

Gospel Truth

Biblical Instruction and Encouragement for the
Mission Field Worldwide.

WHERE DID OUR BIBLE COME FROM?

While many Christians read the Bible and refer to it as “the Word of God,” few have given much thought to its origin. The Bible did not appear as a completed book but came to us through a long historical process—God revealed truth, people wrote it down, the writings were received and shared, copied and preserved, and eventually collected and translated. As the Christian faith and the authority of the Bible are increasingly questioned, believers should understand the history of the Scriptures and their preservation.

This matters because people sometimes claim that men or church councils decided what the Bible should contain. History, however, tells a very different story.

The Bible Is a Collection of Books

The word “Bible” comes from the Greek *biblia*, meaning “books.” The Bible contains 66 books, 39 in the Old Testament and 27 in the New Testament. These books were written by many people over many centuries. The writers came from different backgrounds—kings, prophets, priests, shepherds, fishermen, a physician, a tax collector, missionaries, and church leaders. Yet Christians believe that while there were many human writers, there was ultimately one divine Author.

“Holy men of God spake as they were moved by the Holy Ghost” (2 Peter 1:21). The message came from God, and these writings were received as Scripture, God’s inspired Word. “All scripture is given by inspiration of God” (2 Timothy 3:16).

The Old Testament Came First

The books of the Old Testament were written primarily in Hebrew, with some portions in Aramaic. The 39 books are commonly grouped as the Law, History, Poetry/Wisdom, and the Prophets. The Law, or Torah, consists of the first five books of the Bible, traditionally known as the books of Moses.

The traditional Hebrew Bible arranges these writings under three main divisions: the Law, the Prophets, and the Writings. It counts 24 books rather than 39 because several are combined. First and Second Samuel are counted as one book, as are First and Second Kings and First and Second Chronicles. Ezra and Nehemiah are combined, and the twelve Minor Prophets are counted as one book.

The Scriptures Existed Before Christianity

Long before Christianity began, Israel possessed and revered a recognized body of sacred Scripture. The Law and the Prophets were firmly established, together with other sacred writings that formed the Hebrew Scriptures.

Christianity did not create the Old Testament. These writings were already recognized as Scripture among the Jewish people. Jesus treated them as authoritative, quoting from them repeatedly and affirming them as the Word of God.

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“The Bible did not appear as a completed book but came to us through a long historical process.”

WHAT THE BIBLE TEACHES ABOUT...

Word of God

2 Tim. 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21; Matt. 24:35

Relationship of Love

Matt. 22:37–40; John 14:21–23; 1 John 4:7–11

Repentance

Acts 3:19; Acts 17:30; 2 Cor. 7:10

New Birth

John 3:3–7; 2 Cor. 5:17; Rom. 6:1–4;
Eph. 2:1, 5–6

Freedom From Sin

1 John 5:18; Matt. 1:21; John 8:11

Infilling of the Holy Spirit

Acts 19:2; Acts 15:8–9; Acts 1:8

Holiness

Luke 1:73–75; Heb. 12:14; 1 Peter 1:15–16;
Titus 2:11–12; Rom. 6:22

Kingdom of God

Luke 17:20–21; Romans 14:17; John 18:36

The Church

Acts 2:47; Eph. 4:4–6; 1 Cor. 12:12–13; Col. 1:18

Unity

John 17:20–23; Gal. 3:28; Rev. 18:2–4

Ordinances

Matt. 28:19–20; Matt. 26:26–30;
1 Cor. 11:23–27; John 13:14–17

Divine Healing

Luke 4:18; Isaiah 53:4–5; James 5:13–16

Sanctity of Marriage

Matt. 19:5–6; Luke 16:18; Rom. 7:2–3;
1 Cor. 7:10–11

Outward Appearance

1 Tim. 2:9–10; 1 Cor. 11:14–15; Deut. 22:5

End of Time

2 Peter 3:7–12; John 5:28–29; 2 Cor. 5:10;
Matt. 25:31–46

Pacifism

Luke 6:27–29; Luke 18:20

Worship

John 4:23–24; Eph. 5:19; 2 Cor. 3:17

Great Commission

Mark 16:15

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“And he said unto them, These are the words which I spake unto you, while I was yet with you, that all things must be fulfilled, which were written in the law of Moses, and in the prophets, and in the psalms, concerning me. Then opened he their understanding, that they might understand the scriptures” (Luke 24:44–45).

