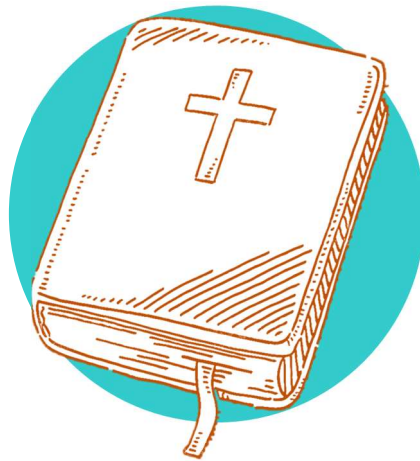


UNDERSTANDING GOD'S WORD



HOW TO READ & STUDY THE BIBLE

Give me understanding,
that I may keep your law
and observe it with my whole heart.

- **PSALM 119:34** -

I INTRODUCTION

If you did not get the memo we are living in a “post-Christian” America.¹ In fact the Western World is a post-Christian world.² For example today about 60% of Americans agree that “identifying moral truth is up to each individual [and that] there are no moral absolutes that apply to everyone, all the time.”³ And 46% of us “evangelical Christians” agree with that same conclusion.⁴ In fact a recent large scale study from “The American Worldview Inventory” in which George Barna led a team at the Cultural Research Center (CRC) at Arizona Christian University (ACU) has found that while today about 70% of Americans still classify themselves as “Christians” only a whopping 6% hold to what is defined as a “Biblical Worldview.”⁵ This means that in 50 years the number of American adults holding a biblical worldview has declined by 50%.

Lest you think this is just a “young-whipper-snapper” problem, it was found that only an estimated 9% of adults in both the Elder (75 and older) and Boomer generations (56 to 74 years of age) hold a biblical worldview. Among Generation X (37 to 55 years of age), the percentage of subscribers to a biblical worldview drops to 5%. Millennial’s (those between 25 to 40 years old) it is even worse, with only about 2% holding to a biblical worldview.

And a biblical worldview was defined merely as follows:

1. Absolute moral truth exists
2. The Bible is totally accurate in all of the principles it teaches
3. Satan is considered to be a real being or force, not merely symbolic
4. A person cannot earn their way into Heaven by trying to be good or do good works
5. Jesus Christ lived a sinless life on earth
6. God is the all-knowing, all-powerful creator of the world who still rules the universe today.⁶

It goes almost without saying that a fundamental shift has taken place in our society and we would be foolish to not take note. As George Barna put it summarizing the data,

“The significantly divergent worldview perspectives and applications of the four generations—especially how different the Millennials are from their predecessors—suggests a nation that is at war with itself to adopt new values, lifestyles, and a new identity.... The data also points out that America is losing its spiritual unity at a rapid pace. Even a rudimentary understanding of the foundations of the American republic reminds us that unless the United States maintains spiritual unity under the hand of God, we will not be able to sustain the freedoms that have made this nation unique and desirable. The heart and soul of the nation will pursue other gods and beliefs to our demise as a nation.”⁷

To be a post-Christian nation means to be a post-Biblical nation. We are a country that sells on average 168,000 Bible a day⁸ and yet we are the most biblically illiterate generation of Christians post the printing press.

¹ For documentation on the decline of Christianity’s influence in America: <http://www.newsweek.com/meacham-end-christian-america-77125>; <https://www.pewforum.org/2019/10/17/in-u-s-decline-of-christianity-continues-at-rapid-pace/>; <https://www.barna.com/research/2015-sees-sharp-rise-in-post-christian-population/>; <https://www.barna.com/research/changing-state-of-the-church/>

² For documentation on the decline of Christianity in the broader Western World: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-33256561>; <https://www.gordonconwell.edu/blog/who-owns-global-christianity/>

³ <https://www.georgebarna.com/research/282014/americans-see-many-sources-of-truth%E2%80%94and-reject-moral-absolutes>

⁴ <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/AWVI-2020-Release-05-Perceptions-of-Truth.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.biblegateway.com/blog/2020/05/extremely-low-percentage-of-americans-hold-biblical-worldview-an-interview-with-george-barna>;

<https://www.arizonachristian.edu/culturalresearchcenter/research/>; https://www.arizonachristian.edu/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/CRC_AWVI2021_Release01_Digital_01_20210413.pdf

⁶ George Barna, “Barna Survey Examines Changes in Worldview Among Christians over the Past 13 Years,” <http://www.barna.org/barna-update/article/21-transformation/252-barna-survey-examines-changes-in-worldview-among-christians-over-the-past-13-years> (accessed January 19, 2013)

⁷ George Barna, <https://www.arizonachristian.edu/2020/09/22/crc-study-finds-millennials-have-radically-different-beliefs-about-respect-faith-america/>

⁸ <https://brandongaille.com/27-good-bible-sales-statistics/>

We have aligned ourselves with the Spirit of the Age where feeling trumps facts and faith is merely equated to ones flavor of ice-cream or desired room temperature. This has all propounded the Church's spiritual confusion and evangelistic ineffectiveness in our culture. J.I. Packer said in his famous book *Knowing God*,

[The] Christian [mind] [has] been conformed to the modern spirit: the spirit...that spawns great thoughts of man and leaves room for only small thoughts of God... [T]houghts of death, eternity, judgment, the greatness of the soul and the abiding consequences of temporal [earthly] decisions are all "out" ...and it is a melancholy fact that the Christian church, instead of raising its voice to remind the world of what is being forgotten, has formed a habit of playing down these themes in just the same way...[T]hese capitulations to the modern spirit are really suicidal so far as Christian life is concerned.⁹

We are like the people in the Prophet Hosea's day that lacked knowledge of God and His precepts. As a result God condemned the people, saying through the prophet Hosea,

¹The LORD has a case against the inhabitants of the land,
Because there is no faithfulness or kindness
Or knowledge of God in the land.
² There is swearing, deception, murder, stealing and adultery.
They employ violence, so that bloodshed follows bloodshed.
³ Therefore the land mourns...
⁴ My people are destroyed for lack of knowledge.
Because you have rejected knowledge,
I also will reject you from being My priest.
Since you have forgotten the law of your God,
I also will forget your children.
Hosea 4:1-3 & 6 (NASB)

Such is the state of our land today. As the scripture states, we do not perish because of a lack of enthusiasm, a waxing of the feelings, or dry worship services, we perish because we do not have knowledge of God and His precepts.

