

The Bible: Its History

Unit 1, Lesson 3

Memory Work:

Continue memorizing the books of the Bible.
Otherwise, memorize Hebrews 4:12.

The Bible was written in small portions over a long period of time by many people. "Canon" is the word used to describe the inspired and authoritative books of the Bible as determined by the early Church. The process by which the canon was determined took place over many years. This lesson will consider some highlights of that development.

Originally, early Biblical history was passed down orally from generation to generation. Genesis was written down by Moses, about 1500 BC, along with the other books of the Pentateuch. This makes the first five books of the Old Testament the oldest writings of the Bible. By the time of Joshua, who was to lead the Israelites after Moses' death, the "book of the Law" (Josh. 1:8) is already mentioned. This establishes that the oral history was now becoming a written one.

1. List the five books of the Pentateuch, in order, from memory:

- 1)
- 2)
- 3)
- 4)
- 5)

The Old Testament canon is the same as the canon of the Hebrew Bible. