

BIBLE REFERENCES, CITATIONS, AND TRANSLATIONS: A HOW-TO GUIDE

Introduction

Have you ever had a Writing Expert, professor, or grader critique you for your improper format of Bible citations? Has anyone ever criticized you for not indicating which Bible translation you are quoting from? Well, you are not alone. Knowing how to incorporate the Bible into your papers can be tricky! When do you say “1 Cor 13” or “1 Corinthians 13” or “First Corinthians 13”? Where, how, and how often do you need to indicate what English translation you are using? What do you do when you want the reader to compare the passage you are quoting to other related passages?

Take heart, for in this brief post, I will guide you through all the tips and tricks concerning how to use and cite the Bible in your papers! First, we will look at how to mention Bible passages in a sentence. Second, we will look at how to cite Bible passages in parenthetical notes. Third, we will look at how to indicate what Bible translation you are quoting from. And best of all, there will be lots and lots of properly formatted examples!

How to Mention Bible Passages in a Sentence

Let’s take a look at all the different ways you can incorporate Bible passages into your sentence. The most important rule *in the sentence* is that you have to write out the entire Bible book; you cannot use Bible abbreviations. Some examples are as follows:

- In 1 Corinthians 12-14, Paul discusses how spiritual gifts should properly function in the corporate gathering of the church.
- Isaiah 53 is a passage that describes the plight of the Suffering Servant.

Now, if the first word of the sentence happens to be the name of a *numbered Bible book* (e.g., 1-2 Kings, 1-2 Thessalonians, and 1-2 Timothy),¹ you must write out the number:

- Second Samuel 7 outlines the Davidic Covenant.
- First Timothy 3:1-13 details the qualifications for elders and deacons.

Notice, in all of the above examples, there is no need to indicate a Bible translation because there is no actual Bible content quoted.

How to Cite Bible Passages in Parenthetical Notes

+ rules for punctuation that precedes a quotation

Now, here is where things get really interesting: parenthetical Bible citations. If done correctly, the parenthetical note is an excellent tool to concisely convey a wealth of information. The simplest form is a straightforward citation of quoted material:

- The author of the epistle identifies himself as “James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ” (Jas 1:1).

¹ Note: “e.g., . . .” means “for example, . . .” and “i.e., . . .” means “that is, . . .”

- **Here, the sentence flows naturally into the quotation so no punctuation is needed to introduce the quoted material.**
- Paul exhorts Timothy, saying, “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).
 - **Here, the quote is preceded by an introductory statement (“saying”), so you include a comma before the quote (see also: Paul says to Timothy, “Preach . . .”).**
- Paul then lists several exhortations for Timothy to follow: “Preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching” (2 Tim 4:2).
 - **Here, there is a complete sentence (i.e., an independent clause) before the quoted material, so you include a colon before the quote.**

Now, in all of the above examples, the Bible citation goes *after* the final quotation mark but *before* the period. For a list of the correct Bible abbreviations, see Appendix 1.

Let’s move on to some more complicated examples. In certain instances, you may want to cite multiple passages in relation to a particular topic that you are discussing or a particular point that you are making. Here is an example:

- I believe that one day yet future Christ will physically return in glory as judge and king and will bodily resurrect all humankind—the righteous will inherit eternal life and the wicked will inherit eternal condemnation (Dan 12:2; Matt 25:34, 46; John 5:28-29; Acts 1:11, 24:15; 2 Tim 4:1; 2 Thess 1:7-9; Rev 20:13, 15; 21:6-8).

A couple items worth noting here: (1) only abbreviations are to be used; (2) the references must be listed in *canonical order* (i.e., the order that the books appear in most English translations); (3) multiple verses cited in the same Bible chapter are separated by a comma (e.g., Matt 25:34, 46); and (4) multiple verses cited in different chapters of the same Bible book are separated by a semicolon with no repetition of the book’s name (e.g., Rev 20:13, 15; 21:6-8).