We have got to fix this travesty.

To begin that fixing requires, it necessitates, a return to The Good Book. We need to understand the Bible.

⁹ J.I. Packer, *Knowing God*. (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, 1993), pg 12-13

II HINDURANCES TO UNDERSTANDING THE BIBLE

There are many things that contribute to our lack of understanding the Bible. Consider a few:

A INDIFFERENCE: I JUST DON'T CARE TO OR I DON'T REALLY KNOW THAT I DON'T CARE

Two versions of this: *obstinate indifference* and *busy indifference*.

- *Obstinate Indifference*: I don't care, I know I don't care, and I am okay not caring. I'm about the experience and the feels not the knowledge and the truth.
- *Busy Indifference*: We get busy serving, we get busy working, we get busy raising kids, we get busy even studying and we therefore inevitably miss God. We can get like Martha (Luke 10).

What is happening here in both cases? Really, in a nutshell, the Bible has lost or is losing its beauty to us. Its beauty is outshined by other beauties. Good things start becoming god-things and that is a bad thing.

This *cooling of desire* has got to be fought. We can become less desirous of even desiring the Word of God. The Bible becomes "another book." It becomes part of the furniture, a mere additive to the collection of books gathering dust on our shelves on coffee tables. What is so dangerous about indifference is its universal acidic nature. It has the capabilities of spreading to other areas of our spirituality.

Less Bible reading is usually indicative of less prayer time which together means less meditation which inevitably means less biblical worldview integration into our lives.

In short *less Bible equals less Christ-like living*.

B FAMILIARITY: I READ IT, I KNOW IT, I GOT IT... MOVING ON

We have grown up hearing the Old Testament Bible stories, we have learned about Jesus' parables, we have watched movies on the Book of Revelation. We know how it all began and how it's all going to end.

But do we really?

Strangely enough, our familiarity with the Bible can at times make us see less of it. We become Churchy professionals who "know it all" and have "heard it all" but in reality, we have just become fans of our favorite zingers and catchphrases. We have become parrots – able to squawk out of favorites in rote form without a sense of context or deep thought or care.

In reality, we can become like the Pharisees.

Our familiarity can and often dulls us to boundless beauty and piercing wisdom that dwells within the pages of the Bible. We can get comfortable posting a Bible verse or quoting a single phrase without going deep into the meaning behind it. Even worse we can become comfortable with cherry-picking the Bible to justify anything we want.

To get this across let's consider just one example:

I can do all things through him who strengthens me.
Philippians 4:13 (ESV)

This is an amazing and powerful verse. It is etched on pillows, on coffee mugs, and on car windshields, and on T-shirts. But does it mean what we think it means? Yes and no. *You need to consider the context of the chapter.*¹⁰

- (a) **Historical & Literary Context:** Paul wrote this while in prison in Rome around 61 A.D. He is writing to the Philippians Christians that are in fact part of the first church he ever founded in Europe (modern day Greece). He also is writing this towards the end of Philippians. The occasion of the epistle was to acknowledge a gift of money from the church at Philippi, brought to the apostle by Epaphroditus, one of its members (Philippians 4:10-18). This is a tender letter to a group of Christians who were especially close to the heart of Paul (2 Corinthians 8:1-6), and comparatively little is said about doctrinal error. He is also focused upon urging the Christians of Philippi to remain loyal to their faith and stand against opponents and also to be in unity (2:1-18; 4:2-3).
- (b) **The core concern was Paul's contentment regardless of what circumstances he faced.** The verse is not some awe-inspiring one liner or a bull-horn of inspirational or motivational Truth. It is an acknowledgement of contentment regardless of what Paul faced. As one author has stated,

"Paul's knowledge of how to cope with his ever-changing and never-certain living conditions. It is in this context and during this time of fluctuating experiences in prison that Paul declares the "secret" he has learned is that he can do "all things, through him who strengthens him"¹¹

As another author wrote:

"Philippians 4:13 has nothing to do with accomplishing your personal goals. Philippians 4:13 is a verse that's not about us. It's about Jesus. The verse is not about the power of positive thinking, that you can accomplish your goals with Jesus. It's not saying that you can overcome hurdles because of Jesus. It's not telling you that you can do anything you set your mind to because of Jesus. Those things might all be true also. But that's not what this verse is saying. The verse isn't saying you can accomplish your dreams, it's saying that you can survive your nightmares."¹²

The point of this is not to browbeat on us with wanting to find peace and hope within the Scripture. This is a beautiful and noble and worthy goal, BECAUSE peace and hope lies there... But we should not go seeking to read hope and peace into the Bible where it is trying to tell us something far deeper. Instead, we need to allow it to do this on its own, and this requires allowing it to speak to us on its own terms.

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6DIZAWOvSDU>; <https://www.christianity.com/bible/niv/philippians/>; <https://bible.org/seriespage/introduction-background-and-outline-philippians>; <https://studydrivenfaith.org/2016/12/i-can-do-anything-philippians-413-misinterpreted-and-misunderstood/>

¹¹ <https://studydrivenfaith.org/2016/12/i-can-do-anything-philippians-413-misinterpreted-and-misunderstood/>

¹² <https://joshbenner.org/2018/04/26/youre-probably-misquoting-philippians-413-and-why-it-matters/>



NARCISSISM: IT'S-ALL-ABOUT-ME SYNDROM

This word is named after the Greek myth of Narcissus who was this beautiful man who was so obsessed with himself that he didn't think anybody was good enough for him. So much did he believe this that he denied all advances of romance towards him and decided to stare at the beauty of his reflection in a pond. He looked at it until he died and a flower sprung up where he fell.

