collection of 14 books written during the 400 year period between the Old and New Testaments. They have never been accepted by the Protestant Church as part of the Bible but in 1546 the Roman Catholic Church, at the Council of Trent, afforded them the same authority and inspiration as Scripture itself, actually pronouncing a curse on all who reject it as part of Scripture.

The simple reason why they were not included is that they, like many other writings, don't satisfy the criteria already identified. Interestingly, neither the Lord nor any New Testament writer ever quoted from the Apocrypha, though they constantly quote from the Old Testament and also quote other extant writing, such as the Book of Enoch and Greek poets. Some parts of the Apocrypha contain historical errors and actually contradict biblical teachings. Brian Edwards points out that there is an instruction in 2 Maccabees to pray for the dead, "a thought never found in Scripture and clearly against both the Old and New Testaments. Since there is not one verse in the Bible that gives us authority to pray for the dead or believe in purgatory, it was chiefly for this verse that the Roman church added the Apocrypha to the Bible."<sup>2</sup>

**g. Why are the books of the Bible arranged as they are?**

i. The Old Testament

The arrangement of the books of the Old Testament in our English Bibles is very different to the way they were set out in the Hebrew Bible, which was divided into three sections:

- LAW: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy
- PROPHETS: Former – Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings  
Latter – Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, the Twelve
- WRITINGS: Psalms, Proverbs, Job, Song of Solomon, Ruth, Lamentations, Ecclesiastes, Esther, Daniel, Ezra, Nehemiah, Chronicles

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<sup>2</sup> Edwards p109

This order broadly reflects the chronology of the books as well. William Hendriksen gives a helpful table showing the Old Testament books according to their probable chronology.<sup>3</sup>

1. **1450 – 1000 B.C.**  
Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth
2. **1000 – 786 B.C.**  
1 and 2 Samuel, Song of Solomon?
3. **786 – 736 B.C.**  
Amos, Jonah, Hosea (partial)
4. **736 – 686 B.C.**  
Hosea (continued), Isaiah, Micah, Job?
5. **686 – 636 B.C.**  
Proverbs (date when brought to completion?), Nahum
6. **636 – 586 B.C.**  
Zephaniah, Habakkuk, Jeremiah, Daniel (partial), Ezekiel (partial), Obadiah
7. **586 – 536 B.C.**  
Lamentations, Daniel (continued), Ezekiel (continued), 1 and 2 Kings (when completed)
8. **c 520 B.C.**  
Haggai, Zechariah
9. **About a century later, probably before 420 B.C.**  
Joel? Malachi
10. **420 – 336 B.C.**  
Psalms (brought to completion), Ecclesiastes, Esther, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 and 2 Chronicles (when completed)

However, it should be noted that the books included in our Bibles today are exactly the same as those in the Hebrew Bible, although ordered differently. The Hebrew arrangement helps us understand something said by Christ. In Lk.11v51 Jesus says, "Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be responsible for it all." Since Abel is mentioned in Genesis, the first book of the Hebrew Bible, and Zechariah is mentioned in the last book, Chronicles, Jesus is alluding to the blood of all the righteous that has been shed right down through the entire history of the Bible.

Today, the books are arranged as they were in the Septuagint: Historical – Genesis to Esther; Poetical – Job – Song of Solomon; Prophetic – Isaiah – Malachi.

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<sup>3</sup> Hendriksen, W 1976 Survey of the Bible Welwyn Evangelical Press pp35-36

ii. The New Testament

When we come to the New Testament, we discover a remarkably similar arrangement: Historical – Matthew – Acts; Epistles – Romans – Jude; Prophetic – Revelation.

Hendriksen, again, arranges them in their probable chronological order.<sup>4</sup>

**1. Before or about 50 A.D.**

James, perhaps Mark

**2. 50/51 – 53/54 A.D.**

Galatians, 1 and 2 Thessalonians

**3. 53/54 – 57/58 A.D.**

1 and 2 Corinthians, Romans

**4. 60/61 – 63 A.D.**

Colossians, Philemon, Ephesians, Philippians

**5. 63 - 67 A.D.**

1 and 2 Peter, Matthew, Luke, Acts, 1 Timothy, Titus, 2 Timothy, Jude

**6. 67 - 96 A.D.**

Hebrews, Gospel of John, 1, 2 and 3 John, Revelation

**h. Why so many versions?**

Translations and versions of the Bible are not a new thing! The work of translating and revising Scripture has continued ever since the time of the Reformation. There is a need for revisions and fresh translations because of the discovery of more accurate Greek and Hebrew texts, continually changing languages and fresh insights into the meaning of biblical words, idioms and expressions. We cannot cover the whole issue here but we will highlight the major milestones and principles, certainly as regards our English language Bibles.

386 Jerome translated the Scriptures into Latin, his version becoming known as The Vulgate, meaning 'common' or 'popular'. As an aside, it's interesting to note that even in Jerome's day, religious people were conservative and suspicious of anything new and he was accused of 'spoiling' some of their favourite texts. Jerome labelled his critics 'two-legged asses'. However The Vulgate remained the accepted Bible of the Western church for more than 1000 years.

1382-1388 John Wycliffe translated the Latin into English for which he was called, "that pestilent wretch of damnable memory, yes, the forerunner and disciple of antichrist." However, this was a translation of a translation and not of the originals.

1525-1526 William Tyndale, a student of Erasmus is reputed to have said, "I defy the Pope and his laws. If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scriptures than thou doest." Such was the opposition that he had to flee to the continent to complete his work and copies were smuggled back into England. His translation was excellent, working directly from the Hebrew and Greek and he 'invented' significant words such as 'scapegoat' and 'passover'.

