

*The New  
Church's Teaching Series  
Volume 2*

# Opening the Bible

Roger Ferlo

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rereading what really matters. A related aim, equally important, is to show how the various kinds of notes and scholarly apparatus usually included on the printed page can offer you an entry into a virtual community of readers and religious thinkers—the men and women who have shaped our biblical traditions through several millennia of faithful reading. In particular, this book will introduce Christian readers of the Bible to Jewish traditions of reading in community that would have been familiar to Jesus and Paul. They remain powerful among Jewish readers of the Bible today, and can provide us with a dynamic model for reading it in our own churches.

I offer no shortcuts for answering your deepest questions about what the Bible means. No book can or should. But it can help map the territory. The goal is not to give you ready answers; that would be to subvert this book's purpose, which is to foster conversation and debate, not to cut it off. Rather, the goal is to help you shape the questions. It is meant to nurture your practical competence in reading the Bible, to increase your interest in the Book as a book, to whet your appetite for continued reading, and to deepen your appreciation of the Bible's extraordinary delights. What you have in your hand is literally a handbook, or better, to use that wonderful old Latin word, a *vademecum*—a book that you can take with you as you begin to read the Bible again. Use it as a friendly companion on the Way.

## Chapter 2

# Preparing to Read

**B**egin by picking up a Bible. Don't open it yet. Just hold it in your hand and feel its heft, its weight. Think of it as a physical object. Whether produced shabbily or sumptuously, in paperback or bound in leather, modern Bibles are designed to be handled—paged through, manipulated, stroked, prized, purchased, awarded, sold, borrowed, dusted, smelled, venerated, dropped, shelved, marked with yellow highlighter by a college undergraduate, or thumped on a pulpit by an old-time preacher.

Unless your past associations with the Bible make you uneasy, or you are afraid someone will see you with a Bible in your hand and mistake you for a religious fanatic, what you are doing probably seems ordinary, unremarkable. But it isn't ordinary. In fact, the simple act of holding that book in your hand was once considered subversive and revolutionary. In some parts of the world it still is. The Bible is not always what it appears to be.

### Scroll and Codex: The Earliest Bibles

What you hold in your hand is a modern invention. As a physical object, your Bible would have puzzled its original writers. In Jesus' day, when most of the materials in the Hebrew Bible had already been written, collected, and

translated into both Aramaic and Greek, no one would have thought of a Bible as we do. Until at least the second century of the Common Era<sup>1</sup> what we call the Bible was not the single bound volume that we know, but several volumes. Isaiah or Jesus or Paul could never have held a single Bible in their hand. They probably would not have used such a word. They would more likely have used a Hebrew or Aramaic or Greek equivalent of the English word "writing," the way we now use the word "scripture" or "scriptures," words derived from the Latin word for writing. And the words they used for reading the Bible would be closer today to a combination of the English words we use to describe "hearing" and "reading aloud."

In Jesus' day, reading from the Hebrew Bible was usually a public event. It would have meant selecting from a score of separate papyrus scrolls kept together in a communal place. (These would have been known in Greek as *ta biblia*, "the little scrolls," whence the English word "Bible.") Once you had access to a scroll, you would have to hold it with two hands, turning one end of the scroll in one hand as you turned the opposite end with the other. This collection of *ta biblia* was the only kind of Bible Jesus and his contemporaries knew. Almost invariably, reading from one of the scrolls would have been a public act, the kind of thing described early in Luke's gospel, when Jesus reads from the Isaiah scroll in his hometown synagogue:

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

"The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,  
because he has anointed me  
to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent me to proclaim  
release to the captives  
and recovery of sight to the blind,  
to let the oppressed go free,  
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. Then he began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Luke 4:16-21)

What Jesus means here by the word "scripture" is in large measure the theme of this book's final chapter. For now, just notice that the gospel writer does not say explicitly that Jesus read the Isaiah scripture *aloud*. Of course, the episode makes no sense unless he did. Oral reading is simply taken for granted. Long before New Testament times, and well into the Middle Ages, the act of reading aloud is almost invariably implied in the verb "to read." Reading aloud was a common ancient practice, even when reading in solitude or privacy. That ancient custom lies behind our contemporary reading of Scripture, especially in worship.

Within a few generations of Jesus' reading Scripture in synagogue, the technology of the book had begun to change. Christians began to collect stories like Luke's, along with Jesus' sayings and the letters of Paul, in separate anthologies. For reasons that scholars are still debating, they put aside the ancient practice of writing on scrolls and adopted an alternative and relatively rarer method of book-binding, called the *codex*.

A codex (plural, "codices") in some ways closely resembled the Bible you hold in your hand. A scribe would collect the Greek manuscripts of the emerging New Testament

writings (and eventually, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible as well), and copy them onto large, folio-sized leaves made of either papyrus, an early form of paper, or specially-cured animal skins called *vellum*, or parchment. These leaves would then be folded and bound together in large folio volumes. Perhaps the early church turned to the codex to distinguish its Bible, consisting now of an Old and New Testament, from the Bibles used by Jews. Perhaps it was meant to facilitate their work as missionaries, since much of what the Christians preached in the Gentile world relied on specific passages from sacred Jewish writings, and it was useful to have copies in Greek at hand. Even rabbinical Judaism, emerging in Palestine, Syria, Egypt, Babylon (present-day Iran and Iraq), and elsewhere after the destruction of the Jerusalem temple in 70 CE, eventually adopted the codex format for its extensive commentaries on the Hebrew Bible, which came to be known collectively as the Talmud. But Jews never relinquished the scroll as the medium for reading the Bible in synagogue worship.

Thus from the start, the codex was the characteristic format for the new Christian writings. Over the course of the centuries only a very few of the early Greek codices have survived intact, although there are scores of manuscript fragments. By the fifth century, the Greek Bible began to be displaced among western Christians by the great Latin translation of St. Jerome, known as the Vulgate. Jerome's Latin Bible became the official Bible of the western church. Often sumptuously produced, codices of the Vulgate multiplied throughout western Europe, and would enter the collections of congregations, basilicas, cathedrals, monasteries, the royal courts, and the emerging universities. But important as they were, these great codices were all but invisible to ordinary people, most of whom were illiterate.

Both scrolls and codices were expensive to make, and therefore rare. Reading them was a major enterprise, demanding different kinds of skills and different kinds of expectations from those we bring to the books we so easily take down from our shelves. Until Renaissance and Reformation times, the large, expensive manuscript codex was the only form the Christian Bible took in the west. Although there were many small and exquisite prayer books and Books of Hours created for the private devotions of the very rich in the Middle Ages, as well as great choir scores and liturgical books, the Bible was unique. Everything about it—its size, its cost, its rarity, its Latinity, its difficulty, its very sacredness—made the Bible for most of its history in the western world a book set apart.

#### ~ The Portable Book

The invention of the printing press did not immediately change all this. Even when Gutenberg produced the first printed Bible, using the newly invented process of movable type, the book was still a massive and forbidding thing. Printed in two magnificent folio volumes in late 1455 or early 1456, Gutenberg's Latin Bible outwardly looked much the same as a codex. Like most of the first printed Bibles, it was designed to resemble the large manuscript volumes that were available only in the great European churches, monasteries, and institutions of learning, or in the private collections of the wealthy. The first printers even designated specific places to be left blank on the page, so that artists could paint them in, making the finished product look more like an illuminated manuscript. Even the typeface was designed to resemble the thick curves and elaborate serifs of Gothic script (known as black-letter type). The book was a gorgeous, precious object, expensive, large, and scarce.

In the 1490s, the great Venetian printer Aldus Manutius invented what he called an *enchiridion*, from the Greek words for “in the hand”—in short, a portable book. The effect of this innovation was breathtaking. These elegant books, printed in the clean cursive typeface known as italic, made readily available for the first time in centuries the great classics of Greek and Roman culture. Before presses like the Aldine were founded, these works could be consulted only in the awkward scrolls of antiquity (very few of which survived) and the large bound codices of the Middle Ages. Free of elaborate commentary, printed in a clear new typeface, books from the Aldine Press remain both beautiful objects in their own right and models of books made for intensive private use. Johannes Gutenberg may have invented the printing press, but it was Aldus Manutius who paved the way for the convenience and accessibility of the book as we know it.

