

# ***Questions about the Text of the Bible***

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# *Questions about the Text of the Bible*

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# *Questions about the Text of the Bible*

## **Introduction**

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Where did the Bible come from? Who wrote it, and who said what belongs and what doesn't? How do we know that what we have now is what the authors originally wrote?

Why are there so many Bible translations? Why don't they say the same thing? Why do some, like the King James Version and the New King James Version, have words or even verses that aren't in the modern translations? Why do Catholic Bibles contain additional books?

What does it mean for a translation to be "literal"? Are literal translations better than the others?

These are valid questions, and I provide some plain answers. I've studied these topics as part of my Intermediate Greek and other courses, so I'm reasonably informed. More important, perhaps, is that I believe that the Bible is God's word, and that belief guides my answers where the hard evidence is lacking.

I'm going to talk about three things.

1. The history of the Bible
2. How new "versions" of the Bible are made and their strengths and weaknesses
3. The answers to the questions I listed above

The first two sections go into some depth; if you just want the answers, please feel free to skip to the last section.

# Questions about the Text of the Bible

## The History of the Bible

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First, I want to point out how *ancient* the Bible is, especially the Old Testament. There is little hard evidence about *anything* from that long ago, much less the small nation of Israel, or about Christians, whom the Jews considered heretics and the Roman despised as another Middle Eastern cult. To make things harder, Christians didn't start keeping records until the fourth century CE.

What follows is what I understand, based on the small amount of existing evidence and reasonable assumptions. I'm going to avoid words like "probably" or "possibly" because little is known for certain, and I'd be using them constantly.

## The Hebrew Scriptures

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The Bible started with Moses, who wrote from 1446 to 1407 BCE. God prepared him for his enormous ministry by allowing a young woman of the Egyptian nobility to adopt him. She sent him to school where Moses learned to read and write. It's possible that he was the *only* Israelite who could, as the rest of the Israelites had been slaves for three generations. Note that while popular tradition portrays Moses as a prince, it's more likely that the Egyptians trained him to be a professional, perhaps an architect.

I want to note that Moses was vastly intelligent and talented. This allowed God to work through him in many different ways as he used Moses to build slaves into a nation. At the same time, God was actively guiding and working with him throughout his ministry.

The Israelites spoke Hebrew, which was very similar to the Canaanite language. The Canaanites had invented the alphabet; Moses learned Canaanite writing, perhaps in school as it was useful for commercial purposes. Moses used it to create the ancient Hebrew script.

The first mention of Moses writing anything down is in *Exodus* 17:14, where God told him to record the Israelites' victory over the Amalekites. Thus, Moses began writing down events that became the first five books of the Bible in 1446 BCE. Over the next forty years, Moses wrote five books, *Genesis*, *Exodus*, *Leviticus*, *Numbers*, and *Deuteronomy*. In *Joshua* 1:7-8, God called these books the Torah, meaning Instruction; the New Testament calls them the Law of Moses. God also referred to them as a book; clearly, Moses had written them down.

After Moses, the next mention of writing is in *Joshua* 18:4, 8. Joshua sent men from the twelve tribes to survey the land and write down a description of it. Thus, the ability to read and write had become somewhat common during Moses' time.

I believe that Moses taught some Israelites to read and write, and he trained scribes to copy his books exactly; most likely, these were priests and Levites. The scribes passed this tradition

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down for thousands of years, with scribes copying the Torah and other important writings precisely.

Jumping ahead to recent times, the earliest copies of the Hebrew Scriptures were Masoretic manuscripts from the early eleventh century CE. Then, in 1948, the Dead Sea Scrolls were found. Comparing these manuscripts, which date back to the second century BCE, to the Masoretic manuscripts showed only tiny variations in over a thousand years. This demonstrates the care and precision Hebrew scribes exercised as they copied the Hebrew Scriptures.

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## The Samaritans

After the Assyrians scattered Israel in 721 BCE, the Assyrians replaced them with foreigners. *2 Kings* 17:24-28 describes how these foreigners began to worship God. These people became the Samaritans.

