

How We Got the Bible

How Was the Bible Written?

Our Bible is not one book but a collection of books and letters written by about 40 writers over a period of 1,600 years, from the first writer, Moses, 1500 B. C., to the last writer, John, about 96 A. D. The writers were prophets and apostles of God, inspired and guided by the Holy Spirit in what they wrote. This makes the Bible different from any other book, for it is the word of God, not just the word of man. [See Exodus 34:27; Deuteronomy 31:9; Matthew 22:43; 2 Timothy 3:15-17; 2 Peter 1:20,21; 3:15,16; John 14:26; 15:26; 16:13; Acts 1:8; Galatians 1:12; Ephesians 3:3-5; 1 Corinthians 14:37; Luke 1:1-4; John 20:31; Hebrews 2:3,4; Colossians 4:16.]

At first the prophets and apostles spoke the word of God orally to the people. But later many of them wrote down the same inspired teachings so that we would have God's message preserved accurately after their death - Jeremiah 36:1, 2; 2 Peter 1:12-16. Our Bible is divided into two main parts, the Old Testament, containing God's word to God's people before the coming of Christ, and the New Testament, containing the gospel and teachings of Christ. Moses wrote the first five books of the Old Testament. After Moses' death the book of Joshua was added to this collection as a record of the continuing history of Israel. As other inspired men like Samuel, David, Isaiah and Daniel wrote in the succeeding generations, their writings were added to the collection of books known to be inspired by God.

By about 400 B. C. all the books contained in our Old Testament had been collected. Except for some short sections in Aramaic, these books were all written in the Hebrew language. An important translation of the Old Testament books into Greek was made in about 200 B. C. It is known as the Septuagint translation. For its time, it was a modern language translation. It is the version the New Testament writers usually used when quoting from the Old Testament scriptures.

We believe that the first book of the New Testament to be written was the book of James or the book of 1 Thessalonians, around 50 A. D. The last book to be written was probably the book of Revelation, about 96 A. D.

The Formation of the New Testament

The books and letters of the New Testament were written to different persons and churches in many places over a period of about 50 years. It took some time to collect them all together into one book. Back then there was no post office, automobile, air travel, E-mail or telephone, and communications were slow. There were no typewriters, computers or printing presses; every copy had to be made laboriously by hand.

At first those who received a certain letter from an apostle did not know what letters had been received by Christians in other places. But very soon they began to hear of the letters or books received by others. Peter, in the mid '60's A. D., was aware of Paul's letters and classed them with other inspired scripture - 2 Peter 3:15,16. Churches began to exchange copies of

inspired writings - Colossians 4:16. Since these writings were valued as God's word, they were carefully collected and kept.

Christians in different towns and countries told each other of the letters they had received from inspired apostles and prophets. For example, the church in one place might say to the church in another place, "We will send you a copy of the letter we received from Paul, but please send us a copy of the letter you received from John." As the churches exchanged copies, the church in any place was gradually able to collect more and more of the inspired books and letters.

This took a long time because the copies had to be carried mainly by foot travelers or on sailing ships. And Christians in widely separated places did not see each other often to exchange information about books that had been written or received. Persecution also made it hard for numbers of church leaders to meet and compare notes. But churches began to keep lists of books known to have been written by inspired apostles and prophets of the Lord. Whenever they learned of another such book, they added it to the list until finally all the inspired books were listed.

Making the list of genuine inspired books was not always easy. There were some books in circulation which were falsely written under the name of an apostle or prophet in order to gain acceptance of their teaching. There were other books which had good teaching in them but were not written by a divinely inspired person. Church leaders were extremely careful not to list any book which lacked evidence of having been written by an inspired writer.

The list of the genuine inspired writings is called the canon, a word which goes back to the Greek and Hebrew words for a cane. Canes were sometimes used as measuring rules, and so the canon came to mean the list of books which measured up to the standard for inspired books. The inspired books are referred to as the canonical books.

Religious writings which did not measure up to the canonical standard came to be known as the apocrypha, a word meaning hidden or doubtful. There were apocryphal books in both Old and New Testament times. The Roman Catholic Church accepts as canonical 12 apocryphal books from the Old Testament Period which the Jews themselves would not include in the Hebrew Bible, and which Protestants do not accept as inspired.

By 150 A. D. most of the books of our present New Testament had been brought together and accepted as scripture. Soon after this all our present books were included. There were some uninspired books which were for a time considered canonical by some church leaders until later evidence showed them to be non-canonical. There were also some inspired books which at first were not accepted by some church leaders but which were later included in the canon as more evidence of their inspiration came to light. The evidence for canonicity (inspired authorship) came partly from the churches who had first received the books and knew the authors, and partly from the contents of the books themselves.