Aldus did not publish a Bible in this attractive new format; perhaps he considered Bibles too holy to handle so casually. The large Bibles he did publish, though, are masterpieces of humanist scholarship and the bookmaking craft, and they played a powerful role in facilitating the new Bible translations—first from the Latin, and then from the Hebrew and Greek—that were about to turn Europe upside down. But the Aldine Bibles themselves were still reserved for the learned and the privileged. The portable format might be suitable for publishing the newly rediscovered and newly edited texts of classical Greece and Rome, but Bibles were a weightier matter. Renaissance humanists like Aldus Manutius gave the portable book its size and shape, but it took the great Protestant reformers to give it its own theology.

Aldus’s conservatism was short-lived. Within a decade or two, with Luther and other Protestant reformers insist-

ing that the Bible be made accessible to every believer, the Bible had been translated into German, French, English, and other European languages, and would soon be published in a portable format for mass consumption. This once-privileged book could now become the personal possession of ordinary people, many of whom were becoming literate enough to read it. By the end of the sixteenth century, to publish a Bible or to buy it you no longer needed the privilege of great wealth or the sanction of a great institution like the church or the crown. For better or worse, the Bible was now an openly available commodity in the marketplace of ideas.

It did not become so without controversy and bloodshed. When the Bishop of London, traveling through Antwerp, bought up every copy he could find of William Tyndale’s bold new translation of the New Testament, he thought he could put an end to such seditious behavior by sending the copies back to London to be burned publicly in Cheapside. What he didn’t know was that Tyndale himself had been made aware of the plan, and secretly cooperated: “for being about [preparing] a more correct edition, he found he would be better enabled to proceed, if the copies of the old were sold off; he therefore gave the merchant all he had, and Tunstall, paying for them, brought them over to England, and burned them.”<sup>2</sup> Tyndale’s entrepreneurial sleight of hand provides a rare moment of humor in what was for him deadly serious business. It did not take long for people to realize that if you could own your own book, if you could hold it in your hand, if you could read it in your own language, then you could also interpret it in your own way, no matter what the bishop or the pope or even the king might say. Reading a Bible on your own could run you a great risk. It could even bring you to the stake, as it brought Tyndale.

We are still living with the results of that tumultuous period in the history of the printed book. The fact that you can hold a printed Bible in your hand at all, and read it in English, and make your own decisions about how to interpret it results from the extraordinary cunning, courage, and self-sacrifice of sixteenth-century reformers like William Tyndale.

There is something puzzling about all this. For centuries before Tyndale's printed Bible made its first appearance, the Bible had been a rare and sacred object, made by holy hands, passed reverently from generation to generation, read and interpreted only in community. One would have thought that its mechanical reproduction in the age of print would have in some way diminished its power and sacredness. The printed book, marketed as a commodity, distanced by countless middlemen from the circumstances of its first creation, would seem much more impersonal than a codex or a manuscript. It would lack the aura attached to it by the time and care of the monk who prepared it, or the monastery that preserved it, or the cathedral school that maintained the traditions of reading it properly. It would no longer have a permanent place in a monastic or collegiate library among other rare and treasured manuscripts, passed from hand to hand by generations of scholars. It would no longer be interpreted by and for the specific community in which it was lodged. Wouldn't availability breed contempt?

In fact the opposite happened. The printed Bible became an object of immense cultural power. The shift from manuscript to printed book, at least in the early days of the Reformation, intensified rather than diminished its aura: "The printed word had a kind of absoluteness, integrity and finality... an intensity, a shaping power" that was a new experience in western culture.<sup>3</sup> It was a power all the more

intense for individual readers who began to interpret the Bible freely and for themselves, and viewed that freedom as their birthright.

Can its power still be felt today? I think it can. But first Episcopalians have to learn how to open the book again, and this is not as easy as it seems. Most of us own a Bible, but few know what to do with it. What keeps people ignorant of the Bible is not an unwillingness to tackle its complexities (in my experience as a teacher, people are willing to tackle all kinds of things), but rather one of two assumptions. Either they think that the Bible is an ancient and forbidding book accessible only to experts—to historians, philologists, theologians, archeologists, linguists, ministers, and priests—or they think that it is accessible only to true believers, offering a refuge for people (ministers and priests included) who mistrust the intellect and seek to keep new ideas at bay.

This book offers some alternative assumptions. Although any responsible reading of an ancient text needs the support of experts in a variety of disciplines, the tools exist for any competent reader to take advantage of the experts' discoveries and insights. There is no need to be intimidated. Furthermore, even though the Bible has a long history of being used as a weapon against people with whom we disagree or whom we fear or hate, it is larger than the use people make of it. So there is no need to be intimidated in this quarter, either.

What do you really need to open the Bible and to read it well? Not a lot, when you come right down to it. You start with a conviction that God speaks to us through the Bible, and a prayerful disposition to listen. And then you bring an open heart, an open mind, a willingness to learn and to make mistakes, a respect for other readers' views, a tolerance for differences of opinion, and a love of surprises.

And you'll need some decent tools. In the following chapters, I will take you on a guided tour of an annotated English-language Bible. Each feature of the printed Bible page has a history and a purpose: the running head, the numbering of chapter and verse, the varied typography, the translators' notes, the layout in columns, the commentary. All these are stops on the tour. We will also follow up several intriguing detours along the way, from the ancient Jewish methods of reading to the production history of a Shakespeare play. The annotated Bible I will cite most often is the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, also known as the NOAB, the "Oxford Annotated," or simply "the Oxford."<sup>4</sup> The NOAB is one of the most widely used study Bibles in this country. In the way it lays out the page, it is a direct descendant (although much changed) of both the Geneva Bible of 1560 and the English Bible that King James commissioned in 1604. Because it uses the *New Revised Standard Version* (the NRSV) as its copy text, the NOAB can trace its lineage back to William Tyndale's translations and commentaries of the 1520s and 1530s.

Perhaps because of its roots in the Tyndale, Geneva, and King James traditions, the NRSV is the translation most widely used in public worship in the Episcopal Church. My discussion will make more sense if you have the Oxford Annotated open before you, but most other modern annotated Bibles have similar features. Particularly useful ones are the latest editions of the *Harper/Collins Study Bible* (also based on the NRSV), the *New Jerusalem Bible*, the *Oxford Study Bible*, the *Catholic Study Bible*, and the *NIV Study Bible*, based on the *New International Version*. I have consulted all of them in preparing this book, and it can be used profitably with any of them.

Now open your Bible, to any page at random. Don't be daunted by what you see. In the next few chapters, you

will find that the page is less formidable than it looks. Learning to use the tools of the annotated page will equip you to engage in spirited conversation with other readers across the centuries, including the biblical writers themselves. In fact, we will see that the best models for reading the Bible as Scripture can be found in the Bible itself, in episodes like King Josiah's discovery of the scroll of the Law during the restoration of the Temple in 2 Kings 23 or the apostle Philip's encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch in Acts 8. By learning to recognize ourselves as participants in scenes of reading like these, we can help nurture larger and more hospitable communities of faith.



## Chapter 3

# Scanning the Page

Open your Bible to Jeremiah 15:15, and then to Mark 16:8. Notice I do not provide page numbers. If you compare two or three Bibles, you will notice that the page numbers vary considerably from one edition to another, creating the need for a standard reference system. References are therefore usually given by chapter and verse: chapter numbers are to the left of the colon or period, verse numbers to the right. But page numbers do appear, and can be helpful in finding your way from one book of the Bible to another. Tables of contents usually list the books of the Hebrew Bible and the New Testament separately, both alphabetically and in traditional order, and provide the relevant page numbers. The Oxford tables of contents are included in the material at the beginning of the volume, beginning at page xxiv. The Jeremiah page referred to in these discussions is p. 987 OT (that is, Old Testament); the page for Mark 16 is p. 74 NT (or New Testament). It is not unusual for study Bibles to number the Old Testament and New Testament pages separately, a practice new Bible readers may find confusing at first.

## ≈ The Running Head

Take a moment to look at the page itself, just as a page. When you begin scanning it from the top, the first feature you encounter is what printers and compositors call the “running head,” with the title of the book you are reading. When printing a book, the running head allows compositors to keep track of the various pages in the process of collation and binding. A feature of the printed page that most readers take for granted, it points up one of the primary ways the technology of the printed book changed the way the Bible could be read. As we saw in chapter one, in ancient times the “book” of Jeremiah would actually have been written on a separate papyrus or vellum scroll, accessible on a shelf with other similar scrolls containing other sacred texts. When Christians adopted the codex as the form for their Bibles, it became necessary to remind readers which of the various books they were reading.