The Samaritans had their own version of the Torah, to which they made a few adjustments. However, their text is very close to the Hebrew text. This is further evidence that the Hebrew Scriptures we have today are very close to the originals. It's also evidence that the Torah was around for a long time before 721 BCE.

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From 1446 until around 430 BCE, various authors wrote books, psalms, and collections of proverbs that the scribes considered important enough to copy. We don't know who made these decisions or how, or what books were copied and later set aside. However, prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah undoubtedly played major roles.

Ezra, a priest in the fifth century BCE, wrote four of the last books, *1 & 2 Chronicles*, *Ezra*, and *Nehemiah*. Jewish tradition indicates that Ezra<sup>1</sup> formed the Great Assembly of scholars, and this group brought the later books of the Hebrew Scriptures into the canon, including *Ezekiel*, *Daniel*, *Esther*, the minor prophets, and Ezra's works.

Thus, the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures was established at the end of the fifth century BCE by Jewish scholars led by Ezra.

Discussions about some of the books continued until the end of the first century CE when the Council of Jamnia declared the matter closed. However, these discussions were about whether certain books belonged in the canon; there is no indication that any were added.

## The Septuagint

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In the introduction, I said that what Christians call the Old Testament is the same as the Hebrew Scriptures. That isn't *entirely* true.

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1 Ezra's role in forming the canon of the Hebrew Scriptures is hotly debated by scholars because it is so important in deciding whether they are really scripture or not. I think that the Jewish tradition is correct. Other explanations don't fit the evidence and assume that most of the Hebrew Scriptures were somehow fabricated.

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The Egyptian king Ptolemy II—285–246 BCE—decided that he wanted a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures for his library in Alexandria. What happened next is clouded by legend, but the Chief Priest sent Jewish scholars to perform the translation. The result was called the Septuagint, from the Latin word for seventy based on the traditional number of scholars.

Many Jews no longer spoke Hebrew, and the Septuagint became very popular for personal use even though it wasn't officially scripture. As publishers created copies, they felt free to add other Jewish lore, history, and wisdom books to the Septuagint, and publishers mixed the additional books in with those of the Hebrew Scriptures. They also placed all the books in a new order. Over time, a certain group of added books became standard in all new copies of the Septuagint. Again, Jewish scholars had not given the Septuagint any special status, and Jews realized that the additional books were not part of the Hebrew Scriptures.

In the first century CE, the early Christians used the Septuagint and treated it as being the same as the Hebrew Scriptures. Over time, in spite of complaints by some Christian scholars, including Jerome, the Septuagint became the Old Testament. When Jerome made his Latin translation of the Old Testament for the Vulgate in the late fourth century, he translated the Hebrew Scriptures first and then translated the additional books from Greek. Please note that this happened long before the Catholic Church came into existence, and the Catholic Church simply inherited the Vulgate.

Sometime around 1530, Martin Luther set out to make a German translation of the Old Testament using the Masoretic texts of the Hebrew Scriptures. To his surprise, entire books were missing; he found them in the Septuagint. He chose to translate the additional books from Greek and to place them in their own section between the Old and New Testaments. He called this section the Apocrypha, from the Greek word for hidden.

Other Protestants noticed the same thing, and a movement started to remove these "hidden" books completely. The Catholic Church openly opposed this, and Catholic Old Testaments still have the additional books in their original locations. Around 1828, Protestant Bibles began to exclude the Apocrypha.

Most modern Old Testaments are translated from the Hebrew Scriptures and don't include the Apocrypha.

## **The New Testament**

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One of the surprising things about the New Testament is that the early Church rapidly lost track of *when* the books of the New Testament were written. This has led many scholars, those skeptical of the Bible, to claim that the early Church lost track of *who* wrote the books as well. However, that is not the case.

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The Church was not a top-down organization, and the churches grouped themselves around the leaders of nearby big-city churches, such as Rome, Constantinople, Antioch, Caesarea, and Alexandria. Books and opinions were freely shared, however, and a general consensus emerged about which books were the most important.

