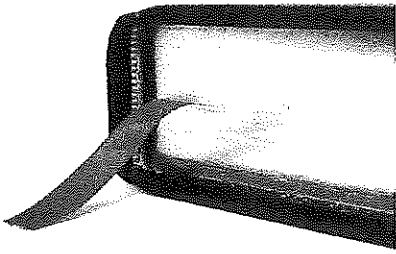


Transmission of the Bible



Topic

Bible transmission

Theme

God expects careful attention to accuracy when transmitting Scripture.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will understand the basic history of the transmission of the Bible and will be burdened to share it with others.

Materials

- Resources 5 and 6
- Greek Bible
- Hebrew Bible

Scripture Focus

Phil. 1:21, 27–30; 2 Tim. 3:16

Summary

This lesson reviews the history of the transmission of the Bible including the early manuscripts and the later translations. The final section covers some basic principles for translating the Bible from its original languages.

Outline

I. Transmission of Scriptural Text

- A. Masoretic text
- B. Septuagint (LXX)
- C. Dead Sea Scrolls
- D. Ancient copies of the New Testament

II. History of the Bible

- A. Middle Ages
- B. Reformation
- C. English translations

III. Principles for Translation Work

- A. Have a high view of Scripture
- B. Be reasonably literal
- C. Work as a team

Memory Verse

"All scripture is given by inspiration of God, and is profitable for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness"
(2 Timothy 3:16).

GETTING STARTED

LESSON 5

Strange Languages

Pass around a Greek and Hebrew Bible for the learners to see. Have them comment on the strangeness of the letters. Let them know that the Hebrew is read from right to left. That means Genesis 1:1 is at the back of the Bible and that the right hand page is read before the left hand page.

ASK: How difficult would you say is the task of accurately translating the Bible from the original languages?

Translating the Bible is a task for scholars. Their work down through history has made the Bible accessible and understandable for us today. That is a tremendous blessing. We ought to be grateful to have the Bible in our language and to then be looking for ways to share it with others.

Guess the Language

Go to a website like BibleGateway.com and play some audio of the Bible being read in different languages. Ask the learners to guess the languages.

ASK: What would you need to know in order to translate the Bible from its original languages into a foreign language? *One would need to understand Hebrew, Greek, and the receptor language extremely well.*

The task of Bible translation is just getting started. About two-thirds of the world's seven thousand languages have no Bibles or even portions of Bibles. This lesson will focus on the transmission of the Bible to us as well as the need to support Bible translation work today.

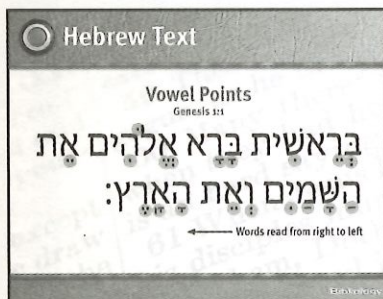
SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES

I. Transmission of Scriptural Text

God used individuals and groups of people throughout history to transmit the Bible so accurately that we can call our Bibles the *Word of God*. Considering the careful transmission of Scriptural text should build our confidence in our English Bibles.

A. Masoretic text

The Old Testament is based on the Masoretic text, which was transcribed by a group of scribes called Masoretes beginning around the sixth century AD. Their job was completed in the tenth century by scholars at Talmudic academies located in Babylonia and Israel. These Jewish scribes preserved the Scriptures by assembling and codifying every available text at that time. Their goal was to preserve the original text of the Hebrew Old Testament. In addition, the Masoretes supplied diacritical marks to enable correct pronunciation. The Hebrew manuscripts they consulted lacked vowel markings and other guides for reading the texts. The dots and dashes above and below the letters in a Hebrew Bible tells the reader how to properly pronounce the words while other marks help the reader know when to accent a word and when to pause.



RESOURCE: Display resource 5 to show vowel points in the typical Hebrew text.