Jesus’ reference to the Law, Prophets, and Psalms reflects the major divisions of the Hebrew Scriptures and shows that He spoke of them as an existing, authoritative body of sacred writings.

The Old Testament Was Carefully Preserved

For centuries, these ancient writings were copied and preserved on scrolls. Before the printing press, every copy of Scripture had to be made by hand. Jewish scribes carefully copied the Hebrew Scriptures from generation to generation. Small differences could naturally occur: spelling differences, repeated or omitted words, and minor differences in wording. Those differences do not mean the Old Testament was continually rewritten or changed into a different message.

Later Jewish scholars known as the Masoretes, working from about the sixth through the tenth centuries A.D., carefully preserved the traditional Hebrew text. They also added vowel markings, accents, and textual notes to record how the Hebrew was read. The textual tradition they preserved became known as the Masoretic Text, which underlies most modern editions of the Hebrew Old Testament. The Masoretes did not create a new Hebrew Bible. They preserved a Hebrew text already handed down for centuries.

Beginning in 1947, ancient Jewish manuscripts were discovered near the Dead Sea. Among them were manuscripts of Old Testament books dating from before and around the time of Christ. Some were roughly a thousand years older than many medieval Hebrew manuscripts scholars had previously relied upon. For the first time, scholars could compare these ancient copies with Hebrew manuscripts preserved nearly a thousand years later. While there are variations among the manuscripts, the Hebrew text shows substantial continuity through the centuries.

By the time Christ came, the Scriptures of Israel had already been written and passed down for generations. His coming would mark the beginning of the New Testament era, when the message of Christ and His apostles would also be committed to writing. ■

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Editorial



The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. — Isaiah 40:8

Men have tried to suppress the Word of God. Centuries have passed, languages have changed, manuscripts have been copied, and Bibles have been burned, but God's Word still stands. Oh, hallelujah! There is no power that can destroy the life-changing truth of God's holy Word.

The topic this quarter is "Where Did Our Bible Come From?" It is true that the Bible, as a written document and book, came through human hands, but that does not mean it is merely a human book. God inspired men to write His Word, and through centuries of copying, recognition, translation, and distribution, that Word has been handed down to us.

The historical evidence gives substantial reason for confidence in what we have received. Just as God inspired what was written throughout the ages, I have faith and confidence that He was also providentially at work as the Scriptures were recognized and passed down. Human beings are fallible, and no translator is perfect, but the message itself is of divine origin.

The physical book is not divine; its Author is perfect. John 1:14 says, "And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth." Jesus Christ is the living Word, and the written Word reveals Him and makes known the truth of God to mankind.

When we open our hearts to the Word and receive its instruction and guidance, our lives will never be the same. People can argue over translations and the authenticity of manuscripts, but thousands of years later the Word still speaks to the heart, convicts of sin, gives direction, and changes lives.

I believe the Scriptures not only because of the historical evidence. I believe because of the power of the divine Author who is working in my life today. The Bible teaches of sin and of the power to be delivered from it. It teaches of bondage and of a Savior who came from heaven, suffered, and died on the cross that we might be forgiven and redeemed. It teaches us that through the Holy Spirit we can live a life of holiness and walk in the presence of God.

The Bible is true, and it works. Its message is still changing lives, and its promises are still sure.

Michael W. Smith

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KEY TERMS

Canon — The collection of books recognized as authoritative Scripture.

Codex — A manuscript in book form, with leaves bound together rather than a scroll.

Manuscript — A text or document written by hand.

Textual Variant — A difference in the text among surviving manuscript copies.



The NEW TESTAMENT:

FROM APOSTLE TO SCRIPTURE

Following Christ's resurrection and ascension, the apostles continued preaching the gospel. In the early church, the gospel was spread largely through preaching and oral teaching. Within about twenty years, apostolic letters were already being written to instruct and encourage the churches. By about A.D. 65–75, the Gospel of Mark, generally considered the earliest written Gospel, had been composed. Other written accounts of the life and teaching of Christ followed during the remaining decades of the first century. Sacred writings began to emerge from Christ's apostles and their close associates in the apostolic church. These writings eventually came to be recognized together as the New Testament. The New Testament contains four Gospels, Acts, twenty-one epistles, and Revelation.

The Apostolic Writings Began to Circulate

The New Testament did not appear as one completed 27-book collection. The Gospels, letters, and other writings originally existed as individual documents written to particular churches or people. These writings were not kept only by their original recipients but were circulated among other congregations. Paul gave an example of this in Colossians 4:16, "And when this epistle is read among you, cause that it be read also in the church of the Laodiceans; and that ye likewise read the epistle from Laodicea." The writings that would eventually make up the New Testament were already being read, shared, and circulated among the churches during the apostolic period.