Guidelines quickly emerged that turned into rules. Books had to

- be written by an Apostle or a close associate
  - or, eventually, the brothers of Jesus, James and Jude
- agree with sound doctrine
- be useful for teaching
- be used by many churches over a long period of time

From early on, certain books were widely considered canon: the four Gospels, *Acts*, Paul's letters addressed to churches, *1 Peter*, *1 John*, and *Revelation*.

The first step from guidelines to rules happened in the mid-second century when heretics began writing books, especially false gospels teaching a religion called Gnosticism. Church scholars made lists of books that were either

- canon and could be read at weekly worship
- accepted and could be read in private
- condemned and should be read only by scholars interested in countering their influence

However, these lists weren't binding, and their main purpose was to identify false gospels and books written by heretics.

The churches didn't always agree with each other. The churches in the east attributed *Hebrews* to the Apostle Paul, but the churches in the west disagreed, although they thought the book was useful.

After heretics started using *Revelation* in the east, the churches in the east condemned it. Their reason was that the letter was causing confusion. However, the churches in the West continued to accept the letter as canon.

Other letters, such as *James*, *2 Peter*, and *Jude* were treated as accepted but not canon for reasons that aren't clear. At the same time, some books, such as one written by Clement the bishop of Rome to the Corinthians, were often considered canon even though they didn't meet the authorship requirements.

The next motivation to form lists came in the mid-third century as the Roman government began destroying churches and burning Christian writings. This forced those who possessed these books to decide which to hand over and which to conceal at the risk of torture or even

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death. This persecution reached its peak at the beginning of the fourth century and ended in 311 with the Edict of Serdica, also known as the Edict of Toleration.

As Constantine became emperor in the early fourth century, he was sympathetic to the Church and helped it rebuild its churches and make new copies of the Christian writings. At the same time, as an administrator, Constantine wanted the bishops to establish order and unity among the churches. He didn't tell the bishops what to think, but he did tell them to agree. This led to a general trend of standardization.

By the mid-fourth century, the bishops produced an edict stating that only canon books could be read during weekly worship, but they didn't specify which books were canon. Scholars continued to produce lists and discuss issues, and the churches in the Roman Empire agreed on the list of 27 books we now have by the end of the fourth century.

*Hebrews* gained acceptance when the churches in the west finally agreed that the Apostle Paul had authored it. The churches in the east again accepted *Revelation*. Some books, such as the one by Clement, fell out, while *1 & 2 Timothy*, *Titus*, *Philemon*, *James*, *2 Peter*, *Jude*, and *2 & 3 John* gained canon status.

At the beginning of the fifth century, the Bible of the Church *in the Roman Empire* consisted of the Old Testament, based on the Septuagint, and the New Testament.

Note, however, that the churches in Syria, Ethiopia, and other places outside the Roman Empire had their own canon lists. These tended to contain additional books, and the Syrian canon continued to exclude *Revelation*. At the same time, the churches in the west began to rely heavily on Latin translations of the Bible, especially Jerome's Vulgate. The churches in the east continued to use the Greek texts.

## **The Greek Text of the New Testament**

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We don't know how the early Christians began making precise copies of the writings of the Apostles and other significant figures, but the existing manuscripts make clear that they somehow adopted the care taken by Jewish scribes in making precise reproductions. (The so-called "Western Text" is a family of manuscripts that is the exception because they contain numerous additions, but scholars are able to identify manuscripts belonging to this family, and they treat it as a special case.)

This care has allowed scholars, especially in the twentieth century, to determine which manuscripts are closest to the originals and produce what I'll call the "reconstructed text." These scholars have identified numerous places where the evidence is not sufficient to make final decisions, and they carefully document these issues in the scholarly texts they produce in footnotes. Modern translations of the Bible sometimes have their own footnotes summarizing



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these issues. Having said that, the reconstructed text produced by scholars is very accurate, far more than any other writing from the same period.