We modern western Americanized evangelical Christians tend to suffer from heavy doses of Narcissism. We want the Bible to be all about us. Every page is about finding our better self or fighting our battles or trying to mine some personal wisdom for the day. A lot of music, a lot of sermons, and a lot of daily devotions are ultimately and centrally "I" centered. We sing about ourselves, we sermonize about ourselves, we come to grips with ourselves, and we gear the entire church program around this model. We gear our faith around it. This syndrome can display itself through many ways, but I want to mention two:

- *Cherry-Picking:* We seek for golden nuggets of truth to help us through the day. The Bible becomes a box of mismatched jewelry that we put on and take off at a whim for our life circumstances. "This speaks to me" or "This is what this verse means to me" are common mantras.
- *Self-Insertion:* We always want to plant ourselves into the middle of the Bible stories and always make it about us rather than learning from others.

The Bible is God's Story. Period. It is about His work, His ways, and His plan for us. It climaxes in Jesus Christ (Luke 24; John 5:46; 2 Timothy 3:14-15), who embodies all the shadows and metaphors of the Old Testament and all the prescriptions, promises, and apocalypses of the New. Jesus literally said,

³⁹You search the Scriptures because you think that in them you have eternal life; and it is they that bear witness about me, ⁴⁰yet you refuse to come to me that you may have life.
JOHN 5:39-40 (ESV)

Our job when we come to the Bible is centrally to understand what it says about WHO GOD IS and WHO JESUS IS.¹³ It is only when we come to understand Who They are and what They are doing do we understand ourselves and our purpose. It doesn't mean there isn't application and personal emotional connection to the Bible. Far from it. It means that such things are found in understanding the profound theological truth of the Bible as a whole.

You *must* be able to "get out of your own skin" to scale the heights and look down to see how you think and believe the way you do.¹⁴ Until this happens you will never be able to come to a text of Scripture, or any text really, as it is in itself. As the late and great literarian and theologian C.S. Lewis (1898-1963) asserted,

"We must begin by laying aside as completely as we can all our own preconceptions, interests, and associations.... We sit down before the [work] in order to have something done to us, not that we may do things with it. The first demand any work of any art makes upon us is surrender. Look. Listen. Receive. Get yourself out of the way."¹⁵

¹³ Consider the story of how David and Goliath (1 Samuel 17) is always taught! 1) David chose five smooth stones when he faced Goliath, 2) God has given you Five Smooth Stones to face giants in your own life, 3) If you use these stones, you too will be victorious. Problem? Where is Jesus in all this? <https://www.1517.org/articles/david-vs-goliath-were-teaching-the-story-all-wrong>; <https://www.ligonier.org/blog/david-goliath-and-you/>; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/july/david-and-goliath-christ-centered-preaching.html>

¹⁴ There is a very detailed and extensive discussion of how the reader is to come to a text in Kevin Vanhoozer, *Is There Meaning In This Text? The Bible, The Reader, and the Morality of Literary Knowledge* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1998). I recommend looking at *Chapter 7 Reforming the Reader: Interpretive Virtue, Spirituality, and Communicative Efficacy* pg. 367-441 generally. Specifically consider the section *The Reader as User, Critic, and Follower* pg. 369-381 and *Is Exegesis Without Ideology Possible?* pg. 381-392

¹⁵ C.S. Lewis, *An Experiment in Criticism* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1992), pg. 18-19

D

IGNORANCE: I DON'T KNOW HOW AND DON'T KNOW WHERE TO BEGIN

Another reasons why we don't know the Bible well is because we probably just don't know how to actually read and study it. We are just plain ignorant. We have never been taught. Because we have never been taught we do not have the knowledge nor the skills to effectively engage in the Bible.

Now there are two types of ignorance that can be mentioned here:

- *True Humbled Ignorance:* I do not know but I am willing to learn. This type of ignorance can be worked with and overcome because it is a sincere acknowledgement that one simply does not understand how to do study!
- *Arrogant Imperial Ignorance:* Learning a bunch of words, learning study skills, and reading from scholars, historians, theologians, and old books isn't for me! This type of ignorance cannot be worked with nor overcome because there is, in a very real sense, an arrogance in not knowing. Somehow it is believed that being unlearned or being ignorant makes you "more faithful" or "childlike" and therefore sincere in your faith. But newsflash, it doesn't. Childlikeness doesn't mean childishness.

We are called to become matured believers ([1 Corinthians 14:20](#); [Ephesians 4:12-13](#); [Colossians 1:9-10](#); [Hebrews 6:1-3](#)) who grow in knowledge and wisdom, not staying anemic and baby-fied our entire Christian life.

When you begin the process of Bible Study you must have tools for the journey. Consider the following:

A THE RIGHT SPIRIT: REVERANT, PRAYERFUL, & THOUGHTFUL

You have to have a heart and mind that is *reverent, prayerful, and thoughtful*. Those words are specifically chosen. Let's explain them a bit:

I. REVERENT

What we are studying is the greatest book ever written and the test for it has eternal ramifications. We are not dealing with esoteric wisdom of mere human sages, we are dealing with the very Words of God. We have got to keep this in mind when we come to the Bible.

I am not going to go into the theological depths on the nature of divine revelation – how God reveals Himself through nature and scripture – but I think it needs to be at least touched upon here in our discussion of reading and studying such revelation reverentially.

It is important to be reminded what the Bible is. The Bible is revelation – it doesn't become revelation. It is a disclosure of God's will to us. It is God uncovering for us something of His nature, will, doings, and plans. Classically revelation is understood to be, inspired, inerrant, and sufficient.¹⁶ These three words are extremely loaded theologically – and each of them require study and lessons within themselves – but let us briefly define them:

- **INSPIRED** – This means to say that the Bible is both a God and Man word. It is a divine revelation brought forth through human authors, in all their historical and cultural particularities. God and Man confluently or concursively (a seamless togetherness) worked in such a way that the free will words of the human author were exactly the words God intended them to be (2 Timothy 3:15-17, 2 Peter 1:21).