Recognized as Scripture

Some of the apostolic writings that circulated among the early churches were recognized as divinely inspired and treated as Scripture. Peter referred to Paul's epistles and said that some wrested them "as they do also the other scriptures" (2 Peter 3:15–16).

This demonstrates that the recognition of apostolic writings as Scripture had already begun during the apostolic period.

The Basis for Recognition

Various writings circulated among early Christians. Some were useful, respected, and edifying, but that did not make them Scripture. A writing could be ancient, popular, and written by a Christian without being divinely inspired.

The church did not create Scripture or give these writings their authority. Rather, early Christians sought to recognize which writings carried apostolic authority and were inspired by God. Several considerations were important in this process:

1. **Apostolic Connection.** Was the writing from an apostle or someone closely associated with the apostles?
2. **Agreement with Apostolic Teaching.** Was it consistent with the teaching of Christ and the apostles and the faith already received by the church?
3. **Widespread Reception.** Was the writing known and received among churches in different regions rather than only in one locality?
4. **Continuous Christian Use.** Had it been known and used from early times in Christian worship, preaching, and teaching?

These were not four official tests established by a council, but were important considerations evident as early Christians distinguished apostolic Scripture from other writings.

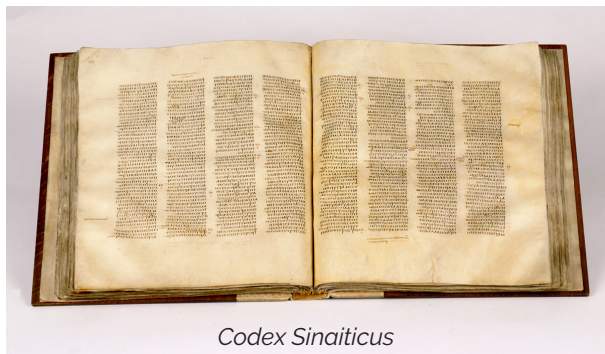
A Growing Consensus

The 27 books of the New Testament did not come together as a complete collection at one time. A large core of New Testament writings was broadly received very early, while agreement concerning a smaller number developed more gradually. By about A.D. 180, Irenaeus clearly identified Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John as the four Gospels received by the church.

In the early fourth century, Eusebius distinguished between writings that were widely accepted and others that remained disputed in some places. Among the disputed books he named James, Jude, 2 Peter, 2 John, and 3 John, while noting that these writings were nevertheless recognized by many. Revelation also experienced differing reception. By A.D. 367, Athanasius, in his 39th Festal Letter, listed the same 27 New Testament books used today.

The New Testament writings arose from the apostolic church, circulated among the churches, and were received as Scripture. Over time, a broad consensus developed around the 27 books that make up the New Testament today. ■

HOW THE SCRIPTURES WERE PRESERVED AND PASSED DOWN



Codex Sinaiticus

For centuries, the Scriptures were copied by hand, passed from one region to another, and translated into languages people could understand. Though handwritten manuscripts contain normal variations, the message of Scripture was preserved and passed down from generation to generation. Manuscripts, ancient translations, and eventually the printing press all became part of that remarkable history.

“The existence of many manuscript witnesses makes comparison possible and allows differences in the text to be carefully examined and evaluated.”

From Scroll to Codex

Most ancient literary works circulated on scrolls. Christians, however, adopted the codex—the bound-book form—very early. By the second century, Christians were making extensive use of the codex for Scripture, even while scrolls remained common in the broader Roman world.

The codex offered several advantages. It was easier to handle, could hold a larger amount of text, and allowed multiple writings to be bound together in a single volume. Gospels, apostolic letters, and eventually larger collections of Scripture could be gathered together in one book.

Some of the earliest Christian manuscripts survive as fragments from codices rather than scrolls. The earliest surviving complete New Testament is found in Codex Sinaiticus, a handwritten Greek Christian Bible from the mid-fourth century.

Copied by Hand

For centuries, every additional copy of Scripture had to be written by hand. If a congregation wanted another Gospel or apostolic letter, someone had to reproduce it manually. Copies circulated among churches and often became the source for more copies.

Because human beings were copying by hand, differences naturally appeared from manuscript to manuscript—spelling changes, omitted or repeated words, slight shifts in word order, or occasionally a word or phrase added for explanation. These differences are known as **textual variants**. A variant does not necessarily mean a major change; many are small and

readily identified. Some of the more substantial variants require careful study and comparison.