Most readers of printed books are so accustomed to the convenience of the present system that it is virtually invisible. Editorial conventions like running heads make it easy for contemporary readers to leaf back and forth from book to book, comparing and contrasting passages. Our ancient counterparts did not have this advantage, relying instead on their extraordinary skills in recalling the content of other writings still on the shelf as they worked with the scroll in their hands.

### *How did the books get their titles?*

Although few things in life seem more familiar, titles such as Genesis, Exodus, Mark, and John are by and large a late innovation. Most books of the Bible were originally called something else, or had no titles at all. Moreover, the titles of books in our printed editions can still vary among Anglicans, Protestants, Orthodox, Roman Catholics, and

Jews. For example, Christian Bibles like the Oxford refer to the second book of the Old Testament (itself a Christian term) as the book of Exodus, a title used in the fourth-century BCE Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible called the Septuagint. Hebrew Bibles, on the other hand, kept to the older practice of calling each of the first five books by the first words of its opening sentence—in the case of Exodus, *We'elleh semot*, "And these are the names." Since the Hebrew Bible lived as much in the oral memory of the reader as on the page, remembering the first words allowed the reader to connect the recitation of the book of Exodus with the recitation of the book that had come immediately before—*Bereshith*, "In the beginning," which is the Hebrew title of the book of Genesis.

A similar phenomenon occurs with the fourth book of the Bible. Most English translations of the Hebrew Bible, Christian or Jewish, follow the Septuagint in giving it the title *Arithmoi*, or Numbers, since so much of the early part of the book is devoted to reports of various censuses. But in the Hebrew Bible the title is once again taken from the first word of the book, *Bemidbar*, "In the wilderness." Similarly, the book of Leviticus, whose name in the Greek Bible designates the Levitical code that makes up much of the book's subject matter, is in Hebrew *Wayyiqra*, "And he summoned." Deuteronomy, which is Greek for "the second Law," is called in Hebrew *Debarim*, "These are the words." Most English translations of the Hebrew Bible, whether Christian or Jewish, now follow the Greek model for naming these books, perhaps because the first English Bibles did so in the sixteenth century.

In the New Testament, the gospels came by their names quite late; the texts first appeared anonymously. The names of the four evangelists were assigned by later traditions, and have little or no historical basis. Luke's gospel is

unusual in that it is the only one to appear in two separate volumes, the second called the Acts of the Apostles. In the traditional order of the New Testament books, Acts is separated from Luke by the gospel of John. Although we do not know who wrote the gospels according to Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, we now think we know something about the different communities for which they were written and which great ancient metropolitan centers might have been associated with them—Mark with Alexandria, for example, and Matthew with Antioch in present-day Turkey. I will refer to the gospel writers using the traditional names, but it is important to bear in mind that these names have more to do with traditions of reading than with the gospels' actual authorship.

The case with Paul's writings is almost the opposite. From the beginning Paul's name was attached to the several letters attributed to him, but recent scholars generally agree that not all the letters bearing his name are actually his. Most think that there are seven authentic letters of Paul: 1 Thessalonians, Galatians, 1 Corinthians, 2 Corinthians, Romans, Philippians, and Philemon. The authorship of Colossians and Ephesians is more uncertain, but most scholars are convinced that 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and 2 Thessalonians are products of a Pauline "school"—a group of Paul's followers most likely writing in the generation following his death.

Writing a letter using a famous name seems odd and dishonest to us, who are so used to grappling with issues of copyright, plagiarism, and intellectual property. But the practice was quite common in the ancient world, and was considered a way of honoring the memory of a movement's founder. Most scholars think that letters attributed to Peter, Jude, James, and John follow the same pattern. No name is given to the writer of the letter to the Hebrews, however.

A remarkable document, written by a person deeply versed in Jewish liturgical practice, this letter stands by itself in the collection. And although the Revelation to John is often ascribed to the writer of John's gospel, and to John the disciple who plays such a central role in it, most scholars doubt this attribution on grounds of style.

#### *How did the books get their final shape?*

The content and shape of the biblical books as we now know them, particularly the books of the Hebrew Bible, took centuries to develop and are often the product of a long series of editorial decisions made by various communities of teachers and readers over several generations. Scholars tell us that the "book" of Jeremiah is in fact a compendium of several different kinds of writing, not all of which are actually "by" the author Jeremiah in the way that we are accustomed to understand authorship. As happened later in the New Testament period, the name of a great prophet like Jeremiah or Isaiah could be attached not only to their own sayings and writings, but also to writings composed generations later. Sometimes these writings were produced by the prophet's direct followers, who reinterpreted and reapplied the prophetic words to their own times; sometimes they are the product of a believing community that, inspired by the earlier writings, sought to put its own religious practices under the patronage of the prophet it revered.

Finally, the very order of the books varies with the different traditions. By the second century before the Common Era, the writings of the Hebrew Bible had more or less coalesced into three separate collections. There was the *Torah*, ("The Teaching" or "The Law" or "The Way"), consisting of the first five books of the Bible. Tradition attributed their authorship to Moses himself, even though the

fifth book, Deuteronomy, describes his death. Anomalies like this are what first prompted eighteenth- and nineteenth-century scholars to unravel and describe the various literary traditions, sometimes widely separated in time and purpose, that eventually were woven together in the Torah that has come down to us. As we will see in a later chapter, this "higher criticism" of the Bible has had a tremendous impact on the way people learn to read Scripture.

The second collection of sacred writings, in Hebrew called *Nebi'im* ("The Prophets"), includes not only the writings of the prophets contained in books like Jeremiah and Isaiah, but also what we would call the historical books like 1 and 2 Kings. And finally there are the *Ketubim* ("The Writings"), including the Psalms and Wisdom literature, some of which were composed under the influence of Persian and Greek religious thinking as recently as a few centuries before the birth of Christ. Jewish readers often refer to Torah, *Nebi'im*, and *Ketubim* together, using the acronym *Tanakh*, compounded from the initial consonant in each word.

The Christians, however, reshaped the order of Jewish scriptures in response to what they saw as the fulfillment of prophecy in the events surrounding Christ's death and resurrection. The Christian Bible begins as the Hebrew Bible does, with the book of Genesis, but shuffles the order of books in such a way that the last book of what Christians call the Old Testament, the book of Malachi, can be read as a kind of apocalyptic prelude to the gospel of Matthew, which in most Christian Bibles immediately follows.

In some Bibles you will notice a section of writings placed between the Old Testament and the New Testament, or sometimes at the end of the entire volume. These writings are referred to as the *Apocrypha* (from the Greek—"things hidden"). The Apocrypha includes writings that

appeared in the Greek and Latin versions but were never part of the traditional Hebrew text that formed the basis of the first Protestant translations. The Episcopal Church still uses some of these writings in its Sunday worship and daily office, without granting them the same inspired status as the officially recognized or "canonical" writings.

#### *What was left out?*

Printed Bibles, even those as voluminous as the Oxford Annotated, seldom give the reader a hint that both Jews and Christians once considered other writings equal in stature to the books that were eventually included in their Bibles. In recent years, there has been a tremendous amount of attention paid to the library of ancient Christian and gnostic documents discovered in 1945 in the Egyptian desert, near a little settlement called Nag Hammadi. "Gnostic" is derived from the set of Greek words denoting knowledge, here particularly secret knowledge; a gnostic is "one who knows." Although written mainly in the ancient Ethiopian language called Coptic, and able to be dated to two or three centuries after New Testament times, some of these documents are actually translations of early Greek material that may reflect other directions the Christian movement was taking in its earliest years. At least one of these documents, known as the gospel of Thomas, includes material that presents parallels to materials found in what are called the four canonical gospels (from the Greek *kanon*, "rule" or "standard").

These are very exciting materials to read, and very puzzling. Work on the Nag Hammadi documents has reshaped many people's thinking about the nature of the Bible itself. When scanning the running heads and considering the variety of biblical books, it is well to remember that what got into the Bible and what did not was often

the result of highly contested institutional decisions. The Christian Bible in its final form has rightly been called "the church's book." In the light of the tremendous intellectual, political, cultural, and religious ferment that these new documents reflect, we might also say that the Bible you hold in your hands is the book put together by the winners.

I usually employ the phrase "Hebrew Bible" or "Hebrew scriptures" to refer to the body of writings in Hebrew and Aramaic that comprise the *Tanakh*, the Bible used by Jews throughout the world. I do this not only because the Hebrew Bible has its own literary and theological integrity, but also because it is a more convenient way to refer to the body of writing that Jesus, Paul, and their immediate followers would themselves have called Scripture.