To say that the Bible is the Word of God does not mean that just the ideas in the Bible – i.e. the big theological concepts or themes – are God's intended message but rather that the very Words of Scripture of God's intended words. The very grammar, the style, the syntax, are all intended by God. Jesus got this understanding across when He declared,

For truly I tell you, until heaven and earth disappear, not the smallest letter, not the least stroke of a pen, will by any means disappear from the Law until everything is accomplished.
Matthew 5:18 (NIV)

The “smallest letter or jot” of the Hebrew alphabet (**yod**) and “the least stroke of a pen or tittle” (**serif**) is a small hook or projection that differentiates various Hebrew letters (**like a comma**).

It is important to understand the implications of this. It means you have to take the grammar seriously. You have to take word usage seriously. You have to take biblical literary genre seriously

¹⁶ If you would like some depth to understand these theological terms within the Doctrine of Revelation consider: B.B. Warfield, *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*, from online book at http://www.monergism.com/thethreshold/sdg/warfield/The_Inspiration_and_Authority_o_-_B_B_Warfield.pdf; Chicago Statement on Biblical Inerrancy, found at http://www.danielakin.com/wp-content/uploads/old/Resource_545/Book%20-%20Sec%202023.pdf. I would also direct you to consider the good discussion of the nature of the Bible available in William Klein, Craig Blomberg, & Robert Hubbard, Jr., *Introduction to Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2017), pg. 211-222

because that is part of the content of God's divine revelation. To not take these things seriously is to not take the Word of God seriously.

- **INERRANT** – This means to say that the Bible is without error in all that it records, teaches, or proclaims within the particular historical, cultural, and literary intentions of its writings. (*Psalms 12:6, Matthew 5:18-19*) In other words, something is “without error” when it is not contradicting or lying or incorrect about something. That said, how one reads the truth of poetry is different than you read the truth of history. Therefore, the particular styles and intentions of the authors of scripture have to be considered when we say, “The Bible is without error.”
- **SUFFICIENT** – This means to say that the Bible is the final and only revelation we need to understand God, His will, His purposes, and our nature and purposes. So, there is no need for us to have to add to the revelation of God through personal dreams, visions, or writings, nor do we need to look to additional teachings or texts to understand who God is or who we are and what we are to do. (*Galatians 1:8, Colossians 2, Jude 1:3*) This deliberately destroys the idea that the Holy Spirit will somehow “reveal” to us special “revelations” of the will and ways of God. It doesn't work that way my friend. While God can illuminate the Word of God, and He can confirm and comfort us in our prayers and concerns, He will not contradict His settled Word brought forth through 66 canonized books.

II. PRAYERFUL

No amount of Bible reading, no amount of study skills, is going to be able to compensate for a heart and mind that is not humbled before God.¹⁷ *Bible reading and study is sacramental.*¹⁸ It is a grace in many ways bestowed on us with the power to change us if we open ourselves to its wisdom and power. **Watchman Nee** (1903-1972) the great Chinese church leader and martyr said it this way,

“Touching the spirit of the Bible is not a matter of methods. It is a matter of whether or not a person has been dealt with by the Lord... [If] God has not operated in us systematically, we will be shrouded with a veil when we come to the Word. No matter how hard we try, we will be separated from it by a great distance. Our spirit must be dealt with. We must allow God to deal with us severely.”¹⁹

The whole process of studying the Bible – of learning methodologies of interpretation, reading commentaries, conducting original language word studies, learning literary and historical background knowledge – doesn't matter a Hill-of-Beans if you are not in the right spiritual state. You can learn all the Greek and Hebrew words you want and still miss the message of the text. You can learn all the socio-cultural underpinnings behind a certain parable, and still miss its implications for your life. You can do all the textual analysis of the grammar and syntax of a Pauline Epistle and still not grasp the spiritual substance of it. Just like you can have all the emotionally charged cathartic experiences, all the mystical emotions, and all the expressions of the gifts of the Spirit and still miss Christ!

Bible study isn't about learning a bunch of esoteric data-points or scholarly techniques it is about coming to know God. *We must desire not to just know the Word of God but knowing the God of the Word.*

Studying the Word of God is worship. Full stop. If such an end is not your goal, then you are wasting your time. Worship is not relegated to tears, hand waving, gyrations, or inflection of the vocal chords. Worship is showing worth to God, it is submission to His Truth, to seeing Him as the greatest treasure of

¹⁷ Consider Ray Lubeck's discussion on this topic in *Read the Bible For A Change* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2004), pg. 5-8

¹⁸ Peter Kreeft has a short but poignant discussion about this in *You Can Understand the Bible* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), pg. xii-xiii

¹⁹ Watchman Nee, *How to Study the Bible* (Anaheim, CA: Living Stream Ministry, 1993), pg. 63

all Reality and the central driving force of your meaning, purpose, and doings.²⁰ Worship is the life of the believer. **Peter Kreeft** (1937–present), professor of philosophy at Boston College and The King's College, has put the beauty of studying God's word like this,

“Reading the Bible should be a form of prayer. The Bible should be read in God's presence and as the unfolding of His mind. It is not just a book, but God's love letter to you. It is God's revelation, God's mind, operating through your mind and your reading, so your reading is your response to His mind and will. Reading it is aligning your mind and will with God's; therefore it is a fulfillment of the prayer 'Thy will be done', which is the most basic and essential key to achieving our whole purpose on earth: holiness and happiness.... Both prayer and Bible reading are ways of listening to God. They should blend: our prayer should be biblical and our Bible reading prayerful.”²¹

III. INTENTIONAL

As we go through our study we need to have a spirit that is not just reverent and not just prayerful but also thoughtfully intentional. Intentionality has to do with the cultivation and adoption of methods and steps that are thoughtful and become habitual. **Paul** said,

7 Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; 8 for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come.

1 Timothy 4:7-8 (ESV)

We need to think about what we are doing. We are not in a race. We are in this for change. Change takes work. It takes effort. It takes time. Study is not for the lazy and it's not for the excuser. You have to DECIDE to direct the heart and mind to do it. **Donald S. Whitney** (1954–present), in his excellent classic *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, in which he says,

“The main reason...for disciplining ourselves is godliness.... The most critical Discipline is the intake of God's Word. No factor is more influential in making us more like the Son of God than the Spirit of God working through the Word of God. If you want to be changed, if you want to become more like Jesus Christ, discipline yourself to read the Bible.”²²

When we come to reading and studying the Bible we do not forsake our minds. We do not forsake thinking! We are not called to check our brains at the door when we come to church or to our spiritual walk. The sage of Proverbs said,

² making your ear attentive to wisdom
and inclining your heart to understanding;
³ yes, if you call out for insight
and raise your voice for understanding,
⁴ if you seek it like silver
and search for it as for hidden treasures,
⁵ then you will understand the fear of the LORD
and find the knowledge of God.