The Masoretes' work, as mentioned in lesson 2, was extremely meticulous. They checked that every word and letter was accurate, pointing out odd spellings and any unusual grammar. They also noted where they saw variations in the texts they were using. The Masoretes even counted the verses, words, and letters in the text. They especially noted the middle letter of each page, book, and section so that any revisions or mistakes would be more obvious when additional copies were made.

The written Masoretic texts we have today date back as far as the late ninth century AD. The oldest printed manuscripts date from the late fifteenth century. When compared, the earliest written and the earliest printed manuscripts are remarkably consistent. As a result, the Masoretic text is considered by scholars to be the authentic Hebrew Bible.

ASK: Would you say we are fortunate that the Masoretes' work was so careful? Explain. (Q3) *God was obviously working to ensure the Bible was passed down with a high degree of accuracy. The Masoretes were part of His plan.*

B. Septuagint (LXX)

Around 200 BC, Jewish scholars in Alexandria, Egypt, translated the Hebrew Bible into the commonly spoken Greek. This translation was called the *Septuagint*. The name comes from the Latin word for *seventy*. Tradition holds that seventy-two men (six from each tribe of Israel) participated in the work and simultaneously produced perfect translations.

The New Testament, which was written in Greek, often quotes the Septuagint, though not exclusively. Today we have a few early manuscripts of the Septuagint. Among them are the Codex Vaticanus and the Codex Sinaiticus. Those copies are from the fourth century AD. Another manuscript, the Codex Alexandrinus, is from the fifth century. All three manuscripts also include portions of the New Testament in Greek. Some scholars highly value and prioritize these Septuagint manuscripts because they are so early. Yet the manuscripts do show corrections, causing some to question whether their antiquity should give them priority over later and more numerous manuscripts. Overall, the manuscripts are valuable as references for determining the accuracy of the transmission of both the Old and New Testament Scriptures and for coming to a consensus on what made up the original autographs. The parallels between the Masoretic text and the Septuagint are evidence that both are accurate copies of the original word that God gave to His prophets.

In addition to the early versions of the Septuagint, Jerome translated both testaments of Scripture into a new Latin version by AD 405. This Latin translation became known as the *Vulgate* and was the preferred Bible text throughout most of Europe for the next millennium. The Vulgate provides yet another test for the accuracy of the Old Testament.

C. Dead Sea Scrolls

The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls starting in 1947 has proven to be the greatest manuscript discovery of modern times. A shepherd initially found clay

jars in a cave a short distance from the Dead Sea. The jars contained leather scrolls with ancient Hebrew writing. Subsequently, manuscripts were found in eleven different caves. Cave four contained the majority of the manuscripts containing Scripture. Through careful examination, scholars were able to reconstruct more than five hundred books written in Hebrew, many of them containing large portions of the Old Testament. Only the book of Esther was missing from the scrolls. These ancient scrolls are from the first and second century BC, which is about a thousand years older than the earliest complete edition of the Masoretic text. They help confirm the overall accuracy of the Masoretic text. Most of the differences that scholars identified are insignificant spelling variations, grammar errors, or missing words. None of the discrepancies affect any teaching or doctrine. When compared with each other, the Septuagint manuscripts, the Masoretic Text, and the Dead Sea Scrolls are remarkably similar and ultimately yield an extremely accurate Old Testament.

D. Ancient copies of the New Testament

We have about five thousand ancient copies of portions of the New Testament to examine and compare. Some of the earliest are third century AD translations of the New Testament into Old Latin, Syriac, and Egyptian. The Latin Vulgate and the Greek Codex Vaticanus, Codex Sinaiticus, and Codex Alexandrinus are all fourth and fifth century AD translations of the New Testament. We also have about seventy-five papyri fragments dating from 135 AD to the eighth century. Those fragments cover parts of all but two New Testament books. Overall, forty percent of the New Testament is covered by the early fragments.