After persecution ended, it was much more possible to communicate freely and to meet to consider the evidence for disputed books. From the time of the Council of Carthage, 397 A. D., the 27 books we now have in our New Testament have been accepted as inspired scripture. It is important to understand that the council did not make the books inspired. They were inspired from the time of their writing, and the evidence for their inspiration existed from the beginning in the local churches that received them, as well as in the character of the books themselves. The council only recognized the evidence that already existed.

How the Bible Was Passed Down to Us

We have seen how the books of our Bible were written at various times by various writers between 1500 B. C. and 100 A. D., and how the books were brought together into one collection. Let's look now at how the Bible was handed down to us.

The New Testament books were written in Greek, the Old Testament (with minor exceptions) in Hebrew. All the original documents were handwritten. We possess only copies of copies of the original documents. The originals perished long ago with use.

All the copies were made laboriously by hand, since printing was not invented until the 15th century A. D. A trained scribe took a year to make one copy of the Bible. A hand-made copy is known as a manuscript. We believe the Old Testament was written and copied on leather. The New Testament books were written on papyrus, or on more durable vellum or parchment made from animal skins.

When copying by hand, mistakes can be made. Obviously the older a manuscript copy is, and the closer it is to the time of the original, the less chance there is for mistakes to creep in. Scholars can tell when a manuscript was made by examining its style of letters and other features, as well as by variations in it from older manuscripts. By arranging the manuscripts in "family trees" of copies, scholars can determine when a particular copyist's error first crept in.

We have about 5,000 old Greek manuscripts of the New Testament from before the invention of printing. About 375 are in the "uncial" style of writing used before the ninth century. These older manuscripts are obviously the most important sources in determining the original Greek text. The oldest vellum manuscripts date back to the fourth century (300-400 A. D.). Some smaller portions of the New Testament have been found on papyrus dating back as early as the second century.

The earliest and most important substantial Greek manuscripts of the New Testament (in order of importance) are these: The Vatican Manuscript (4th century), so called because it is kept in the Vatican Library); the Sinaitic Manuscript (4th century), found in a monastery on Mt. Sinai and now kept in the British Museum; and the Alexandrian Manuscript (5th century). Scholars have had access to two of these only during the last century, and none of them was available when our King James Bible was translated. [The facts in these paragraphs are from How We Got the Bible by Dr. Neil R. Lightfoot of Abilene Christian University (The Way of Life Series, ACU Press 1986).]

Because scholars now have earlier manuscripts, better skills at detecting scribal errors, and increased knowledge of the original languages, we can be more certain than ever before of what the original writers wrote.

What About Copyists' Errors?

Are our Bibles today true to the original? Even with printing, typographical errors slip into our Bibles and have to be corrected in later editions. How much more so before the 14th century when each copy had to be made by hand. Every copyist's mistake, change, addition or omission would then be passed on through generations of copies starting from that copy. The earlier the manuscript, the less changes would have accumulated. Most changes introduced by copyists

were unintentional. These changes came from misreading the original, mental fatigue, mistaking marginal notes as part of the text, skipping lines because the eye returned to the same word further down the page, copying the same word twice, etc.

Intentional changes were usually honest efforts to correct what the scribe believed to be an error in the text he was copying--for example, making the words of Jesus in one gospel account agree exactly with his words on the same occasion in another gospel. More sinister are a few changes that may have been introduced to support some sectarian doctrine or to combat some perceived heresy.

An English Bible will be no more accurate than the Greek or Hebrew text it is translated from. Translators want to work from a text as close to the original as possible. They have the choice of either picking out one ancient manuscript they believe to be the most reliable and translating from it, or using the evidence from many manuscripts and other sources* to identify obvious changes and come up with a text as close as possible to the original. No single manuscript is completely free of copyist's errors and changes, and the second approach gets us much closer to the original wording. [*Other evidences include translations made early into other languages, and quotations from scripture in early writers.]

Believers are sometimes alarmed at statements that there are thousands of variant readings in the manuscripts of the Bible. But this sounds much worse than it actually is. For one thing, the count includes all the repetitions of the same variation in later copies since the variation first appeared. For another, the vast majority of variants have no effect on the meaning. They involve different spellings, minor changes in word order, omission or addition of "a" or "the," etc. Third, scholars have become very good at identifying which readings represent later changes from the original. There are a few variants such as Mark 16:9-20 where we cannot be sure. But none of these affects any principle of our faith; the same teachings are found elsewhere in scripture.