#### *Thematic headings*

One final note before we leave the top of the page. Many printed Bibles in English also provide some sort of thematic heading at the top of the page to guide the reader through complex material. Like chapter and verse numbering, these headings are not original to the texts. In modern Bibles like the Oxford Annotated, the headnotes provide a terse synopsis of the content to be found on the page: *Jeremiah complains again and is reassured; the empty tomb*. Historically, printed Bibles have also used these headnotes, along with chapter and section headings, to help the reader navigate the page not only textually but theologically. In study Bibles like the Oxford, they are offered, like the running head, only to facilitate efficient navigation of the page. Use them accordingly.

#### ~ Citing Chapter and Verse

Almost from the first, printed Bibles adopted a system of numbering chapters that had been used in manuscript

Bibles since the time of Stephen Langton, Archbishop of Canterbury in the fourteenth century. We are so used to thinking of the various books of the Bible as divided into chapters that it is difficult to imagine having them any other way, but chapter divisions are relatively late in the history of the Bible, and were not part of the original Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek texts. As we will see, the earliest Greek manuscripts do not even separate words on the page, much less include any larger divisions.

The numbering of separate verses came even later than the division into chapters. A Rabbi Nathan began the practice in the Middle Ages, and it was further extended by the humanist scholar Robert Estienne in 1551. Verse numbers first appeared in a printed English Bible six years later, in the New Testament published by English Protestant exiles in Geneva during the reign of the Roman Catholic Queen Mary. Chapter and verse divisions have been with us ever since.

They have proved a mixed blessing. Without question, they are indispensable for negotiating complex and voluminous biblical material. But they can also obscure the meaning of a text rather than clarify it. Sometimes chapter divisions break up narratives that should be read continuously (see, for example, the arbitrary placement of the chapter ending in 2 Samuel 11). Sometimes they give the impression of a continuous narrative when there is none; this happens quite frequently in the gospels, when Jesus' sayings are quoted at length with only tenuous connection to the story being told (see, for example, Matthew 25). The lectionary of the Episcopal Church (like the Roman Catholic and the Lutheran) often ignores chapter divisions in the readings selected for a given day from the Old and New Testaments. One should not make too much of chapter

divisions in trying to interpret a particular text. They are editorial additions, nothing more.

#### *Midrash and allegory*

In the ancient world, there was no such thing as giving the precise location of a particular passage by reference to chapter and verse numbers. Nonetheless, both Jewish and Christian commentators on the Bible in the first centuries of the Common Era developed highly sophisticated methods of strategic quotation and commentary. Even within the Hebrew Bible itself, writers of later books like Chronicles in effect reimaged and revised the earlier historical texts found in the books of Samuel and Kings. In intertestamental times (between 250 BCE and 200 CE), multiple methods of reading the Bible flourished. By the time of Jesus and Paul, the Hebrew of the Bible had been translated into the more widely spoken languages of Greek and Aramaic. The Aramaic translation known as the *Targum* was more a paraphrase than a translation, incorporating its own theological point of view into its version of the text. When Jesus read in the synagogue, it is possible that he used the Targum as the starting place for his dramatic reinterpretation of Scripture.

The Greek translation attracted readers versed in Platonic methods of allegorical reading, where the literal sense of the sacred text was merely a mask for its real, hidden meaning, to be uncovered by the reader with special training and insight. These methods were particularly widespread in Greek-speaking Jewish communities like that in Alexandria, where the philosopher Philo produced powerfully influential allegorical readings of Genesis and other Old Testament texts. Philo wrote at about the same time that Paul was composing his letters, which often feature similar allegorical strategies. Paul actually uses the word

"allegory" in Galatians 4, where he discusses the stories in Genesis about Sarah and Hagar, whom he sees as representing the old covenant (Hagar) and the new (Sarah).

Even more radical readings of Scripture were produced by apocalyptic Jewish sects like those gathered at Qumran, where the Dead Sea scrolls were produced. Using a method known as *peshet*, the Qumran writers quoted key texts in Scripture and then interpreted them as a kind of code for events happening in their own day, or events about to happen. New Testament scholars recognize this strategy in the way the gospel writers weave earlier biblical texts into their own narratives. Although the differences are great, the method is analogous to what we experience in our own day in the predictions of geopolitical disasters that writers like Hal Lindsay claim to discover in the book of Revelation.

After the destruction of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Romans during the first Jewish revolt in 70 CE, the Pharisees and their successors in the later rabbinical movement embraced an immensely sophisticated method of reading called *midrash*. It is a word hard to translate, but is closely related to English words like "research" and "searching." Since the texts of the Bible were now complete, and all portions of it were considered equally holy, midrashists could focus on the biblical verse as a basic unit. Once the protocols of midrashic reading were agreed upon (and they could be elaborate), it was safe to assume that any verse of the Bible could illuminate any other verse, no matter what the context.

This assumption unleashed remarkable religious energies, as the act of reading Scripture became an exercise in dialogue. The more rabbis there were applying midrashic methods to a biblical verse, the more room there was for disagreement about what other verses could be used to interpret it. But as all verses of Scripture were equally holy

and (at least in potential) equally pertinent, there was no need to decide among the rival readings. More often than not, all rival interpretations were incorporated into the midrashic record, and the meaning of the Bible verse at hand would be found in the interplay among them. The act of reading Scripture was less an effort to defend a single, unitary meaning than it was a participation in a lively community of readers, continuing across generations.

A central conviction of the midrashic sensibility is that God's voice, hidden in the sacred text, can be heard in the midst of the human voices reading the texts. As long as all readers agreed to the protocols of midrashic reading, no one voice had absolute or automatic priority over another. Many of these voices are recorded in the rich collections of writings known traditionally as the "oral law" (supplementing and interpreting the "written law" of the Torah), and collected over several centuries in the Talmud and other writings. They can also be heard in the extraordinary collection of medieval Jewish mystical writings known collectively as the *Kabbalah*. The continuing study of the oral law over the centuries has nourished a tradition of sacred reading in contemporary Judaism that allows the reader of Scripture to enter into dialogue with these ancient voices as they come to terms with the sacred text. Especially in Conservative and Reform Judaism, this has meant that conversation about the meaning of Torah is always open and expanding. The function of this Oral Law is "to soften the rigidity of the letter without...violating its sacredness (whence not a jot or a tittle will be allowed to pass away)."<sup>1</sup> The midrashist's open-ended commitment to the necessity of dialogue provides a compelling model for contemporary readers of the Bible, Jewish and Christian alike.

Although Paul's New Testament letters predate these portions of the Talmud by several generations, we can still

discern a strong midrashic sensibility at work in the way he quotes and interprets the Bible. Paul's letters are full of quotations from the Septuagint. As they are seldom verbatim, we can assume that for the most part he quotes from memory. It is difficult for late twentieth-century readers to imagine knowing so much of the Bible "by heart," but our dependence upon the written and printed word as an aid to memory was foreign to ancient sensibilities. The sound and rhythm of the sacred writings were part of the warp and woof of memory for anyone trained as a Pharisee, as Paul himself was trained. Paul's love for the sound of Scripture is audible on every page.

But in key passages of his letters, Paul's midrashic love for the sound and letter of the holy words gives way to an allegorical impulse that seeks the spirit "beneath" or "behind" the text. "Our competence is from God," he wrote to his congregation in Corinth, "who has made us competent to be ministers of a new covenant, not of letter but of spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life" (2 Corinthians 3:5-6).

Now if the ministry of death, chiseled in letters on stone tablets, came in glory so that the people of Israel could not gaze at Moses' face because of the glory of his face, a glory now set aside, how much more will the ministry of the Spirit come in glory? . . . Since, then, we have such a hope, we act with great boldness, not like Moses, who put a veil over his face to keep the people of Israel from gazing at the end of the glory that was being set aside. But their minds were hardened. Indeed, to this very day, when they hear the reading of the old covenant, that same veil is still there, since only in Christ is it set aside. Indeed, to this very day whenever Moses is read, a veil

lies over their minds; but when one turns to the Lord, the veil is removed. (2 Corinthians 3:7-8, 12-16)

This is both a luminous reading and an outrageous misreading of Exodus 24, where Moses descends with the stone tablets of the Law from Mount Sinai and wearing a veil over his face to protect the people of Israel from being blinded by the glory of God. Here Paul is working in allegory. Instead of quoting the Exodus passage verbatim and then working through it point by point to expand its meaning from within, he neglects the specifics of language and context in order to reveal the real meaning he sees below the surface of the story. For Paul, convinced that the old covenant has given way to the new, what Moses hides with the veil is not a glory too radiant to bear, but a glory that is fading.