Proverbs 2:2-5 (ESV)

²⁰ <https://www.desiringgod.org/interviews/what-is-worship>; <https://www.gospelproject.com/worship-99-in-99/>; <https://www.christianitytoday.com/biblestudies/bible-answers/spirituallife/what-is-true-worship.html>;

²¹ Peter Kreeft, *You Can Understand the Bible* (San Francisco, CA: Ignatius Press, 2005), pg. xi-xii

²² Donald S. Whitney, *Spiritual Disciplines for the Christian Life*, revised ed. (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2014), pg. 28

To be intentional is to attentive, as the text says. It is to incline your ear. It is to seek. It is to search. It is to mine. It is to come and understand "I don't know everything...BUT... I am willing to learn... and I am going to do something about it." If you are a person that believes all you need to do is sit in a room, close your eyes, and wait for God to give you direct revelation of everything then that isn't humility, it is arrogance and unbiblical.

To be intentional is to think about what you are reading. It is to think about your thinking. It is to step back, slow down, and ask questions of what you are reading. It is to mine what you are reading.

B

A GOOD TRANSLATION: UNDERSTANDABLE & BASED ON GOOD MANUSCRIPTS

The biggest tool for us in studying the Bible is the Bible itself! *Who would have thought!?* But more to the point it is vitally important to have a good translation of the Bible. One that you can understand and is based on the best available manuscripts and is preferably done by a committee of translators.

We are not going to go into depth about the translation process for our Bible's but we do need to address a few things before moving on from this point. If you want to learn more about the process of Bible translation then consider the resources in the footnotes.²³ Also, consider the graphics that are below that help to visually breakdown the process of Bible translation and transmission.

- 1. WHY DO WE EVEN HAVE BIBLE TRANSLATIONS?** This is an important question that many have. Why do we have so many translations of the Bible to begin with? There are many reasons but here are a few to consider:
 - **BECAUSE MOST DON'T KNOW THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES** – Simply put we have to have translations because a vast majority of people today do not understand the original languages in which the Bible was written. We tend to forget that the Bible was not written to us. It was written to Bronze Age and 1st Century Jews and Christians who spoke Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. So that world is very different from our world. For us to understand that world requires us having a correct translation and transmission of words and concepts down to our time.
 - **BECAUSE LANGUAGE CHANGES OVER TIME** – It is not just that we have to take languages from 2,000 years ago or 4,000 years ago and transmit them into our language. The other issue is that our own languages evolve as time goes on. Think about the English language today compared to the time of Shakespeare. For example, it has been pointed out that the average working vocabulary for the average modern American is roughly 3,000 words, while back in Shakespeare's day the average working vocabulary of a regular person was 54,000 words.²⁴
 - **BECAUSE OF NEW MANUSCRIPTS** – We also have varying translations of the Bible because over the decades new discoveries have been made of older or more thorough manuscripts (i.e. copies) of various Bible texts. These copies help translators better understand the process

²³ Paul D. Wegner, *The Journey from Texts to Translations: The Origin and Development of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); Gordon D. Fee & Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All Its Worth: A Guide to Understanding and Using Bible Versions* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007); Robert Alter, *The Art of Bible Translation* (NJ, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019);

²⁴ It is hard to pinpoint hard data on this point but several articles make this argument. There is also data that shows how the average American's vocabulary usage has declined considerably over the past century. Consider the following articles on all of this: <https://time.com/3832166/stop-saying-awesome/>; <https://www.straightdope.com/21343836/does-the-average-american-student-have-less-vocabulary-today-than-in-days-gone-by/>; <https://www.straightdope.com/21343836/does-the-average-american-student-have-less-vocabulary-today-than-in-days-gone-by/>; <http://evoandproud.blogspot.com/2019/09/why-is-vocabulary-shrinking.html>

of transmission or words across time and thus help to pinpoint more accurately the actual original wording of the biblical text.

An example of this would be considering the 1611 King James Bible. When it was being translated it was based off roughly 6 Greek manuscripts and those manuscripts dated to roughly the 1000s A.D. And it is a fairly decent translation and used widely by many people today! However today there are over 5,800 Greek manuscripts that have been found since that time and they date as far back as the 1st and 2nd Centuries A.D. Because of the growth of manuscripts available translators can begin to see more clearly how and if the biblical text has been changed through time. This helps them get back closer and closer to the original wording of the Bible.

More could be said on biblical translation and transmission – such as a discussion on the history of biblical manuscripts – but that will take us too far afield in our current study! So let us move on.

- **BECAUSE OF MARKETING** – Simply put, translations sell. Sad to admit it but sometimes a new translation comes out because publishers want to sell books. This has to be admitted and understood. Every Bible that we have today is done by a publishing company and such companies function off of their sales. You cannot forget this.

2. WHY IS BIBLE TRANSLATION DIFFICULT? You and I, the regular Joe Shmoes and Sally Sues, who go to church ever Sunday and read our English Bibles and listen to sermons from them are indebted. We are indebted to men and women who spend their entire lives taking the original manuscripts of the Bible and translating them into English so we can even have the pleasure and opportunity to read the Word of God. We forget this!

We tend to think that our Bibles descended on a cloud held by cherubs straight from the throne room of God. It didn't and doesn't work that way. The Bible has been painstakingly translated and transmitted for thousands of years. It has to be studied and understood in its original historical and textual settings and then studying in how it has been transmitted across those thousands of years across differing languages and geographic regions. All of this has taken place before you ever went to the Bible bookstore to get your study Bible. Such a process is painstakingly complex and we would do well to remember it and not take it for granted.