ASK: How would you describe the amount of evidence we have to substantiate the New Testament text? (Q4) *Perhaps as overwhelming.*

While it is true that no original New Testament manuscripts exist, the Bible scholars who work faithfully with the texts of those copies of manuscripts can compare the copies and determine what the words of the original manuscripts must have been. While not all scholars agree on how to prioritize the use of the manuscripts, the fact remains that about ninety percent of the New Testament is supported by all of the manuscripts. As with the Old Testament manuscripts, none of the major doctrines are affected where there are discrepancies in the New Testament texts. We can use our New Testaments with the utmost confidence that God used careful men to transmit the Word of God in a highly accurate way.

Consider that similar history books from the time of the New Testament, such as Caesar's *Gallic War* (c. AD 50), are readily accepted as accurate even though they have less than one percent of the total number of New Testament manuscripts and fragments. In addition, many of the manuscripts to support those history books are from about a thousand years after the originals were written. By comparison, the overwhelming number of New Testament manuscripts is more than ample to establish the New Testament text. Critics simply cannot argue that our New Testament is invalid because we don't have enough evidence to establish an accurate text.

II. History of the Bible

A. Middle Ages

Literacy rates in Europe were low during the Middle Ages (AD 476 to fourteenth century). Historians estimate that around ninety percent of Europeans throughout much of the Middle Ages could not read and write. Not only that, but the Bibles available at the time were mostly in Latin, a language only the church leadership understood. Stained glass and art in cathedrals were the closest the people came to understanding God's Word for themselves.

Near the end of the Middle Ages, an Oxford scholar and professor named John Wycliffe (1330–1384) became convinced that the contemporary Catholic church had drifted far from New Testament Christianity. He rightly believed the church was the people, and not the Catholic pope, priests, and sacramental system. If the people were going to understand the Bible and the distortions concerning the Catholic church, then they needed to at least have God's Word in their own language. Wycliffe earnestly desired that every common person *might learn the words of the Gospel according to his simplicity*. So he began to work on an English translation of the Latin Vulgate. He and his assistants completed a first edition before his death in 1384. Wycliffe's influence continued after his death prompting the Catholic church to condemn him as a heretic. His bones were dug up and crushed and his books were burned. His followers, named *Lollards (mumblers)* by their enemies, later produced a second edition of the Bible in English. The Wycliffe Bible was banned by church authorities and was frequently burned. In 1408 it became illegal to translate or read the Bible in vernacular English without permission from a bishop.

ASK: Why would the Catholic church be so interested in keeping the people from an English Bible? (Q5) *So the Catholic hierarchy might keep the people dependent on them and thereby maintain their powerful and lucrative positions.*

As the Middle Ages were winding down and the Renaissance was beginning to spread across Europe, Johann Gutenberg greatly advanced Bible distribution with his development of the printing press in Germany (1453). The first book ever printed with the new invention was the Latin Vulgate version of the Bible. Later, German copies of the Scriptures were also printed on the new printing press.

B. Reformation

The Catholic popes generally supported the return to the classic literature and art during the Renaissance, but they neither encouraged nor supported the growing availability of the Bible in the languages of the people. They wanted to maintain their authority over doctrine. In reality they frequently abused that right; they filled their coffers by selling God's forgiveness.

Martin Luther (1483–1546) nailed ninety-five theses to the Wittenberg church door in 1517 to communicate that the Bible, not the Catholic church, is the central religious authority and that salvation is by faith alone rather than by works. Because of Luther and others, Reformation teachings began to spread throughout Europe. Using the newly edited Greek text of Erasmus, Luther translated the New

Testament into German in 1522 in an effort to allow the people to read the Bible for themselves. Twelve years later he finished his translation of the Old Testament.

C. English translations

In England, William Tyndale (c. 1494–1536), a chaplain and Oxford-trained scholar, had ambitions similar to those of the translators that came before him. After hearing an opponent say that it would be better to be without the Bible than it would be to be without the pope's law, Tyndale retorted, *If God spare my life, ere many years I will cause a boy that driveth the plow to know more of the Scripture than thou dost*. Tyndale translated Erasmus's Greek New Testament into English by 1525, but he could not secure legal permission to print it in England. So he moved to the German provinces in order to print six thousand of them there. The first English New Testaments were printed around 1526. English bishops bought up the Bibles and then burned them. But Tyndale simply used their money to fund a second edition in 1534. He smuggled those Bibles into England in sacks of grain and flour. John Tewkesbury was arrested and burned at the stake for distributing Tyndale's New Testaments and for supporting Tyndale's belief in salvation by faith alone.