In subordinating the "letter" of the Torah, "chiseled in letters on stone tablets" to the new Torah, written on "tablets of human hearts" (2 Corinthians 3:3), Paul uses what look like midrashic methods of quotation to undermine the main purpose of midrash, which is to see in the very letter of Scripture a universe of meaning. Rather than seeing *into* the text, Paul wants his congregation to see *through* it, as all who read the scriptures "in Christ" can see through the veil that Moses put on his face to hide his fading glory—that is, the fading glory of the text that Moses wrote.<sup>2</sup>

This tension between midrash and allegory, between seeing into and seeing through, is a prominent feature in the history of reading the Bible. It is still with us today. For Christian readers after Paul, Hebrew scriptures became the Old Testament. The sacred account of God's saving actions in Israel could be fully understood—in fact, completed—only by their fulfillment in the New Testament

writings about Jesus. By the end of the second century, this new approach to the Hebrew Bible had caused an all but irreparable rift between Jew and Christian in their reading of the sacred texts they shared. In many ways, the tension between these two ways of reading still separates not only Christians from Jews, but many Christians from each other.

### ≈ Some Typographical Conventions

#### *Why print the page in columns?*

Go back now to the printed Bible page. What does it feel like? That seems an odd question. But books, after all, are tactile objects, and readers of books often have strong tactile memories of them. All books have a heft and feel of their own. Massive books with thin pages printed in columns have the heft and feel of Bibles even if they are not, like complete editions of Shakespeare plays. Pages in Bibles without columns, like the first unannotated edition of the New Testament in the *New English Bible*, look more like the pages of contemporary novels than what we are accustomed to think of as Bibles.<sup>3</sup>

How a page looks and feels determines how we read it. Different printed formats encourage different kinds of reading. Contemporary readers expect that Bibles will be produced on thin leaves of paper and the pages printed in columns, but that is not necessarily the case. Reading a Bible page that looks like a page of a novel will focus our attention on the plot; we will “read for the story.” This can be a tremendous revelation to people for whom the Bible has always been a forbidding code of rules. To see the story of Jesus looking like a real story with a beginning, a middle, and an end, to read it without verse numbers or headings or notes, without having to squint at closely packed col-

umns—all this can free people to read the Bible as if for the first time.

But sometimes this ease of reading can be deceptive. Reading a novel for the story encourages you to move quickly from one page to another, to see what happens next, even though most novels of any complexity at all often force you to backtrack, to reconsider, to recognize a symbol or a leitmotif and reassess what you have read so far. Yet the Bible is not written like novel, even a complex one. The novel is a modern form, impossible to imagine without the advent of printing and publishing for profit, while the Bible is an ancient book, large portions of which began as oral tradition, lodged in memory and retold from generation to generation. It was written not by one hand, but by many; not in one lifetime, but over many. It was written in ancient languages—Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek—many of whose nuances have long been lost to us. It is not a single story, nor even a collection of stories. It is a collection of all kinds of ancient materials—law codes, songs, proverbs, sagas, genealogies, histories, oracles, lyric poems, letters, prophecies, allegories, apocalypses—all of which demand their own distinctive methods of reading.

The Bible includes some remarkable stories, some of which stand on their own (like the stories of Jonah and Ruth), and some of which, although polished and complete in their own right (like the story of Joseph and his brothers that now ends the book of Genesis), also contribute to a larger story whose coherence and meaning only become clear after we can see the whole. And even that reflection is shaped by the presuppositions of the community for whom the story matters. For the religious reader, the stories in the Bible are true in the way that a story in a novel can never be true. For some readers, this conviction makes any comparison of the Bible to any other kind of writing all but



blasphemous. Even for those religious readers (among whom many Episcopalians count themselves) who recognize that many of the stories are "history-like" rather than historical, the "truth" of these stories asserts itself in a manner very different from a novel like Tolstoy's *War and Peace*.

At this point we seem to have come a long way from the simple question of page layout. But as often in the religious life, small matters reveal large ones. The traditional format of the Bible, columns and all, is a small but eloquent measure of the tremendous challenge that all the different forms of Scripture have always posed to ordinary readers. Most of us need these tools. All the Bible's apparatus invites you to slow your reading down, and allows you to treat the page spatially, comparing and contrasting complementary texts, meditating on the way that biblical texts echo and refer to one another. You can more easily maneuver across the large amount of material laid out before you on a double page, marked with all kinds of apparatus to guide the reading as it proceeds. Perhaps you've had a similar experience in reading an annotated novel in a student edition, or in reading the text of a Shakespeare play in a "complete" edition, which is often printed in columns and accompanied by voluminous notes, thus giving it the same classic air of authority as a printed Bible. It is no accident that scholarly editions of classic English authors have adapted the kind of page format and annotations that had once been features exclusive to Bibles and other sacred writings like the Talmud.

Even more important, the annotations on the printed page allow you to enter into conversation with the community of readers (some believers, some not) who have preserved and shaped these texts, and to do so in a way that frees you to add your own voice to the chorus. To be sure,

the decision to print a long text like the Bible in column formatting was in part a matter of convenience and cost-cutting. It allowed printers to include an immense amount of material in manageable form, especially if the book was to be held easily in the hand. Yet this double column format is also a potent reminder of the close connection of printed Bibles to their earlier manuscript versions. The great medieval codices of Scripture, as well as the parchment scrolls that preceded them, were almost always produced in columns, oftentimes sumptuously illuminated by hand. These were volumes meant for slow reading, usually reading aloud in community. They were in fact community property, rare and precious, and like the great Jewish commentaries to which they are related, their pages reflect century after century of sustained meditation on the sacred text. When you open to a Bible page printed in columns and arrayed with commentary, you are being invited to take part in an ancient enterprise of community reading.

#### *The use of italics*

Bible publishers have always used different typefaces to convey features of the Hebrew or Greek text that might otherwise be obscured in translation. We have already become acquainted with the typefaces used by Gutenberg and Aldus in the first printed books. Both Gutenberg's black-letter type and Aldus's italics were meant to imitate the effect of a handwritten page. But a whole page of italic typeface, even one as clean and elegant as Aldus designed, tends to weary the eye. Eventually italic began to be used only sparingly, usually to emphasize particular words or set off annotations and commentary.

Even so, the occurrence of italic type was once much more frequent than it is in today's Bibles. Readers of some editions of the King James translation of 1611 are some-

times confused by what seems to be the random use of italics. For instance, look at Jeremiah 15:18: "Why is my pain perpetual, and my wound incurable, *which* refuseth to be healed? wilt thou be altogether unto me as a liar, *and* as waters *that* fail?" Anyone attempting to read the italicized words with emphasis will come up with nonsense. The italics have another purpose here. Adopting a convention first used by the English Protestant exiles who created the Geneva Bible a generation before, the English translators commissioned by King James in the early 1600s used italics to warn the reader that these words had no equivalent in the Hebrew or Greek text. The translators added them in order to make the English read more smoothly and idiomatically.

The practice was confusing, and later translators eventually dropped it, finding other ways to signal gaps between the original text and its translated equivalents. But its use illustrates the precautions one must take in reading any Bible translation. The way the Geneva and King James translators used italic type reflected the ancient conviction that each word of the original Hebrew or Greek text was of itself sacred and inviolable. Therefore the translator's addition to the text must be marked as such, lest anyone accord to these extra words the same prestige as the sacred words themselves deserve. It was a practice both pious and conservative, but it also signaled something new: these meticulous marks of the translator's interventions underscored the newfound respect that the English Protestant reformers had for the integrity of ancient texts, a respect they inherited from the great Renaissance humanists of the fifteenth century. Their decision to use italic type in this way was in fact a thoroughly modern breakthrough, opening the way for capable and curious readers to return

to the original texts themselves as they sought to understand God's word.

In other words, the text is sacred, but no translation is. No translator is fully adequate to the task. All readers in one way or another participate in the practice of translation. Even those who are ignorant of Hebrew and Greek (that is, the vast majority) can compare one translation to another, thereby getting a "feel" for the challenges posed by the original. All translations, however "literal," only approximate the meaning of the Hebrew and Greek texts that they try to render. The King James translators knew this. Their respect for the letter of the original text—and their modesty about their ability to find its exact equivalent in English—continues to be reflected in the translations succeeding theirs, including the *New Revised Standard* text of 1989 that we are using here.