But why is such a process so difficult? Several reasons:²⁵

- NO TWO WORDS ARE ALIKE BETWEEN LANGUAGES
- LANGUAGES HAVE DIFFERENT VOCABULARY SIZES
- LANGUAGES PUT WORDS TOGETHER DIFFERENTLY
- LANGUAGES HAVE DIFFERENT STYLISTIC PREFERENCES OF EXPRESSION
- WORDS ONLY HAVE MEANING IN CONTEXT

Consider some examples below so you can understand how the exact translation of words and concepts can become so difficult:²⁶

²⁵ J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *Grasping God's Word* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012) pg. 33-34; Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *How to Choose a Translation for All It's Worth* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2007), pg. 20-21

²⁶ Examples here come from Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 20

- Consider (French) petit-déjeuner “little lunch” → means “breakfast” in English. Just a raw word-for-word translation of the French doesn’t get across what the French word means. It is more complicated. There is a cultural and contextual element to understanding the French word so we in English can comprehend it.
- Consider (Swahili) kifungua kinywa “open the mouth” → means “breakfast” in English. Again, if the Swahili was just translated exactly into English then it would give a whole different meaning. There is more to the process.
- Consider (French) pomme de terre “apple of earth” → means “potato” in English.
- Consider (German) Ich habe Hunger “I have hunger” → means “I am hungry” in English.
- Consider (English) bear → What does this word mean? Large furry animal, to give birth, to carry, to endure, to put up with? You can only answer if there is context! This means that translation has to take into account not just words but context and context is influenced by time and location and settings.

So again, Bible translation isn’t as easy as you would imagine.

3. **WHAT IS THE PROCESS OF BIBLE TRANSLATION?** The task of bible translation is to try and “transfer the meaning of words and sentences from one language (the *original* or *source* language = the language of the text being translated) into meaningful words and sentences of a second language (known as the *receptor* or *target* language), which in our case is English.”²⁷

The central concern is to be as faithful to BOTH languages when one is trying to translate words. “The ultimate concern of translation is to put a Hebrew or Greek sentence into *meaningful English that is equivalent to its meaning in Hebrew or Greek.*”²⁸ The goal is to not just reproduce the form of the original language but to reproduce the meaning of the original language.²⁹

These things have to be remembered when you are looking at translations. Because of these points about languages there are going to be theories of translation that will shape how translators translate languages. To simplify for the translation of the Bible there is either the formal/literal word for word approach or the functional/dynamic thought for thought approach. Consider:³⁰

- **formal/literal word for word approach** – focuses on trying to capture the form or word structure of the original language
- **functional/dynamic thought for thought approach** – focuses on trying to capture the meaning or idiomatic naturalness of the original language

Consider an example from 2 Samuel 18:24-25:

- ²⁴And David sat between the two gates: and the watchman went up to the roof over the gate unto the wall, and lifted up his eyes, and looked, and behold a man running alone. ²⁵And the watchman cried, and told the king. And the king said, “If he be alone, there is tidings in his mouth.” And he came apace, and drew near. (KJV)

²⁷ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 20

²⁸ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 21

²⁹ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 25

³⁰ Consider Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 26-27 and J. Scott Duvall and J. Daniel Hays, *ibid*, pg. 33-36

- ²⁴ Now David was sitting between the two gates, and the watchman went up to the roof of the gate by the wall, and when he lifted up his eyes and looked, he saw a man running alone. ²⁵ The watchman called out and told the king. And the king said, "If he is alone, there is news in his mouth." And he drew nearer and nearer. (ESV)
- ²⁴ While David was sitting between the inner and outer gates, the watchman went up to the roof of the gateway by the wall. As he looked out, he saw a man running alone. ²⁵ The watchman called out to the king and reported it. The king said, "If he is alone, he must have good news." And the runner came closer and closer. (NIV)
- ²⁴ Meanwhile, David was sitting between the inner and outer gates in the city wall. One of his soldiers was watching from the roof of the gate-tower. He saw a man running toward the town ²⁵ and shouted down to tell David. David answered, "If he's alone, he must have some news." The runner was getting closer (CEV)

Notice how in each translation there is a sliding scale between trying to achieve exact word ordering and to get across what the meaning of the situation is.

Now is a good time to consider the graphics below on translation and transmission.

4. **WHAT TRANSLATION SHOULD I USE?** I am not going to tell a person what they should use when they study the Bible. That can open a can of worms! However I would suggest three things:

- **ONE THAT IS UNDERSTANDABLE** – If you cannot understand what it is you are reading then why are you sticking with that particular translation? If you have to translate the translation then you are doing double work even before you begin studying. "The ultimate goal of translation is not to transfer words from one page to another, but to communicate a message from one person to another. A translation is truly successful only when its readers (or hearers) actually get that message."³¹
- **ONE THAT IS GROUNDED ON THE BEST STANDARD HEBREW & GREEK TEXTS** – Your translation needs to be based upon the best Hebrew and Greek texts that are the oldest and the most extensively confirmed across the history of the manuscript collections we have.
- **ONE THAT IS TRANSLATED BY A COMMITTEE NOT AN INDIVIDUAL** – It is dangerous to have a translation that is made by one person. There is wisdom in counsel. Committees comprise many scholars and linguistic specialists that work together to use the best manuscripts and who work together to bring forth the best rendering of the original languages into English (or any other language).

³¹ Gordon D. Fee and Mark L. Strauss, *ibid*, pg. 40



WRITING TOOLS: MATERIALS TO TAKE NOTES & MARK DOWN THOUGHTS

Studying the Bible is different than reading the Bible. An analogy that can help to get it across would be to consider eating a good meal. Imagine an amazing meal that you have eaten and enjoyed so much.

Eating is enjoyable, it is a pleasure, you can scarf it down or savor it, and it doesn't require any effort except to chew it. That is what reading the Bible is. Reading the Bible is an enjoyable, savory, devotional level of knowing God's Word. This is necessary! I am not knocking it! But it is far more surface level and doesn't require much from us.