Others are troubled by "missing verses" or phrases in modern English translations, such as Acts 8:37; 1 John 5:7. We need to remember that there were no chapter or verse divisions in the original scriptures; these were added by editors centuries later. These editors were working with a text that contained scribal additions. These additions have since been identified, and our modern translators have done right in removing them or setting them off in brackets or italics or marginal notes. The removal of such verses does not mean that anything is missing from what was originally written. We should be grateful to scholars for identifying scribal additions, for we do not want to rely on something which was not in God's original word.

Are our Bibles today true to the original? Definitely yes. No other ancient writing has as much textual evidence as our Bible. On no other book has so much fine scholarship been concentrated to recover the pure text. Dr. Neil R. Lightfoot says, "Except for a few rare instances we have an unquestioned text, and even then one principle of faith or command of the Lord is not involved." Sir Frederic Kenyon called our Bible "the true word of God, handed down without essential loss."

Translation of the Bible Into English

We have seen that the Old Testament was written (with small exceptions) in Hebrew and the New Testament in Greek. After the Greeks conquered the world in the fourth century BC,

most people including the scattered Jews learned Greek. About 200 years before Christ the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into common, everyday Greek. The translation was known as the Septuagint Version, sometimes abbreviated as the ALXX.® The apostles and the early church usually quoted from this Greek translation when referring to the Old Testament.

Not long after the New Testament writings appeared, they also began to be translated into other languages for those who did not understand Greek. Translations were made into Syriac, Old Latin, Coptic, Ethiopic and other languages. About 400 A. D. **Jerome** translated the Bible into Latin and his translation, known as the Vulgate, later became the official Bible of the medieval Roman Catholic Church.

In Europe during the middle ages most common people could not read Latin and the translation of the scriptures into the common languages was not permitted by the medieval church. With the stirrings of reformation in the 14th Century, **John Wycliffe** made the first translation of the scriptures into English. His translation was from the Latin and was less accurate than if it had been made from the original languages. It was not widely circulated because printing had not yet been invented. Because of the translation, Wycliffe was condemned by a church court after his death and his bones burned.

The Reformation proper was fueled by translation of the scriptures into European languages, including Luther's German translation. The Dutch scholar Erasmus issued a Greek text of the New Testament in 1516, making it easier to translate the New Testament from the original Greek. **William Tyndale** soon made an English translation based on this text, plus translating parts of the Old Testament. Tyndale was condemned by a church court and executed for his work, but his English translation became the "father" of our English Bible.

Other English translations/revisions followed: **Coverdale's Bible** in 1535; **Roger's (or Matthew's) Bible** in 1537; **Taverner's Bible** and the **Great Bible** in 1539. The Great Bible was the first English translation authorized by the British crown to be read in the state-established Church of England. The **Geneva Bible** of 1560 was popular with the common people. But English church authorities issued another translation in 1568, the **Bishops' Bible**, authorized to be read in the state church.

Under pressure from the Protestant English translations and revisions, the Catholic Church produced the **Rheims-Douai English Version** in 1582-1611. It was translated from the Latin, not from the original languages.

Most of the English translations up to this time were favored by one religious faction and rejected by another. King James of England called for a translation which could be accepted by all, free of biased notes. The result was the **King James Version** issued by a group of scholars in 1611. The translators adopted many renderings from the earlier English translations, particularly Tyndale's. The King James Version itself has undergone many revisions and emendations since that time. It was strongly rejected at first by some, as new translations usually are, but it eventually became the most beloved and accepted English translation for over 300 years.

Modern English Versions

As beloved as the King James Bible has been, it could not serve the needs of English readers forever. No translation can. Just as there was once a need for the King James translation to replace previous English translations, there came a time for further English translations beyond the King James.

New English translations were needed for two reasons. **First, language is always changing.** The English of today is not the English of 1611. King James expressions like "Wot ye not?"; "We do you to wit"; "Ye are straitened in your own bowels;" "ouches of gold;" and "Jacob sod pottage" are confusing to most people. Some King James words are used today but have changed their meaning completely: In 1611 "prevent" meant to come before; "let" meant to hinder; "conversation" meant behavior. This is not criticism of the KJV; it is just a fact of time. We either have to translate King James English into today's English as we read (which most people can't or won't do), or we have to read a translation which accurately communicates the meaning of the original words in today's English.

Second, more accurate translation is possible now than in the time of the King James Version. Much more is known about the Greek and Hebrew languages. Also a number of earlier and more dependable ancient manuscripts have now been discovered, which were not available to the King James translators. We have already seen in our study how these discoveries have greatly improved our knowledge of the original text of the Bible and have helped identify later scribal additions and changes. This is not to criticize those who made the KJV; they did their best with what was then available to them. In their preface to the King James Bible, its translators pointed out the need for new translations as language and knowledge of the ancient text change.