#### *The name of the LORD*

A second typographical convention adopted by the early English translators, and found in almost every modern English translation since, including the NRSV, also puzzles many first-time readers of the Bible. It is the use of uppercase letters for the word "Lord," as in this passage from Jeremiah 15:15: "O LORD, you know; remember me and visit me, and bring down retribution for me on my persecutors." In the Hebrew Scriptures God is called by many names: *El*, *El Shaddai*, *Adonai*, *Elohim*, *Yahweh*. Of all the names for God, it is this last one—*Yahweh*, or more precisely, the Hebrew equivalent of the letters YHWH—that is the most sacred in the tradition. Every time the word YHWH appears in the original Hebrew, the NRSV translators, using a centuries-old typographical convention, signal the occurrence with the word LORD, using all uppercase letters. (A variant of this practice occurs when the Hebrew

text uses the phrase "Lord YHWH," which the NRSV renders "Lord GOD.")

It is a typographical procedure fraught with theological implications. In the story of the Exodus, it is the name YHWH that the voice from the burning bush reveals to Moses:

But Moses said to God, "If I come to the Israelites and say to them, 'The God of your ancestors has sent me to you,' and they ask me, 'What is his name?' what shall I say to them?" God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM." He said further, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" God also said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the Israelites, 'The LORD, the God of your ancestors, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.'" (Exodus 3:13-15)

*Ehyeh asher ehyeh*: no Bible translator has ever been satisfied with an English rendering of this mysterious Hebrew phrase. The NRSV translators provide two alternatives to the one they adopted: "I AM WHAT I AM," or "I WILL BE WHAT I WILL BE"; they then note that the passage here connects the name YHWH with God's self-revelation, associating it with the Hebrew verb *ehyeh*, "to be."

In the traditional Jewish attitude toward the Bible page, all words are sacred. But none is more sacred than the name YHWH. It is a name not even to be pronounced. When it appears in the portion of the Torah to be read aloud during synagogue worship, the cantor or lector substitutes the word *Adonai* (usually translated as "the Lord" in lower-case letters). In manuscript and printed copies of the Torah, the vowel markings for *Adonai* accompany the consonants YHWH, to remind the reader that *Adonai* is to be read in place of the divine name. (A late medieval misunderstand-

ing of this convention created the unbiblical coinage *Jehovah* by combining the consonants of the divine name with the vowels of *Adonai*, and then transliterating accordingly.) Ancient Greek translations of the Hebrew had substituted the word *Kyrios*, "Lord"; the Latin version had used the word *Dominus*. By setting off the word for YHWH in uppercase letters, the English translators pay tribute to this ancient tradition, and continue it. Of all the contemporary English translations, only the Jerusalem Bible broke with the custom, using the word *Yahweh* instead of "The LORD." It was a decision that remains controversial. In the *Book of Common Prayer*, the word *Yahweh* also occurs on occasion, most notably in the Song of Moses (Canticle 8), appointed to be read during the Easter Vigil and suggested as well for daily Morning Prayer. Most observant Jews would find this usage deeply shocking.

#### *J, E, P and D*

The conventions I have just described also shed light on the development of the Hebrew texts themselves. All texts have a history, and the more ancient a text, the more complex that history becomes. In the late nineteenth century, a brilliant German scholar named Julius Wellhausen argued in a groundbreaking book that the names used for God in the Hebrew Bible, particularly the names *Yahweh* and *Elohim*, provide clues to distinctive and separate strands of historical tradition embedded in the documents themselves. For example, those parts of Genesis where the name *Yahweh* is used have a particular stylistic and theological coherence that is distinct from the texts that use the name *Elohim*. The latter in fact is a plural in Hebrew, meaning something like "the gods," although the E tradition (as it is called) gives the word a singular meaning, usually translated simply as "God." Stories using the name *Yahweh* (called the J tradi-

tion, from the German spelling *Jahweh*), were probably assembled and edited in the form we now have by a poet writing in the court of David and Solomon (about the year 1000 BCE). A good example of this poet's style of writing is the story of Adam and Eve in the second and third chapters of Genesis. The Elohist, or E, tradition, on the other hand, is attributed to the religious communities of the Northern Kingdom, which split off from the Jerusalem court after the death of Solomon. Sometimes it is hard to untangle these two separate traditions in the texts as they have come down to us, as they combined and intermingled over the centuries.

In addition, scholars have postulated two other strands of tradition in the development of the texts as we know them—the Priestly (P) and the Deuteronomic (D). The first is associated with the period of the exile in Babylon after the fall of Jerusalem in the sixth century BCE; not surprisingly, these writings are often preoccupied with ritual and cultic matters, including much of the material in the books of Leviticus and Numbers. Perhaps the most moving and eloquent example of the Priestly style is the creation story of the first chapter of Genesis, a highly stylized and radically monotheistic reimagining of the ancient Babylonian creation myths that would have been known to the Priestly writers during the Exile. Lastly, the Deuteronomic tradition is exemplified in the book of Deuteronomy itself, as well as in the history of the Northern and Southern Kingdoms of Israel and Judah as recounted in the books of Samuel and Kings. The Deuteronomic point of view, which is uniformly critical of kingship, has been traditionally associated with the prophetic and reform movements originating in the North but articulated in the circles gathered in Jerusalem in the time of Josiah and later of Jeremiah.

The recognition of these four strands of biblical tradition—J, E, D, and P—for many decades influenced the way in which the Bible was studied as an historical document. The hypothesis of multiple traditions has been extraordinarily powerful and fruitful, but it has also had its costs. There has never been full agreement about what texts are part of what tradition. Many readers worry about the fragmentation of the biblical text that results from too assiduous an attempt to isolate the various traditions. More conservative communities of readers, for whom presuppositions about the unity and inerrancy of Scripture are theologically paramount, have never been comfortable accepting the insights of the historical criticism that Wellhausen's hypothesis engendered. In recent years, biblical scholars trained as literary critics have sought different ways to describe the imaginative and theological coherence of the biblical text as the Bible has come down to us in its final form. In describing this biblical "poetics," such readers have been careful not to return to a precritical point of view that would deny the tremendous insights that stem from Wellhausen's momentous discoveries. This reassertion of a coherent biblical poetics is at the center of current debates about how to read the Bible.

## Chapter 4

# Comparing Translations

Among the pitfalls of reading the Bible in English is forgetting that you are reading a translation. *Caveat lector!* Reader, beware! The Bible is the product of a staggering number of linguistic and cultural traditions, dating through many centuries. There is an old saying that the past is a foreign country. That may be so, but its borders are open: the past is accessible to those willing to make the effort to understand it. Likewise, an informed respect for the variety of ancient languages and cultural presuppositions in the Bible is indispensable for understanding the meaning of the texts. In these as in most matters, the more you know the better off you are. It is helpful to be aware of how languages can differ from each other not only in their structure and grammar, but also in their use of words, in their history, and in their characteristic sounds. Different languages have different ways of saying things, and these ways are seldom equivalent or interchangeable.

## ≈ What Translations Reveal

Annotated Bibles are a window onto some of the challenges every translator faces. Although translators' notes cannot

comment on every interesting word or group of words, they can alert us to the fact that a word or phrase or sentence in the Hebrew or Greek is particularly obscure, or when other manuscript traditions display alternative readings. Translators' notes usually appear at the base of a column of text, above the line separating text from commentary (if there is commentary). They are marked with small-case italic letters in superscript that correlate the note with the verse in question, and this pattern holds in even the most lightly annotated Bibles.

No two translations are alike. All translations are the result of choices made and choices rejected. Gifted translators often disagree. When they do, their disagreements usually center on finding the most faithful English equivalents of complex words or sets of words. Take as an example the Hebrew word *dabar* and the Greek word *logos*. Both can roughly be translated into English as "word" or "speech," but such a translation dangerously simplifies some very complicated nuances. *Dabar* also has meanings closer to "event" or "deed." In Jeremiah 5:28 the prophet says his enemies "know no limits in deeds of wickedness"; the word translated as "deeds" is a form of *dabar*. Compare the English phrase "I give you my word," where saying the word "word" is itself a form of action. It is like saying "I will" at a wedding—saying so makes it so.

The synonym for *dabar* in Greek, *logos*, has different connotations. Like *dabar*, *logos* means "word," but also "reasoning" or "rationality" or something like "the informing principle." The two words are not always equivalent to each other; their meanings can vary according to context. According to one count, the *King James Version* translates *dabar* by seventy-five different words, *logos* by twenty-five. If the words for "word" are this varied and nuanced in the original Hebrew and Greek, imagine how difficult it

is to find their exact equivalents in English each time they occur.