Tyndale finished translating fifteen Old Testament books before he was betrayed by a friend and arrested. His margin notes in his Old Testament translation were particularly condemning of the pope. In 1536, after spending over five hundred days in prison, he was strangled and then burned. His greatest wishes while in prison were for warmer clothes and for the documents he needed in order to complete his translation of the Hebrew Old Testament into English. Apparently he received neither.

ASK: What is your reaction to Tewkesbury being burned at the stake and Tyndale being strangled and burned for making the Bible available to the common man? (Q6)

ASK: How would you describe their actions? (Q7)

READ: Philippians 1:21, 27–30. **ASK:** What similar approach to life do you see evident in the Apostle Paul's testimony? (Q8) *Paul lived his life for Christ. He was willing to sacrifice his life so that others might hear the gospel and grow in Christ.*

Soon other English translations appeared including the Coverdale Bible, the first licensed Bible to be printed in English (1535). It was based on the Old Testament books Tyndale translated. Miles Coverdale (c. 1488–1569) was exiled from England three times for his preaching against Catholic doctrine. The Matthew's Bible was produced in 1538. It was also a completed version of Tyndale's work. King Henry VIII eventually ordered a revision of the Matthew's Bible, called the Great Bible (1539), be placed in every church throughout England. The Great Bible was most notably missing the protestant notes found in the margins of the Matthew's Bible. The Great Bible also included an artistic cover page that put King Henry VIII as the center of attention. The picture was obviously meant to emphasize the importance of obeying the king. A picture of the prison was included on the page as a warning to those who didn't obey.

The Geneva Bible (1560), the Bible William Shakespeare used, was the text

carried to America by the Pilgrims in 1620. Many of the Anglican clergy opposed the Geneva Bible's marginal notes because they taught John Calvin's controversial views. King James I of England also did not like the Geneva Bible. He ordered another version of the Bible, the King James Version or Authorized Version. Forty-seven scholars worked on the translation over about three years. They consulted older translations, such as the Bishops' Bible and Tyndale's Bible, but they also labored over the original languages. The first copies of the new version came off the press in 1611. This original edition included variant readings and alternative translations in the margins. Slight revisions of the King James Version (especially spelling changes) appeared in 1613, 1629, 1638, 1762, and 1769.

Overall, the common English people were grateful to receive God's Word in their own language and enthusiastically purchased the new translations. Literacy rates began to climb during this same period. Many other English translations have been completed during the last century. These translations have a wide range of accuracy. The ones based on solid translation principles are most valuable.

III. Principles for Translation Work

While a full explanation of principles for translation work would be rather detailed and lengthy, there are some general principles that we should be aware of.

A. Have a high view of Scripture

Translators should have a high view of Scripture because the Bible is the inspired Word of God (2 Tim. 3:16). Inspiration, as we learned in an earlier chapter, includes the very words of the original autographs.

READ: 2 Timothy 3:16. **ASK:** How will a translator who believes in the verbal inspiration of Scripture treat the words of Scripture he is translating into another language? (Q9) *With great care.*

One well-established Bible translation ministry believes that translations should *express the very Word of God as literally as possible in the receptor languages without distorting, adding to, or obscuring the meaning of the original text*. What they describe is a *formal equivalence* method of translating the Bible into another language. Others with a less rigid view of the translation process believe simply conveying the meaning, not the wording, of the text is all that is required of the translator. This method is called *dynamic equivalence*. Those who employ this method put an emphasis on *understanding* a passage rather than on conveying what the passage actually said. The problem with the dynamic equivalence method is that the translator actually plays the role of interpreter in the translation process.