Now, maybe you want to quote a passage—or refer to one or more passages—but then direct the reader’s attention to related—though distinct—passages. Here are some examples:

- In fact, death has reigned—as a ruling power over the world—ever since the sin of Adam (Rom 5:12-18; cf. Gen 2:17; 1 Cor 15:21a, 22a).
 - **Here, “Rom 5:12-18” is the specific text that supports my proposition, but I want the reader to *compare* (“cf.” is an abbreviation of the Latin *confer*, which means “compare”) “Rom 5:12-18” with “Gen 2:17; 1 Cor 15:21a, 22a.” In essence, I am indicating that the first citation *directly* supports my point and that the citations following “cf.” *indirectly* support my point.**
- Death is also a power under the control of Satan (Heb 2:14), who is the “prince of the power of the air” (Eph 2:2), the “god of this world” (2 Cor 4:4; cf. John 14:30), and the “deceiver of the whole world” (Rev 12:9).
 - **Here, I have multiple citations, each one supporting its own point. In the note “(2 Cor 4:4; cf. John 14:30),” “2 Cor 4:4” is the specific passage that the quote “god of this world” comes from, but “cf. John 14:30” tells the reader to “compare to” John 14:30 because similar language is found in that verse as well. Also, notice how this example incorporates quoted material throughout.**

Another scenario worth mentioning is how to cite or refer to a specific passage while also directing the reader's attention to a *parallel* passage. Such a situation is unique to certain related books of the Bible: for example, Kings // Chronicles, and Matthew // Mark // Luke.

- After King Amon was put to death by his servants, Josiah became king over Judah (2 Kgs 21:23-24 // 2 Chron 22:24-25).
 - **Here, both passages accurately support the content that precedes the parenthetical note.**
- Jesus drives the money-changers out of the temple, saying, "It is written, 'My house shall be called a house of prayer,' but you make it a den of robbers" (Matt 21:13 // Mark 11:17).
 - **Here, the quote comes from Matthew 21:13, but it is also found in Mark 11:17, though the wording is slightly different.**

How to Indicate a Bible Translation

You will notice that *none* of the above examples that include quoted Bible material actually indicate which English translation is being used. I have intentionally withheld such proper formatting for the present moment—so as to eliminate any confusion. Let's pretend that what follows is the beginning of any given paper (that is to say: let's pretend that what follows is the *first instance* of a Bible quotation in a paper).

When you are writing your paper, you must indicate which English translation you are using *for quoted material only*. If you are like me, you have a go-to translation that you use for almost all Bible quotations. I typically use the ESV for all of my Bible quotations, and I only switch to another translation if I want to discuss a translation issue. So, after your first Bible quotation, insert a footnote that reads, "Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the ESV." Here is an example:

- Body text: In John 1:29, for example, Jesus is described as the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world."
- Footnote text: "Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the ESV."

Now, if you switch to another translation here and there to make a particular point (e.g., to highlight a translation discrepancy), then you just need to indicate which (different from the main) translation you are using in those particular instances. For example, if you primarily use the ESV but you want to include a quotation from the NIV to emphasize its unique language, then you would write the following:

- John 3:16, probably the most quoted verse in the Bible, says, "For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life" (NIV).

In summary, give a footnote after the first Bible quotation to declare the dominant translation used throughout, then mention other translations parenthetically only when you briefly switch to a different translation. If not translation is listed parenthetically, then it should be assumed that you are drawing on your dominant translation (mentioned earlier in a footnote).

Miscellaneous Notes

Verse Abbreviations

When you are working with one specific passage at length, you may consider using shorthand notations in parenthetical notes. So, here's the rule: (1) write out "verse #" or "verses #-#" in the main part of the sentence (do *not* abbreviate here); (2) abbreviate as "v. #" or "vv. #-#" in parenthetical notes (do *not* write out completely here).