However, the vast majority of the surviving early manuscripts don't look exactly like the reconstructed text. The reason for this is that, as the Church standardized and republished the Christian writings under Constantine, it also standardized the text. By this time, scribes had made mistakes that weren't corrected but were instead copied. In addition, certain editors made deliberate changes and additions to the text that began to be copied. The most noticeable additions are the various "long endings" to *Mark* 16 and the insertion of the story about the woman caught in adultery in *John* 8. Rather than attempting to weed out the errors and deliberate changes, the Church simply accepted them all into what is now called the Byzantine or Majority text. This text became the standard going forward, and copyists reproduced it faithfully. Thousands of manuscripts containing the Byzantine text have been discovered, compared to the much smaller number of older manuscripts.

During the Catholic Church era, the church used Jerome's Latin Vulgate rather than the Septuagint and the Greek New Testament. Then, in 1516, a Dutch scholar named Desiderius Erasmus published a Greek New Testament based on the Byzantine text. William Tyndale and Martin Luther both used Erasmus' text for their Bibles, and Erasmus' text became well-known. It was updated by Robert Estienne, known as Stephanus, around 1550, and his work was then updated by Theodore Beza from 1565 to 1604. All three were skilled and diligent scholars, but they all used the Byzantine text. In addition, they were influenced by the Western text, the Vulgate, and other sources. Erasmus also made a key *addition* that I'll discuss below.

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## Chapters and Verses

Aaron ben Moses ben Asher, a Masoretic scribe, added verses to the Hebrew Scriptures in the early tenth century CE.

Stephen Langton divided the Latin Vulgate into chapters in 1227 CE.

Stephanus divided the Greek text into verses for his Greek New Testament published in 1551.

The first Bible with the chapter and verse divisions was Stephanus' edition of the Latin Vulgate published in 1555.

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The efforts of Erasmus, Stephanus, and Beza became known as the Received Text.

The scholars that translated the King James Bible used the Received Text for their New Testament. King James of England commissioned this translation for the Church of England, and it was published in 1611. Also known as the Authorized Version, it became the standard for centuries, and it was still the second bestselling translation as of 2020—the New International Version was first. Because of the King James Bible, the Received Text gained special status.

# Questions about the Text of the Bible

Currently, some Christians argue that the Received Text is superior to the modern reconstructed text because of the vast number of Byzantine manuscripts. The New King James Version follows this theory. It is a modern translation based on the Received Text, and it was the fifth most popular translation in 2020.

Most other modern translations rely on the reconstructed text. Because the reconstructed text has removed the additions found in the Byzantine text and other additions made to the Received Text, these translations are “missing” some verses; in other places, blocks of verses are marked off as late additions.

## An Example of the Differences

The following looks at two phrases added to the Received Text by Erasmus. This addition is significant because it supports the doctrine of the Trinity. Those who support the Received Text point to this as a serious omission from the reconstructed text.

The verses in question are *1 John* 5:7-8. I’m quoting first from the New American Standard Bible and then from the New King James Version.

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that testify: <sup>8</sup> the Spirit, the water, and the blood—and these three are in agreement. (NASB)

<sup>7</sup> For there are three that bear witness *in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one.* <sup>8</sup> *And there are three that bear witness on earth: the Spirit, the water, and the blood; and these three agree as one.* (NKJV, emphasis added)

How did this happen? First, early in the fourth century, a dispute broke out about whether or not God’s Son was divine. The bishops agreed that he was at the Council of Nicaea in 325, and they came up with the doctrine of the Trinity: God is three persons, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, sharing one essence. However, many Christians held to the heretical teaching that the Son wasn’t divine, and this teaching lasted outside the Roman Empire for centuries.

In the late fourth century, the churches in the west, which now used Latin translations of the New Testament, added the phrases “in heaven: the Father, the Word, and the Holy Spirit; and these three are one. And there are three that bear witness on earth:” to the Latin versions of *1 John* in order to support the doctrine of the Trinity.