ASK: What are your thoughts on having the translator act as your interpreter of the Bible text? (Q10)

B. Be reasonably literal

Conservative scholars advocate that every word should be translated in a way that is literal and yet suitable in the new language. A suitable translation is structurally consistent with the receptor language and understandable to those who speak

the language. An extremely wooden translation would not communicate the text very well in the receptor language. For example, a wooden translation of John 3:16 that would retain the same word order of the original Greek would awkwardly state: *Thus for He loved the God the world, that the Son the only-begotten He gave, in order that everyone the one believing into Him not may perish but may have life everlasting.* Obviously, Bible translators must arrange the translation in a manner that native speakers can comprehend. Such an arrangement is being reasonably literal.

Translators who espouse a more *dynamic equivalence* tend to be more idiomatic in an attempt to *smooth out* the translation. Consequently, some editions of the Bible are not really translations at all; they are paraphrases that provide a concept-by-concept gist of the original.

C. Work as a team

Conscientious translators work in translation committees rather than alone since the joint effort provides a system of checks and balances. The committee members can check each other's work and make corrections or changes based on their expertise in the original Biblical languages or in the receptor language.

Bible translation is a difficult ministry. We should thank God that He not only gave us the original Scriptures, but that He also provided diligent servants to translate the Scriptures into the English language in a careful and accurate manner. Because of their work, we can be confident of the translation and understand what God is communicating through His Word.

MAKING IT PERSONAL

Burned for the Bible?

Some believers don't talk about the Bible in public for fear someone might ridicule them. Such a *persecution* is a far cry from the price men like William Tyndale paid in order to share the Bible.

ASK: How openly do you share God's Word? (Q11)

ASK: Describe how concerned you are that the lost have the opportunity to hear the gospel and read the Bible? (Q12)

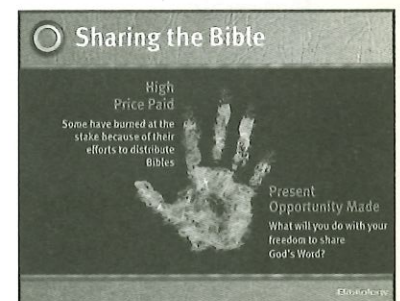
RESOURCE: Display resource 6 to challenge your learners about sharing the Bible with others.

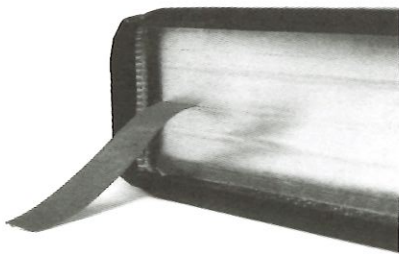
Encourage your learners to take full advantage of the freedoms they enjoy to share God's Word openly. Pray they will have a burden to infuse God's Word into the lives of those who don't know God.

God's Word Goes Global

ASK: What might we do as a class to contribute to the distribution of God's Word around the globe? (Q13)

As a class, consider how you might help your missionaries with projects that would help them spread God's Word around the globe.





The Spirit's Illumination Ministry

Topic

Illumination

Theme

God gives each believer the Holy Spirit to guide in understanding the Bible.

Desired Learner Response

The learner will be diligent in giving the Holy Spirit an opportunity to illuminate the Scriptures and thereby transform his life.

Materials

- Resource 7

Scripture Focus

Gen. 3:8; John 20:30, 31; Rom. 1:18–32; 1 Cor. 2:9–16; Eph. 4:18; 1 Tim. 2:3, 4; 2 Tim. 2:15; 1 John 5:13

Summary

This lesson addresses God's purpose to communicate with humanity and the process He has set in place for that communication to take place. It also addresses the idea that humanity cannot know God's objective truth because every person has insurmountable limitations to interpreting Scripture.

Outline

I. God's Purpose Includes Communication

- A. God made people in His image
- B. God gave people His Word

II. God's Process for Communication

- A. The believer's job
- B. The Spirit's job

III. Man's Problem with Communication

- A. Man believes objectivity is impossible
- B. Man believes history is irrefutable

Memory Verse

"But the natural man receiveth not the things of the Spirit of God: for they are foolishness unto him: neither can he know them, because they are spiritually discerned" (1 Corinthians 2:14).