- **In a lengthy treatment of Ephesians 2:1-10**
 - In verse 4, Paul abruptly transitions to the believer's present reality in Christ.
 - While Paul discusses believers' spiritual status prior to faith in Christ in verses 1-3, he articulates the believer's current spiritual status in verses 4-10.
- **In a lengthy treatment of Acts 1**
 - In verse 7a, the disciples insist that *now* is the time for the restoration of the kingdom to Israel. However, Jesus immediately replies, "It is not for you to know times or seasons that the Father has fixed by his own authority. But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit has come upon you, and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the end of the earth" (vv. 7b-8).

How to Cite the Book of Psalms

Citing and referring to the book of Psalms can be tricky. For example, when do you write "Psalms" versus "psalms" versus "Pss"? Here's everything you need to know:

- **When you are citing one specific psalm in a parenthetical note**
 - In addition to Scripture, God has revealed himself in the world (Ps 19:1-6; Rom 1:19-20).
 - David said, "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want" (Ps 23:1).
- **When you are citing two or more psalms in a parenthetical note**
 - God is omni-benevolent—that is, perfectly good (Pss 106:1; 119:68; 145:9).
- **When you are citing one specific psalm in the main part of the sentence**
 - In Psalm 23, David reflects upon God as his shepherd.
- **When you are citing two or more psalms in the main part of the sentence**
 - Psalms 2, 22, and 110 look forward to the coming Messiah.
- **When you are referring to a psalm (or multiple psalms) generically, but you are not citing them as specific titles (see also each bolded bullet point above in this section)**
 - These three psalms are unique in that they look forward to the coming Messiah.
 - The author of this psalm is unknown; however, most scholars attribute authorship to David.
- **When you are referring to the book of Psalms as a title (as I did here)**
 - Both Psalms and Proverbs both represent Hebrew poetic literature.
- **When you are referring to the psalms as a group or category (as I did here)**
 - During my Bible reading this morning, a couple of psalms and proverbs really resonating with me.

Capitalization

Concerning references to the Bible, always capitalize “Scripture,” “Bible,” “God’s Word,” and “the Word of God,” but do not capitalize “biblical,” “biblically,” “scriptural,” or “scripturally” unless they begin a sentence.

Divine Pronouns

The prevailing trend among contemporary academic writers is to **not capitalize divine pronouns** (i.e., “he,” “him,” “they”) when referring to persons of the Godhead (i.e., Father, Son, and Holy Spirit)—for example, capitalizing “he” when “God” or “Jesus” is the antecedent. However, there is no hard and fast rule at present. So, while I generally recommend that you follow this trend, I also specifically recommend that you (1) follow your professor’s preference and (2) follow your conscience.

Conclusion

Correct use of Bible references, citations, and translations is essential to academic writing. It demonstrates clarity, consistency, and—most importantly—fidelity to the Scriptures (especially with regard to actual quotations of Bible content). In this brief post, we reviewed how to appropriately mention Bible books within a sentence, how to correctly cite Bible passages within parenthetical notes, and how to properly indicate what English translation you are using for quoted Bible material. At this point, you have probably learned way more than you ever wanted to about Bible references; but, your professors, graders, and reviewers will greatly appreciate it! You can thank me later.

Now, if you are still craving more of that sweet Bible citation goodness, there are appendices! In it, you will find examples of complex situations. Happy writing!

APPENDIX 1
Bible Abbreviations

Old Testament

<u>Abbrev.</u>	<u>Book Title</u>
Gen	Genesis
Exod	Exodus
Lev	Leviticus
Num	Numbers
Deut	Deuteronomy
Josh	Joshua
Judg	Judges
Ruth	Ruth
1-2 Sam	1-2 Samuel
1-4 Kgdms	1-4 Kingdoms (LXX)
1-2 Kgs	1-2 Kings
1-2 Chr	1-2 Chronicles
Ezra	Ezra
Neh	Nehemiah
Esth	Esther
Job	Job
Ps/Pss	Psalms/Psalms
Prov	Proverbs
Eccl (or Qoh)	Ecclesiastes (or Qoheleth)
Song (or Cant)	Song of Songs (Song of Solomon, or Canticles)
Isa	Isaiah
Jer	Jeremiah
Lam	Lamentations
Ezek	Ezekiel
Dan	Daniel
Hos	Hosea
Joel	Joel
Amos	Amos
Obad	Obadiah
Jonah	Jonah
Mic	Micah
Nah	Nahum
Hab	Habakkuk
Zeph	Zephaniah
Hag	Haggai
Zech	Zechariah
Mal	Malachi