The need for another translation was evident by the nineteenth century. Fifty-four eminent scholars began work on the **English Revised Version** in 1870 and completed it in 1885. Its U. S. counterpart, the **American Revised Version** (or **American Standard Version**) was issued in 1901. This revision was the most exact English translation ever made and was based on a much more accurate Greek text than the King James. But its English was literarily poor.

Continued improvement of the Greek text, added knowledge of the Greek and Hebrew, and the need to improve on the English of the Revision, led to the issuance of the **Revised Standard Version** in the U. S. in 1952. It recaptured the beauty of expression familiar in the King James Version. The **New English Bible** in Great Britain and the **New American Standard Bible** in the U. S. appeared in 1970. **Today's English Version**, a translation in simpler English, came out in 1978; and the **New International Version**, produced by evangelical scholars, in 1978. Other notable works include the **Jerusalem Bible** (Catholic), 1966, and **The Living Bible** (not a translation but a paraphrase by Kenneth N. Taylor), 1971. Very recently three more translations have appeared, the **Revised English Bible** (update on the NEB), the **New Revised Standard Version** (1989), and the **New King James Version (1984)**. There are many one-man translations such as those by Phillips, Moffatt, Weymouth, Goodspeed, Knox (Catholic) and Williams.

Which English Translation Should I Use?

No translation is perfect; each has its weaknesses and strong points. It is helpful to use more than one translation and to compare them. Also a particular translation may be more useful for a particular purpose. Factors in choosing a translation include:

1. Clear communication of the original meaning in today's language. While those who have been brought up on the KJV or the ASV are accustomed enough to get most of the message despite the archaic language, we should not use these versions when working with other people--there are enough barriers to the gospel already without adding a language barrier. We must care more for souls than for our own comfort. People are put off by the unfamiliar, and we may forget that they are not accustomed to the archaic language as we are. And we may be surprised how a later translation will enhance our own hearing of God's message once we overcome the emotional barrier to change.

2. Based on the most accurate Greek and Hebrew texts available. Most recent English versions are more faithful to the original because the translators had the help of older and more accurate manuscripts not available to KJV translators. The NKJV is reportedly weak on this point because its translators followed the same textual tradition as the original KJV.

3. Accuracy of translation. Knowledge of the ancient Hebrew and Greek has continually grown, enabling later translations to communicate the original meaning better.

4. One-Man versus group translation. One-man translations are useful for comparison, but a Bible translated by many scholars from varied religious backgrounds is safer from doctrinal bias and is improved by the combined linguistic ability of the group.

5. Literal translation versus sense translation. In such translations as the ASV and the NASB, the aim of the translators was to render the original language as literally as possible in English. If one does not know the original languages, this type of translation may be more useful than the freer translations when the outcome of an enquiry depends on details in the text. In a translation like the NEB, the translators were more interested in giving the overall sense. This allows for more readable English and helps capture the spirit of a passage. Sometimes an exactly literal translation, especially in the case of Hebrew or Greek idioms, actually obscures the meaning for English readers, and so the translators use some English expression that comes closest to the **idea** in the original. This is called "dynamic equivalence." Compare 1 Samuel 25:22 or Mark 6:37 in the KJV and the NIV.

The RSV and the NIV both fall somewhere between the literal approach and the sense approach in translation. The RSV is excellent for scholarly study and fine for personal reading. Its English could stand to be more contemporary, but it preserves the beauty of expression which made the KJV so great in its time. The NIV, though not without flaws, is based on good textual scholarship and presently it probably does the best job of communicating with people of average education in the United States.

6. Range of vocabulary. If you are working with people whose first language is not English, you may want to consider one of the versions which deliberately limit their vocabulary to simple English. **Today's English Version (Good News for Modern Man)** and the **Simple English Bible** are examples.

7. Freedom from doctrinal bias. Avoid versions such as the "New World Translation" whose wording has been strongly swayed by the need to support a cultic doctrine.

There is no perfect translation, but we are rich in a number of very good ones which clearly

reveal the mind and will of God.

For further study see Neil R. Lightfoot, *How we Got the Bible*, ACU Press; F. F. Bruce, *The New Testament Documents: Are They Reliable?*, Intersity Press; Bruce M. Metzger, *The Text of the New Testament: Its Transmission, Corruption and Restoration*, Oxford University Press; *History of the Bible in English*, Oxford University Press; and Jack P. Lewis, *The English Bible from KJV to NIV*, Baker.

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