Annotated Bibles like the Oxford do not usually tell us when these kinds of decisions are being made. There are too many of them. That is why comparing two or more English translations of the same passage can sometimes be very revealing, and you should have access to at least two different translations when working with a particular text. Even then, there are challenges. Some translations, like the original *Revised Standard*, strive for a more or less literal correspondence between the original language and the English translation. (The technical phrase for this is "formal equivalence.") The NRSV translators use the motto "as literal as possible, as free as necessary," and in fact tend to be freer than their predecessors.<sup>1</sup> Striving for formal equivalence can sometimes make for awkward English sentences, but it helps the reader approximate the "feel" of the Hebrew and Greek. Other translations strive for a more dynamic equivalence, sometimes resorting to paraphrase in a contemporary English idiom. Paraphrase can make for a more readable and accessible text, but sometimes the end result is far removed from the sense and feel of the original. This is often the case with the simplified, informal style of the *Good News Bible*, first published in 1966. Other paraphrases hide theological agendas. *The Living Bible* translates Paul's technical term "righteousness" (*dikaiosune*, a complex term in Paul) in the language of the tent revival, "getting right with God," while the word for "born" in 1 John 3:9 becomes the more pulpit-friendly "born again."

What translation one prefers is partly a result of taste, and partly of theological conviction. More conservative Protestants have always been wary of modern versions of the King James Bible, such as the *Revised Standard*, perhaps because the liberal National Council of Churches sponsored

these revisions. Believing that it strayed too far from what William Tyndale had called the "plain sense" of Scripture, a group of conservative Protestant translators produced the *New International Version* in 1978. The NIV is the first Bible widely regarded in conservative circles as an acceptable successor to the King James, even though the methods of translation do not seem to differ in any substantial way from methods used by the NRSV. It is a mark of this translation's popularity and effectiveness that the General Convention of the Episcopal Church recently added it to the short list of Bible translations officially acceptable for use in public worship. In addition to the *Revised Standard Version* and *New Revised Standard Version* used most widely, the list currently includes the *King James Version*, the *Jerusalem Bible*, the *New English Bible*, the *Good News Bible*, and the *New American Bible*.

### ~ The Translating Process

Comparing different translations of the same Bible passage often yields some startling surprises. Sometimes the translators even seem to be working from different Bibles. Why is this?

Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in the late 1940s, the earliest complete manuscript copies of Hebrew and Christian scriptures dated from the early Middle Ages. While there are many very early papyrus fragments of New Testament books, complete extant manuscripts are relatively late. Furthermore, all modern translations are based on original texts that are themselves the product of generations of readers and scholars sifting, collating, and comparing scores of texts. Even in the standard scholarly editions of both the Hebrew Bible and the Greek New Testament you will find alternative readings on every page, including alternative reconstructions of texts that for vari-

ous reasons have come down to us in damaged or, as the scholars say, “corrupted” form. Sometimes the editors of the English translations indicate by a special footnote that some textual problem has arisen; we will encounter two intriguing examples of this later in the chapter.

But sometimes the decisions made by editors and translators are invisible. An instructive example of this occurred in the first edition of the *New English Bible* (the NEB), a British translation first published in 1970 with broad ecumenical backing. Look again at the passage from Jeremiah 15. Here is how it reads in the NRSV:

Your words were found, and I ate them,  
and your words became to me a joy  
and the delight of my heart;  
for I am called by your name,  
O LORD, God of hosts. (Jeremiah 15:16)

The wording reproduced here can be found in almost all English translations and is based on the Hebrew text as it appears in the most widely used scholarly edition. But if you look up the verse in the 1970 NEB, you will encounter a very different image:

I have to suffer those who despise thy words,  
but thy word is joy and happiness to me,  
for thou hast named me thine, O LORD, God of hosts.

What has happened?

When Alexander the Great conquered most of the Middle East in the fourth century BCE, one of the lasting cultural results was the triumph of the Greek language as the common language (*koinē*) of the Empire. One of the products of this momentous change was a Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, known to posterity as the Septuagint, which became the common Bible of the Greek-speaking

Jewish world for centuries. It is the Septuagint that Paul quotes from memory time and time again—and not always accurately—in his letters to the first Christian congregations. Very few Jews would have understood the ancient Hebrew of the original texts, and it is possible that the original Hebrew might have been incomprehensible to Paul himself.

The book of Jeremiah as it appears in the Septuagint sometimes differs strikingly from the Hebrew version that has come down to us in what is called the Masoretic text. The latter was compiled and edited by an extraordinary group of Jewish scholars, the Masoretes, who flourished from about 600 CE through the late tenth century. Modern editions of the Bible in Hebrew are still based on this Masoretic text. But the variant readings reflected in the Septuagint, as well as in other ancient versions in Aramaic, Syriac, and Latin, sometimes have as compelling a claim to authenticity as the Masoretic.

Although it is impossible to tell just from looking at the page of the 1970 NEB, a comparison between the Greek and Hebrew versions reveals that the translators of Jeremiah 15:16 might have based their work not on the Masoretic text, but on the Septuagint. They seem to have translated this Greek reading into what they think is its Hebrew equivalent, and then, with some additional conjectural emendations, translated this new text into English.<sup>2</sup> Although the translators adopted some of the Masoretic reading as well, in the end they arrive at a text and a translation that eliminates the striking metaphor that we find in the Hebrew (“Your words were found, and I ate them”).

This is, of course, only one text out of many thousands, and only one editorial decision out of many thousands more. To an ordinary reader of Scripture, the details of such

a decision can seem both overwhelming and pedantic. But small variants like this, multiplied a thousandfold in our own Bible editions, remind us how much we depend upon the work of linguists and text scholars as we encounter these ancient writings, and also how fluid and speculative some of these textual readings can be. Just as all translations are built on compromise, so are all critical editions of ancient texts themselves. At the very least, this fact should make us wary of taking too literal an attitude toward the Bible translations we read.

Many translations, including the NRSV itself, smooth out or eliminate challenging metaphors. Perhaps it was the jarring immediacy of Jeremiah's metaphor that prompted the original NEB translators to prefer the alternative text. It was a very small decision, but had it been preserved in the 1989 edition, now called the *Revised English Bible* (REB), that would have been a very great loss.

### ~ The Question of Inclusive Language

One feature that sets the NRSV translation apart from all other translations in the Tyndale tradition is its use of what has come to be called "inclusive language" in translating references to men and women in the Hebrew and Greek. Believing that the English language is by nature biased toward the masculine gender, so that English-language translations may restrict and obscure the original sense, the NRSV translators attempted to eliminate masculine language as much as they could without doing damage to the historical meaning of the text.

But the quest for inclusivity has also been taken further. In 1995 an editorial committee that included some of the original NRSV translators produced an unofficial revision of the NRSV that sought to extend the principles of inclusive language to the translation of words referring to God.

Thus, for example, the pronoun "him" or "he" is always avoided when referring to God, either by repeating the word "God," using another expression for God, or altering the syntax of the sentence to avoid the pronoun altogether. Arguing that the word "Father" as a title for God has by repetition lost its metaphorical power, and instead tends to be heard as if God were male, the editorial committee often translated the Greek word *Pater* simply as "God," and in several key passages of the New Testament translated the word with a new metaphor, "Father-Mother." Similarly, arguing rightly that the fact that Jesus was a man has no christological significance, the committee translated the word "Son" (Greek *huios*) as "Child," and the phrase "the Son of Man" (*huios anthrōpou*) as "the Human One." References to "the kingdom" (Greek *basileus*) became "dominion"; celestial beings, whether angels or demons, were no longer given masculine pronouns. In the Psalter, the Hebrew word *Yahweh*, which you remember the NRSV translates as "the LORD," is rendered as "GOD," thereby avoiding what the committee saw as the unavoidably masculine connotations of the word "Lord."

