

“What kind of Bible should a Catholic read and is it wrong to read non-Catholic Bibles?”

First of all, what the question points out is that there are a variety of Bibles to choose from. There are many, many different translations into different languages or dialects. In English alone there are many different translations: modern English, children’s English, old fashioned English, etc. They all say basically the same thing, it’s just a matter of taste on what you like to read. Some people insist on reading things in a more old fashioned language, others like it to sound really simple – it really doesn’t matter. Are some translations “technically” better than others? Yes – but the nuances are so subtle it really wouldn’t matter unless you are a professional scripture scholar or some such thing. I personally like the Ronald Knox translation, which was translated by a Catholic Priest in England during the 2nd World War. I have never understood the writings of St. Paul as well as when I have read this translation. But this is personal choice. The Translation we use at Mass is a revised version of the New American Bible (sometimes called the NAB). The Revised Standard Version(RSV) is also a version I like because it is very literal. There are lots of choices to pick from.

But then there is also the difference between Non-Catholic and Catholic Bibles. The main difference between these two varieties is that the Catholic Bible has 7 more books in the Old Testament (Judith, Tobit, Sirach, 1st and 2nd Maccabees, Wisdom, and Baruch) and additional chapters to the Books of Daniel and Esther. The New Testament of Catholic and Non-Catholic Bibles is exactly the same. So why are there more books in the Catholic Old Testament? First of all, you have to keep in mind that the Bible is not a “book” but a collection of different books written by different authors over a thousand years of time or more. For the ancient Jewish people there was no set collection. Different communities had different books. They all had the Torah (the first 5 books of the Old Testament) but after that it varied as to which books they used. Some synagogues would have one or two more or less books than another synagogue – it just wasn’t as precise as we are used to it being. Keep in mind, this was thousands of years before the printing press and each of the “books” were actually hand-written scrolls. These scrolls were very time consuming and costly to produce, so some smaller communities simply didn’t have as many scrolls as others for the lone reason that they could not afford them. But they all had the Torah. Anyway, when Christianity was young, most of its members were Greek speakers and therefore used the typical Greek Old Testament that was called the Septuagint. The Septuagint contained the additional books that the Catholic Bible has now. Now, fast-forward 1500 years to the time of the Protestant Reformation, when the reformers were looking at the scriptures they looked at what books the Jews of Germany had in their testament which did not include the extra books. So they concluded that they should not use them either. However, Jews in Greece and Africa and other parts of the world to this day use those additional books. But in any event, that is the difference.

So is it wrong to read a Non-Catholic Bible? No. But it is *preferable* for Catholics to read Catholic Versions of the Bible for two reasons: the Catholic Bible has all of the Books that we use as Catholics and the footnotes give a Catholic perspective as opposed to a Non-Catholic perspective (it is not wrong to read a Non-Catholic perspective, obviously, but if you want the Catholic take on things – read the Catholic footnotes).

“Since the Bible has been translated so many times, how can we be sure that what we have today is accurate?” People will then reference the infamous telephone game where a line of people whisper a sentence into each other’s ear and by the time it gets to the end of the line it is completely different from the original sentence. Paper and animal skins (parchment) tend to disintegrate over time and so we do not have original documents from the 1st century or before. We do have some fragments from the second century. The first full copies of the Scriptures that exist are from the 4th and 5th centuries and sometimes even contain additional texts that Christians no longer accept as Scriptural - These include the two epistles of Clement (the fourth pope), the Shepherd of Hermas, and the Epistle of Barnabas, etc. These are all beautiful Church writings and can be read online anytime, but the Church gradually decided that they were not “Scripture” worthy. From these centuries we also have numerous (hundreds) of writings of early Christians who quote the Scriptures at length in their works. We can see from these documents that the Scriptures we have today are the very same scriptures of these ancient times. So from the ancient texts we have as well as the texts that quote the scriptures, we can tell that what we have today says the same thing as thousands of years ago. It should be remembered that this also holds true for other ancient books such as the writings of Homer and Plato. These texts have been very carefully copied and passed on over the years in a way that differs from a goofy game of telephone.

Another question concerning Bible translations is **“What is the King James Version of the Bible?”** The King James version is the typical Non-Catholic English translation of the Bible. It was commissioned during the reign of King James I of England around the year 1610 AD. The Church in England had broken away from Rome in the time of Henry VIII and a number of different English translations of the Bible had been published. As this caused a good deal of confusion, King James ordered that an “Authorized Version” be created which would be used by the Anglican Church. It, therefore, became the principle English version of the Non-Catholic Bible. It is not considered to be the most literal translation, but it is much loved by the Non-Catholic English speaking world because it is what they are used to. It uses the language of Elizabethan English which some people find very difficult but others seem to love. Once again, it is a matter of personal preference. Some will say that it is the only version of the Bible that should be used – but the question to ask is “Why?” I don’t debate that some people *like* that version, and that some people *prefer* to read that version, but I do question those who say it is the *only* version of the Bible that should be read. Why should a translation made almost 1600 years after the life of Christ be any more worthy than any other translation? Some people who believe this go so far as to say that the King James Version of the Bible was directly inspired by God. Why God would wait 1600 years to give the world the “best” version of the Bible is beyond my ability to understand. The idea seems to be a hold-over of British elitism which held that everything British (religion, philosophy, science, industry, navy, army, etc) was better than anything else in the world. Even though the British Empire is mostly a thing of the past and England is on the decline old habits die hard.