Not all handwritten manuscripts were identical, and understandably so. These differences do not mean that the biblical text became hopelessly corrupted. In fact, the existence of many manuscript witnesses makes comparison possible and allows differences in the text to be carefully examined and evaluated.

Comparing the Manuscripts

If only one ancient copy survived, there would be no independent manuscript with which to compare it. Instead, scholars possess many manuscripts from different periods and places. When copies differ, scholars compare the evidence rather than simply accepting one manuscript unquestioningly.

Textual criticism is the study and comparison of handwritten biblical manuscripts to determine, as closely as possible, the earliest wording supported by the evidence. In this use, “criticism” does not mean questioning the truth of Scripture, but carefully analyzing the available textual evidence.

Scholars examine the age and geographical distribution of manuscripts, relationships among the manuscripts, grammar and context, evidence from ancient translations, quotations of Scripture by early Christian writers, and which reading best explains how other readings may have arisen.

The large number of manuscript witnesses allows textual differences to be identified,

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compared, and carefully evaluated, rather than leaving us dependent upon a single ancient copy.

Scripture Crosses Language Barriers



“The goal is to communicate as accurately and faithfully as possible, without allowing personal bias to change the message.”

Translation of Scripture was not something new after the time of Christ. Several centuries before Christ, the Hebrew Scriptures began to be translated into Greek. These Greek translations came to be known collectively as the **Septuagint**. The Septuagint was widely used among Greek-speaking Jews and later among early Christians. New Testament writers often quote Old Testament passages in wording that follows the Septuagint.

As Christianity spread among people who spoke many different languages, Greek was not understood by everyone. Biblical writings therefore began to be translated into other languages. Early translations included Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, and Georgian. These translations helped make Scripture accessible to Christians in different cultures and regions. They also provide valuable evidence for comparison, since an early translation can preserve traces of the text available to its translators.

Jerome worked in the late fourth and early fifth centuries. He revised Latin Gospel texts using Greek manuscripts and translated much of the Old Testament from Hebrew. His work, along with other Latin biblical texts, became part of the Latin Bible known as the Vulgate. The Vulgate became the dominant Bible of Western Christianity for many centuries.

The Careful Work of Translation

It is the difficult job of the translator to work from the source languages—the Hebrew and Aramaic of the Old Testament and the Greek of

the New Testament—and convey the correct meaning in another language. Translation is not simply replacing a Hebrew or Greek word with one word in another language. Languages differ in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, idioms, and shades of meaning. At times, a strict word-for-word substitution can actually communicate the wrong meaning.

Translators must consider both what the original wording says and how that meaning can be faithfully expressed in another language. The goal is to communicate as accurately and faithfully as possible, without allowing personal bias to change the message or the meaning intended by the biblical author.

Textual criticism and translation are related but different tasks. Textual criticism is the work of comparing manuscripts to determine the wording best supported by the evidence. Translation is the work of expressing that wording faithfully in another language. Biblical inspiration refers to the original writings, while translation is the careful work of communicating those writings to others.

Printing Changes Everything

For centuries, the Bible was reproduced by hand. The development of movable-type printing in Europe changed how quickly and consistently books could be reproduced. In Germany, about A.D. 1454–1455, Johannes Gutenberg printed the Gutenberg Bible in Latin, using the Vulgate text. This was a major milestone in the history of printing. It increased the speed of reproduction, improved consistency between copies, and enabled much wider distribution of Scripture.

Printing made producing the Bible far easier, but many people still could not read Scripture in their own language. ■





Did Constantine or the Council of Nicaea Choose the Books of the Bible?

No. The Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325 did not meet to decide which books belonged in the Bible. Its major concern was controversy concerning the nature of Christ and His relationship to the Father.

Long before Nicaea, the Gospels, apostolic letters, and other New Testament writings were already being read and received among Christian churches. A large body of New Testament Scripture was recognized

very early, while a smaller number of books took longer to gain widespread agreement.

Constantine and the Council of Nicaea did not create the Bible, choose the four Gospels, or give Scripture its authority. The idea that the Bible was decided by a vote at Nicaea does not agree with the historical record.

Why Do Some Bibles Contain Additional Books?

The difference comes from ancient Jewish and early Christian writings that were known and sometimes valued but were not universally recognized as inspired Scripture.