By contrast understanding how those flavors work together to create the meal that you want requires skills and thoughtfulness. The meal didn't poof into existence. It requires an understanding of how flavors work. How much salt, how much pepper, how much pepper, so forth and so on. It requires thinking like a chef. This is what Studying the Bible is. Studying is understanding below the surface of the experience how the Word is speaking to us. Studying makes us must think through and take seriously the words we are reading and makes us have to ask questions of the text and ourselves.

Studying requires that you get dirty with your text. What I mean by that is you have to be able to write down things, make notes, circle and underline, highlight, think through and so forth. Studying requires that you ask questions of the text as you are slowly down and reading through it. This is why you need writing materials.



A SET GOAL: CHOOSING WHAT, WHEN, & WHERE TO STUDY

The last essential tool for studying the Word of God is setting a goal. What are you going to study? When are you going to study? Where are you going to study? If you don't set goals then you will never do it. Goals help to discipline you and train you to be intentional about studying.

A goal-less Bible study is a directionless study which is doomed to peter out.

You have got to decide: Do I want to study the Word of God or not? Do I want to go below the surface of one-dimensional devotional reading and get more substance?

If you do not want to do it. If you don't want to try it. If you feel this is a waste of time, then move on. You are wasting your time over the next several weeks.

Here is a quote from **R.C. Sproul** (1939-2017) on the issue of motivation for Bible study:

“There is a great deal of difference between reading and studying. Reading is something we can do in a leisurely way, something that can be done strictly for entertainment in a casual manner. But study suggests labor, serious and diligent work.... Here, then, is the real problem of our negligence. We fail in our duty to study God's Word not so much because it is difficult to understand, not so much because it is dull and boring, but because it is work. Our problem is not a lack of intelligence or a lack of passion. Our problem is that we are lazy.”³²

³² R.C. Sproul, *Knowing Scripture* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Press, 2016), pg. 20

TEXT BASIS FOR TRANSLATIONS

IN ORDER TO GET AN ENGLISH TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE YOU FIRST HAVE TO HAVE THE MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE IN ITS ORIGINAL LANGUAGES!

HOW? IT COMES TO US THROUGH THE MANUSCRIPTS ACROSS HISTORY (5,800 GREEK) (c. 25,000 OTHER LANGUAGES) BUT THERE ARE DIFFERENT APPROACHES OF TEXTUAL RETRIEVAL IN TRYING TO DETERMINE THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE FROM THOSE MANUSCRIPTS

BIG IDEA
THE WAY TO GET THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE IS TO SEE WHAT THE **MAJORITY** OF MANUSCRIPTS SAY



BIG IDEA
THE WAY TO GET THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE IS TO SEE WHAT THE **OLDEST** MANUSCRIPTS SAY

KEY BIBLE TRANSLATIONS & THEIR STYLES

WHEN YOU HAVE THE ORIGINAL LANGUAGES TEXT DETERMINED IT THEN MUST BE TRANSLATED INTO ENGLISH. THIS MEANS THERE HAS TO BE DECISIONS MADE ON HOW TO TRANSLATE THOSE ORIGINAL WORDS



- | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|-------------------------------------|--------------------|---|---|--------------------|--------------------|------------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------------|-------------------|--------------------|------------------------|
| | | | | | | | | | | | |
| NASB
1964
1995
2020 | ESV
2001 | KJV
1611
NKJV
1982 | HCSB
2004
CSB
2017 | RSV
1952 | NET
1996 | NIV
1978
1984
2011 | NLT
1996
2004 | CEV
1995 | LB
1982 | TPT
2017 | MESSAGE
2002 |

THE PROCESS OF GETTING YOUR BIBLE



MANUSCRIPTS

- c. 2,800 GREEK NT MANUSCRIPTS
- c. 25,000 MANUSCRIPTS FROM OTHER LANGUAGES
- NOTABLE MANUSCRIPTS:
 - ❖ **OLD TESTAMENT**
 - DEAD SEA SCROLLS (c. 100-300 B.C.)
 - ALEPPO CODEX (c. 930 A.D.)
 - CODEX LENINGRADENSIS (c. 1000 A.D.)
 - ❖ **NEW TESTAMENT**
 - JOHN RYLAND PAPYRUS (c. 125 A.D.)
 - CHESTER BEATTY PAPYRUS (c. 200-250 A.D.)
 - CODEX VATICANUS (c. 300s A.D.)
 - CODEX SINAITICUS (c. 300s A.D.)

ARE DATED, ANALYZED & ORGANIZED TO CREATE A...



GREEK & HEBREW TEXT

80-90% OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM 300s-1500s

TO GET THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE YOU SEE WHAT THE **MAJORITY** OF MANUSCRIPTS SAY AND THEN CREATE A SINGULAR ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TEXT BASED UPON THAT.

THIS IS SOMETIMES CALLED THE BYZANTINE TEXTUAL TRADITION OF MANUSCRIPTS

MAJORITY TEXT



THIS IS AN ACTUAL ORIGINAL LANGUAGES TEXT THAT IS CREATED FROM THE MAJORITY OF THE MANUSCRIPTS IN EXISTENCE
BIBLIA HEBRAICA STUTTGARTENSIA
 DEAD SEA SCROLLS, SEPTUAGINT, MASORETIC TEXT
 ROBINSON & PIERPONT GREEK NEW TESTAMENT
 HODGES & FARSTAD GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

10-15% OF MANUSCRIPTS FROM 100s-300s

TO GET THE ORIGINAL MESSAGE OF THE BIBLE YOU SEE WHAT THE **OLDEST** OF MANUSCRIPTS SAY AND THEN CREATE A SINGULAR ORIGINAL LANGUAGE TEXT BASED UPON THAT.

THIS IS SOMETIMES CALLED THE ALEXANDRIAN TEXTUAL TRADITION OF MANUSCRIPTS

CRITICAL TEXT



THIS IS AN ACTUAL ORIGINAL LANGUAGES TEXT THAT IS CREATED FROM THE OLDEST OF THE MANUSCRIPTS IN EXISTENCE
BIBLIA HEBRAICA STUTTGARTENSIA
 DEAD SEA SCROLLS, SEPTUAGINT, MASORETIC TEXT
 NESTLE & ALAND GREEK NEW TESTAMENT
 UNITED BIBLE SOCIETY GREEK NEW TESTAMENT

IS USED AS THE BASIS FOR TRANSLATING & CREATING...