Finally, the new version assiduously avoids language that would seem to imply that any kind of human disability characterizes someone's entire identity. Thus Matthew 11:5, which the NRSV translates as "the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear...and the poor have good news brought to them," has become "those who are blind receive their sight, those who are lame walk, the people with leprosy are cleansed, those who are deaf hear...and those who are poor have good news brought to them."<sup>3</sup>

It is much too early to say whether such a translation will catch on with ordinary Bible readers, or be used as one of the officially listed Bible translations approved by Gen-



eral Convention for public reading during divine worship. Like all versions and paraphrases, the new inclusive version can be instructive when used in comparison with other versions. But it must also be said that, in its own way, this version is as polemical and circular in its reasoning as its counterparts on the other end of the political and theological spectrum such as *The Living Bible*, in which the ancient text is also made to serve an ideological end. It may well be that the makers of the inclusive version attempt to do in translation what should really be done through teaching, preaching, and living example.

### ~ Mining the Footnotes

Most of the time, annotated Bibles clearly indicate whether the editors have chosen from one of several possible versions of a particular verse or set of verses, and they will also indicate the manuscript sources for different possible readings. A mundane example is the matter-of-fact NOAB footnote to Jeremiah 16:7 informing us that the reading “No one shall break bread” is based on two Greek manuscripts: the Masoretic text (abbreviated MT) reads differently—“break for them.” The editors chose what seemed to them the more coherent reading.

This concern to be forthright about the sometimes startling multiplicity of texts has a long and distinguished history, dating as far back as the Masoretes. Copying a manuscript of the Torah by hand was a painstaking process. It was also a religious act, prepared for by years of apprenticeship, and always accompanied by prayer. Because the consonantal text of the Hebrew Bible was sacred, editors and copiers of the manuscripts were loathe to correct occasional errors that had cropped up over centuries of copying. Instead, they devised a system of marginal annotation that preserved the inviolable integrity of the

written text (in Aramaic, the *ketib*, “that which is written”), but offered the reader (who would more often than not be reading aloud) a corrected spelling or pronunciation (the *qere*, “that which is read aloud”). As the practice developed, it also gave scholars greater latitude. When there were two versions of an ancient text, each with a significant claim to precedence, this device allowed the scholars to offer both rather than choose between them.

Such details may seem excessive to a first-time Bible reader, and many of these textual variants are of interest only to scholars, but they do show us that the Bible is a *living* book. Although the Holy Scriptures “containeth all things necessary to salvation” (BCP 868), these writings did not arrive in a hermetically sealed box. The Bible is not a mute container of truth. It is a living creation, inspired by the living God, and the work of human hands in human communities—hands guided by the Holy Spirit through centuries of editing, translating, praying, copying, and rethinking, hands working across languages, across time, and across cultures. Reading the Bible takes energy—the energy produced by an open heart and mind, a critical eye, a willingness to listen, and the courage to allow our deepest convictions to be challenged, even our deepest convictions about the Bible itself.

Working with the translators’ notes in an annotated Bible demonstrates that the shape of our inheritance is not always clear. That is the risk we take in participating in such an ancient tradition of reading: uncertainty simply goes with the territory. Even editors as conservative as the Masoretes recognized the need to take into account the anomalies and cross-purposes created by centuries of textual transmission. These too are part of our biblical heritage. All contemporary Bible editions reflect innumerable decisions about which ancient reading to incorporate into

the standard text and which to relegate to footnotes. These decisions can raise compelling religious questions. Here are two examples of such questions, one drawn from the Hebrew Bible and one from the gospel of Mark.

*"A virgin shall conceive..." (Isaiah 7:14)*

One of the most familiar verses in the Old Testament is Isaiah 7:14, which reads like this in the *King James Version*:

Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a sign; Behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel.

Now compare it to the NRSV, which follows most contemporary translations:

Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel.

Both editions provide a translator's note on the word "Immanuel," but the NRSV also offers a note on the phrase "young woman," which replaces the King James' "virgin."

The changes are slight, but theologically they are deeply significant. Both notes on "Immanuel," like many such notes in annotated editions of the Bible, offer the literal translation of a biblical name. Many names in the Hebrew scriptures are actually Hebrew phrases. When Jeremiah says "I am called by your name," part of what he means is that the name Jeremiah contains a form of the name of God in its last syllable. Often Hebrew names are symbolic, as in Isaiah 8, where we learn that the name *Maher-shalhash-baz* means "The spoil speeds, the prey hastens," a name designed to allay King Ahaz's panic before the coming battle. As the note for Isaiah 7:14 tells us (and as any lover

of Handel's *Messiah* will know immediately), Immanuel means "God with us" (KJV) or "God is with us" (NRSV).

But for Christian readers through the centuries, who have read the Hebrew Bible as a testament of prophecies fulfilled in the gospels, this name Immanuel echoes with a different kind of promise: the birth of Immanuel, the Messiah, "God-with-us," from a virgin mother. Matthew's gospel quotes this very passage in Isaiah to describe the birth of Jesus:

All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet:

"Look, the virgin shall conceive  
and bear a son,  
and they shall name him  
Emmanuel,"

which means, "God is with us." (Matthew 1:22-23)

This passage is so familiar to us as to seem unremarkable, but it is in fact quite extraordinary. There are several puzzles lurking. Why would the NRSV translators alter the King James reading of "virgin" to "young woman" in their translation of Isaiah 7:14, but then revert to the King James usage when translating Matthew 1:23? And, for that matter, why should Matthew go to the trouble of translating the word "Emmanuel," when any Jewish reader would know immediately what it meant?

The answers to these questions are a little complicated, but they reveal a lot about what the Bible is and what it is not. Here is the note that the NRSV offers for "young woman": "Gk *the virgin*." Behind this stark note lurk generations of theological controversy. "Virgin," of course, was the translation employed by the King James translators, as well as other translators before them. But they were following an interpretation of the Hebrew text found in the

Greek Septuagint, where the Hebrew *'almah*, "young woman," is translated by the Greek word *parthenos*, "maiden, virgin." The NRSV translators prefer the Masoretic text instead, assuming (and rightly so) that the Greek is less reliable, since it is a relatively late translation of the original Hebrew. Furthermore, in a longer note appearing below the main text, the annotators provide other occurrences of *'almah* in the Hebrew Bible, where it is variously translated as "young woman" or "girl." In the light of such data the NRSV translators thought it best to give the word *'almah* the meaning it seems to have had in Old Testament times.

It is from small technical decisions like this that large theological controversies arise. Since New Testament times, Christians have understood this prophecy in Isaiah to be a prediction of the Messiah's birth from a virgin. The NRSV translators undercut this traditional reading, not because they do not believe in the teachings about the virgin birth (they might or they might not), but because they seek the utmost accuracy in rendering the Hebrew text before them. The translators arrive at their decision on sound scholarly principles and tell us their reason in the notes.

And in this case they are in good company. The Roman Catholic translators of the *Jerusalem Bible*, who have just as great a stake in the doctrine of the virgin birth, also prefer the Hebrew reading to the Greek. In their note, the Roman Catholic translators take pains to point out that the Greek reading, while not the word used originally in the Hebrew text, may be nonetheless an important witness to a later tradition, which tells of a virgin birth of a hero-Savior. The editors quietly speculate that such a tradition was extant at the time the Septuagint translators were at work. Knowledge of such a tradition would have increased the likelihood that the Greek-speaking Jewish translators,

working hundreds of years before Christ's birth, would choose the Greek word *parthenos* to translate the Hebrew word *'almah*. Thus the young woman of Isaiah becomes the virgin of the Septuagint.

Which brings us back to Matthew's nativity story. Like most first-century Jews, the writer of Matthew's gospel would have been working from the Greek text of Isaiah as he composed his gospel. Matthew wrote in Greek for a Greek-speaking audience, many of whom had a Jewish background, some of whom probably knew Aramaic but not biblical Hebrew. Hebrew would have been as much a mystery to most first-century Jews as church Latin was to most twentieth-century Roman Catholics. So Matthew translated the word "Immanuel" in the course of his text (no one had recourse to footnotes in those days), for the benefit of his non-Hebrew speaking listeners and readers. Two millennia later, translating Matthew's gospel into English, the NRSV translators adhere strictly to Matthew's Greek text, where the word *parthenos* appears. In the translation of Isaiah 7:14 the NRSV employs another English word in an attempt to give a more accurate rendition of the original oracle of Isaiah.

As you can see, if you have patience enough to pursue them, translators' footnotes and commentaries can reveal much not only about the history of the Bible itself, but also about the presuppositions, desires, and longings of the various communities which the biblical traditions have shaped, including our own. To read Scripture with an ear to its own history is to begin to overhear centuries of conversation about texts that matter deeply to people, and to be invited to participate in those conversations yourself. And as with all conversations, the more you know, the more intelligently you can participate. Knowing the history of these famous passages in the Hebrew Bible and the New