In 1516, Erasmus followed the Byzantine text and didn’t include the pro-Trinity addition in his Greek text. However, by his third edition, he had translated the added phrase from Latin to Greek and added it to his Greek text. Perhaps Catholic Church authorities encouraged him to make this change. Both Stephanus and Beza kept the addition, and it became embedded in the Received Text and the King James Bible.

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While I understand that the addition is nice to have, it wasn't something that John wrote, and it doesn't belong.

## **Summary**

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Let me review, starting with the Old Testament.

- The Jews finalized the canon of Hebrew Scriptures late in the fifth century BCE
- The Apocrypha, which are still found in Catholic Church Old Testaments, were additional Jewish books added to the Septuagint, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures, and adopted by the early Church
- Protestants eventually removed the Apocrypha from the Old Testament
- Modern Protestant Old Testaments are based on the Hebrew Scriptures only, while Catholic Old Testaments still contain the Apocrypha

As for the New Testament,

- The early Church carefully copied the books they considered canon
- Additions crept into the books as they were copied; these additions were standardized as the Byzantine text
- The canon of the New Testament was finalized late in the fourth century CE
- The King James Version and the New King James Version New Testaments are based on the Byzantine text plus some other additions
- Modern scholars have identified the additions and removed them as they reconstructed the original text
- Most New Testaments are based on the reconstructed text

Let me be clear. No one's faith is harmed by reading a Bible that follows the Received Text or that contains the Apocrypha. However, building doctrines on things the original authors didn't write isn't, in my opinion, a good idea.

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## “Versions” of the Bible

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So far, I’ve said that modern Protestant translations of the Bible use the Hebrew Scriptures and the reconstructed original text of the New Testament. They all use the same system of chapters and verses. So, why are there different “versions”?

First, they really aren’t *versions*; instead, they are *translations*. The New International Version would be more accurately called the New International Translation. So, what we have are a number of different translations of the Bible that use the same original language texts.

So, why are there so many translations? Shouldn’t they all be translated exactly the same? The short answer is, “No,” and here’s why.

The main reason is that ancient Hebrew was a simple language and the Common Greek of the New Testament was complex. English falls somewhere in the middle. Ideally, translators would do a word-for-word translation and then smooth over it; unfortunately, that isn’t possible. As a result, there are no truly “literal” translations, even though some have that word in their names.

Beyond that, translations that strive to be word-for-word tend to be hard to read. The New American Standard Bible is known for being word-for-word, but many find it difficult to use for devotional reading. In addition, it has a lot more meaning-for-meaning translations than most people realize. No disrespect; it’s a great translation, but it’s not “literal.”

Other translations strive for meaning-for-meaning without falling into paraphrasing. The New International Version was the first of the completely new translations and it is still the most popular English version. However, there are places where the wording the translators chose, in the opinion of many, drifts too far from what the original language says.

Translators face other challenges. In all languages, many words have more than one meaning, and translators must choose among them. The choices aren’t always obvious, and they can make a difference in meaning. Another challenge is tradition. The King James Version became so popular that, over the centuries, new translations sought to upgrade the KJV while respecting its wording choices. The New International Version was the first to break with that tradition.

An unfortunate example of these two things coming together has to do with Greek words that mean “language.” In both Hebrew and Greek, the word “tongue” also means “language.” In fact, English is the same, although people today seldom say “tongue” to refer to a language.

During the translation of the King James Bible, the Old Testament translators chose to translate “tongue” as “language” at least some of the time, but the New Testament translators chose to use “tongue” consistently, even when it clearly means “language.” Although modern

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English uses “tongue” to mean the body part, the major modern translations have failed to set this tradition aside. (A few twenty-first century translations have chosen to break this tradition, but they aren’t well-known.)

Without going on, I think it is clear that translation committees face numerous choices, some large and some small, that prevent a universal translation into English. The solution to this is to choose a translation for devotional reading that works for you and then to look at multiple translations for comparison during in-depth study.

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## **Answers to My Questions**

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### **Where did the Bible come from?**

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The Bible is actually two collections of books, the Hebrew Scriptures of the Jews and the New Testament of the early Church.