WORD FOR WORD

PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSLATION THAT SAYS THE **FORM** OF THE ORIGINAL BIBLICAL TEXT NEEDS TO BE PRESERVED AND PASSED DOWN INTO ENGLISH BIBLES.

ALSO CALLED "FORMAL" OR "LITERAL" VIEW

Focuses on preserving the grammar, syntax, words, & structure of the original language text



THOUGHT FOR THOUGHT

PHILOSOPHY OF TRANSLATION THAT SAYS THE **MEANING** OF THE ORIGINAL BIBLICAL TEXT NEEDS TO BE PRESERVED AND PASSED DOWN INTO ENGLISH BIBLES.

ALSO CALLED "FUNCTIONAL" OR "DYNAMIC" VIEW

Focuses on preserving the flow, ideas, idioms, & common meaning of the original language text



ENGLISH BIBLE



NASB
1964, 1995, 2020



AMP
1965



ESV
2001



KJV
1611, 1769



NKJV
1982



HCSB
2004



CSB
2017



RSV
1952



NRSV
1989



NET
1996



NIV
1978, 1984, 2011



NLT
1996, 2004



NirV
1992



CEV
1995



TLB
1982



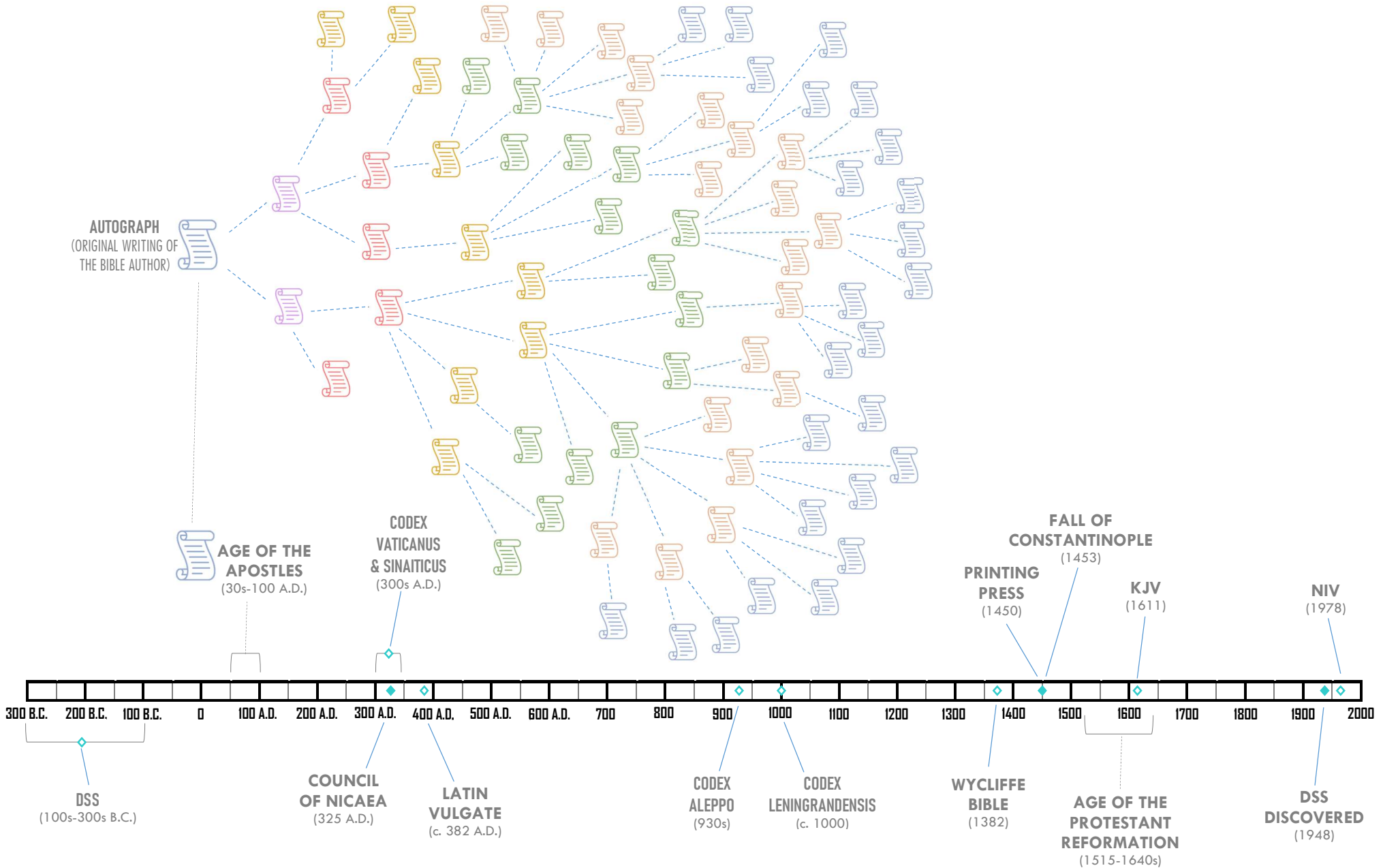
TPT
2017



TM
2002

PARAPHRASES NOT TRANSLATIONS

THE PROCESS OF TRANSMISSION ACROSS TIME



IV AN OVERVIEW OF THE PROCESS

We are now ready to begin the process of actually reading and studying the Bible! Exciting! The process what we will take is going to be broken down into three steps with specific strategies and processes under each of them. Consider:

1. OBSERVATION

- What does the text say?
- Who, What, When, Where, Why, How?
- To observe something we have to engage our minds. We have to think. We have to slow down. We have to reflect. We have to have our eyes open. This involves inspection. We can read without understanding. We can read without even observing. Observing requires time and use.

2. INTERPRETATION

- What does the text mean?
- After identifying what the author said we then try and understand that observation interpretatively.
- Consider literary context
- Consider historical context
- Consider theological context

3. APPLICATION

- How does this text apply to my life?
- If we don't observe well, we can't interpret well, and if we can't interpret well, we can't apply well.