The traditional Hebrew Bible did not include the books now commonly called the Apocrypha. However, some appeared in the Greek collection of Jewish Scripture and were later used by many Christians. Roman Catholic Bibles call several of them Deuterocanonical. Eastern Orthodox Bibles also include additional books, although their collection differs somewhat.

The original 1611 King James Version printed the Apocrypha in a separate section between the Old and New Testaments. In 1546, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent formally declared its Deuterocanonical books part of the Catholic canon.

Other ancient writings, such as the Book of Enoch, were also known. Jude 14–15 contains wording similar to 1 Enoch, but quoting a writing does not make the entire book inspired Scripture. Paul also quoted nonbiblical writers without recognizing all their writings as Scripture.

These books were not secretly removed or recently discovered. They were known, read, and evaluated, but did not receive the same broad and continuous recognition as the books of Scripture. The difference is not whether these writings existed, but whether they were genuinely inspired by God and received as Scripture.

The Bible in the Hands of the People

For much of Christian history, owning and reading a Bible in one's own language was not a blessing to take for granted. In medieval England, Roman Catholic church authorities opposed unauthorized English translations and restricted efforts to place Scripture into the hands of ordinary people.

John Wycliffe was an English theologian and scholar in the 1300s who believed Scripture should be available to the people. Wycliffe and his followers were associated with the first complete English Bible, translated primarily from the Latin Vulgate. His teachings were condemned by church authorities. He died naturally in 1384, but more than forty years later his remains were dug up, burned, and his ashes scattered.

More than a century later, **William Tyndale** translated the New Testament directly from Greek into English and had it printed in 1526. Roman Catholic church authorities condemned the translation, confiscated copies, and publicly burned them.

In 1535, Tyndale was betrayed, arrested, and imprisoned. His conflict with church authorities involved his broader Reformation beliefs as well as his work with Scripture. After more than a year in prison, he was convicted of heresy. In 1536, Tyndale was strangled, and his body was then burned at the stake. Tradition records his final prayer as "Lord, open the King of England's eyes."

Tyndale died, but his translation did not. His work profoundly influenced later English Bibles, including the King James Version of 1611.

The struggle to place Scripture into the hands of ordinary people is not only a story of the past. Even today, Bible ownership or distribution is restricted or dangerous in some countries, while poverty and lack of availability keep believers elsewhere from owning a Bible. The circumstances differ, but the need remains the same: people everywhere need the Word of God in a language they can understand. ■



DID YOU KNOW?

The **Great Isaiah Scroll**, discovered among the Dead Sea Scrolls, was **copied more than a century before the birth of Christ**. Yet it **already contained Isaiah 53**, which speaks of one who would be “wounded for our transgressions,” bear the sins of others, and be “cut off out of the land of the living.” This manuscript was clear evidence that the prophecy existed long before the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and was not written after the events it describes.



A Word
in Season

THE LIVING POWER OF GOD’S WORD

For the word of God is quick, and powerful... — Hebrews 4:12

God’s Word is not a collection of dead words on a page. It is living truth that reaches into the heart and works in the lives of those who receive it. Hebrews describes the Word as “quick,” or living. It is not merely something to study historically or admire from a distance.

This is why the enemy has worked so hard throughout history to hinder the spread of Scripture. Yet where the Bible is readily available, it can easily become commonplace. It may sit unopened while people are “too busy” to read, meditate, and allow God’s Word to speak to them.

Reading the Bible should never be viewed as bondage. It is a privilege. God has given us His Word to show us the way of life. It is a light for our path when the world around us is filled with darkness, human reasoning, and confusion. Scripture was given “for doctrine, for reproof, for correction, for instruction in righteousness” (2 Timothy 3:16). The Word teaches us, exposes what is wrong, corrects our thinking, and shows us how to live.

The Word reaches places that human wisdom and advice cannot. It reveals attitudes and motives we may not recognize in ourselves. It challenges our excuses, gives strength when we are weak, and brings clarity when our thinking has become clouded. Sometimes it comforts us, and sometimes it confronts us—but always for our good.

First Thessalonians 2:13 says that the Word of God “effectually worketh also in you that believe.” That is the difference between simply possessing a Bible and truly receiving the Word of God. When it is believed and obeyed, it works in us.

Jesus said, “the words that I speak unto you, they are spirit, and they are life” (John 6:63). The Bible is more than a history book or a collection of religious writings. It is God’s message to mankind, and it still has power to convict, direct, restore, and transform.

May we never become so familiar with the Bible that we lose our appetite for its living power. ■



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HOLINESS UNTO THE LORD



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