Moses began writing the Hebrew Scriptures, and he established traditions for copying them that have lasted for 3,500 years. Other Israelites and Jews also wrote books that were added over time. This all took place from 1446 to around 430 BCE.

The Apostles and their close associates wrote various books and letters from around 41 to 97 CE. The early Christians carefully copied them and adopted a formal list in the late fourth century.

### **Who wrote it, and who said what belongs and what doesn't?**

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Moses started writing the Hebrew Scriptures, and the writings of various prophets were added to them over time by the Israelites and Jews. The authors of many of the books of the Hebrew Scriptures are no longer known.

The Jews and Israelites added books to their scriptures over time. Around 430 BCE, Ezra the priest and a council of scholars added some recently written books and then declared the Hebrew Scriptures finished.

In the New Testament, the authors of all the books are known except for *Hebrews*. The early Christians considered authorship to be a critical criteria for acceptance as canon. In the late fourth century, Christian scholars finalized the 27 books of the New Testament based on centuries of tradition.

### **How do we know that what we have now is what the authors originally wrote?**

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The Hebrew Scriptures were copied by scribes called the Masoretes. The earliest Masoretic manuscript dates to the eleventh century CE. In 1948, the Dead Sea Scrolls, which date as far back as the second century BCE, showed that the Masoretes had copied their scriptures very accurately.

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The New Testament is somewhat more complex. The most common existing manuscripts were based on a fourth century standard text called the Byzantine text. In the twentieth century, scholars began cataloging and carefully examining the older manuscripts and fragments. They have been able to reconstruct the original text by tracing the changes and additions that crept into the Byzantine text with a great deal of certainty.

While there is some uncertainty about specific words and phrases throughout the original language texts, these have been carefully documented and translators take them into account. The fact is that no other ancient text has so many early copies, and those copies don't agree nearly as well as those of the Bible.

### **Why are there so many Bible translations? Why don't they say the same thing?**

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The biggest reason is that the Hebrew and Greek of the Bible are quite different from English. This forces translators to do quite a bit of interpreting as they translate. Different translations take different approaches to this challenge. In addition, decisions about what the author meant by using certain words and translation traditions cause each translation to be different.

Bottom line, no one translation is "best." Choose one that works for you and then compare multiple translations when doing serious study.

### **Why do some, like the King James Version and the New King James Version, have words or even verses that aren't in the modern translations?**

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The King James Bible was based on what became known as the Received Text that was created in the sixteenth century from the Byzantine text plus other sources. Because the King James Version became so popular, many Christians treat it, and the Received Text, as if it were inspired. The New King James Version is a modern updated translation also based on the Received Text.

Most other translations used the modern reconstructed text that removed the additions made in the Byzantine text and the Received Text. However, the verses numbers were added to the Received Text, so the reconstructed text leaves out some verse numbers.

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### **Why do Catholic Bibles contain additional books?**

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The early Christians used a Greek translation of the Hebrew Scriptures that contained additional books. The early Church adopted those books without examining where they came from. The Catholic Church inherited these additional books and has never removed them. Protestants, on the other hand, removed them.

### **What does it mean for a translation to be “literal”? Are literal translations better than the others?**

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There is no such thing as a literal, or word-for-word, translation of the Bible. The closest things are interlinear Bibles, and even they aren't always literal. Beyond that, they are confusing, especially Greek interlinear New Testaments, because they lose the meaning contained in the grammatical markers.

There are translations that strive to be word-for-word, but even these fall short of “literal.”

The problem with more word-for-word translations is that they are hard to read, and they can give the impression that the Bible was written in a strange style. More word-for-word translations tend to be easier to read and sound more natural.

In my opinion, the “best” translation is one that sounds good to you as you read. Many Christians are turning to The New Living Translation for devotional reading. For serious study, compare several translations, such as the New American Standard Bible, the English Standard Version, and Christian Standard Bible, before drawing any big doctrinal conclusions.