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<sup>4</sup> Hendriksen op cit pp315-316

- 1535 Miles Coverdale published a version based on Luther's German and The Vulgate
- 1537 Thomas Matthews and John Rogers published a version which was, in effect, a mixture of Tyndale and Coverdale but which became the foundation of all later English language versions.
- 1539 The Great Bible, commissioned by Oliver Cromwell and Thomas Cranmer, was not a new translation but a reworking of previous versions and was so called because it was to be 'the largest'. A copy was ordered to be placed in every church in the land and chained to the lectern.
- 1557/1560 William Wittingham, a brother-in-law of John Calvin, produced The Geneva Bible which was based on new manuscript discoveries and introduced verse divisions.
- 1611 The Authorised Version or King James Bible, based on the Textus Receptus

In more recent years there has been a veritable flood of new translations and versions:

- 1886 ERV - English Revised Version
- 1901 ASV - American Standard Version  
Twentieth Century New Testament
- 1903 Weymouth New Testament
- 1913 Moffat New Testament
- 1952 Revised Standard Version New Testament
- 1957 J B Phillips
- 1970 NEB - New English Bible
- 1963 NASB - New American Standard Bible
- 1971 TLB – The Living Bible
- 1976 GNB - The Good News Bible
- 1978 NIV – New International Version
- 1979 NKJV - New King James Version
- 1989 NRSV - New Revised Standard Version
- 1995 CEV - Contemporary English Version
- 1996 NLT – New Living Translation
- 2001 ESV -English Standard Version
- 2002 The Message
- 2005 TNIV - Today's New International Version

The question is, with so many versions to choose from, which should we go with and which can we rely on. Essentially, all versions fall into one of three categories:

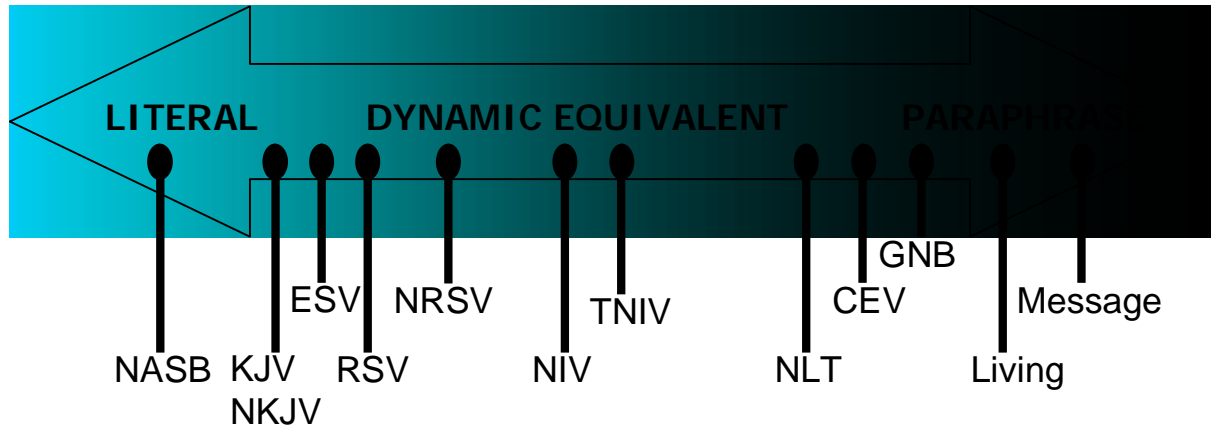
**Literal or 'Word for Word'.** In these versions, the objective of the translator was to produce a version where the words and sentences are as close to the original languages as possible. Examples of this type of translation include the King James Version (AV or KJV), the American Standard Version (ASV), the Revised Standard Version (RSV), and the English Standard Version (ESV), each of which is essentially a revision of the previous one based on new manuscript findings and research.

**Dynamic equivalent.** Here the aim is to search for the word or phrase in English which, in the opinion of the translators, most closely matches the intended meaning of the author. Examples of this might include the New International Version (NIV), the New Living Translation (NLT), and the Contemporary English Version (CEV).

**Paraphrase.** In this case the aim is to give us a version where whole chunks of the Bible are rewritten to a greater or lesser extent to convey the meaning of the original (in the translator's opinion). Examples of this approach would be The Living Bible and The Message.

## Bible Translation Spectrum

(Based on a chart produced by Sovereign Grace Church, Minneapolis, USA)



Which one we choose to use will depend largely on the purpose for which we want to use it. I have recently moved from using the NIV in sermon preparation to the ESV and would personally recommend using a **literal** or **word-for-word** translation for serious Bible-study and preparing talks and sermons since we need to be confident about the accuracy of the words and truths we are communicating. I regularly use the NIV, a **dynamic equivalent** translation for my personal devotions and will occasionally look at one of the **paraphrases** to get a fresh overview of a passage of Scripture. Once or twice I have given a paraphrase to an interested enquirer whose reading abilities are limited or undeveloped as a way of getting them into the Bible but would want, as soon as appropriate, to introduce them to a more reliable translation.

There is, for the English speaker, no shortage of options, but we can't leave this subject without highlighting the immense need of Bible translation work in most other world languages. Their poverty set against our riches should shame us into prayerful action.

Of the 6,912 languages in the world, today

- 429 have the entire Bible
- 1144 have only the New Testament
- 1941 have some translation work in progress
- **2286 have not got a single word of Scripture in their own language**  
- that represents **196,000,000** people

Acknowledgements:

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Edwards, B 1978 Nothing but the Truth Welwyn Evangelical Press  
Hendriksen, W 1976 Survey of the Bible Welwyn Evangelical Press  
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