New Testament

<u>Abbrev.</u>	<u>Book Title</u>
Matt	Matthew
Mark	Mark
Luke	Luke
John	John
Acts	Acts
Rom	Romans
1-2 Cor	1-2 Corinthians
Gal	Galatians
Eph	Ephesians
Phil	Philippians
Col	Colossians
1-2 Thess	1-2 Thessalonians
1-2 Tim	1-2 Timothy
Titus	Titus
Phlm	Philemon
Heb	Hebrews
Jas	James
1-2 Pet	1-2 Peter
1-2-3 John	1-2-3 John
Jude	Jude
Rev	Revelation

APPENDIX 2

Complex Citation Examples

- At the point of rebirth, a definite moral change transpires within believers where they receive new spiritual life which enables them to resist sin (1 John 3:9). In Romans 6, Paul speaks of this initial step in sanctification as one that destroys sin’s hold over believers. Yet, definitive sanctification is not all-inclusive for believers are not entirely free from sin until death or judgment (Phil 3:12; 1 John 1:8, 10). Thus, sanctification is also progressive, as evidenced in 2 Corinthians 3:18, where Paul describes Christians as those who “are being changed into his likeness from one degree of glory to another” (RSV).²
- For example, the apostle Paul, in 2 Corinthians, twice proclaims that Christ “died for all” (5:14-15 ESV). He also says to his beloved disciple Timothy that Christ “gave himself as a ransom for all” (1 Tim 2:5-6) and is the “Savior of all people, especially of those who believe” (4:10). Finally, the author of Hebrews states that Christ suffered death so that He would “taste death for everyone” (Heb 2:9).²⁵
- Fortunately, however, Scripture is replete with details on the destiny of these malefactors. Isaiah, looking toward God’s future glorification, says that God will “swallow up death forever” (25:8 ESV).²¹ Paul, in 1 Corinthians, draws on this passage in Isaiah—as well as Hosea 13:14²²—to speak of believers’ victory over sin and death through Christ, saying, “‘Death is swallowed up in victory.’ ‘O death, where is your victory? O death, where is your sting?’” (1 Cor 15:54b-55). Jesus Himself speaks of his victory over the powers of darkness when he says, “Now is the judgment of the ruler of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out” (John 12:31; cf. 16:9), and “I have overcome the world” (16:31).²³ Concurrently, Paul says of Christ, “Disarming the rulers and authorities, he has made a public disgrace of them, triumphing over them by the cross” (2:15 NET). Finally, speaking eschatologically of Jesus, Paul says, “Then comes the end, when he delivers up the kingdom to God the Father after destroying every rule and every authority and power. For he must reign until he has put all enemies under his feet. The last enemy to be destroyed is death” (1 Cor 15:24-26 ESV; cf. Rev 20:13-14).
 - **Notice, in all of the above examples, there are footnotes included at the end of various sentences. These are reserved for reference to or discussion of *non-biblical* source material only (e.g., commentators, theologians, historians).**
- One of the boundaries of an orthodox eschatology is the judgment of the righteous and the wicked (ultimate righteousness, eternal life, and glory for the righteous and ultimate punishment for the wicked; Dan 12:2-3; Matt 25:31-46; John 5:28-29; Acts 24:15; 2 Thess 1:5-10; Rev 20:12-13).
 - **When you would have two parenthetical notes back to back, you combine the two into one and separate them with a semi-colon.**

² Student example. Used with permission.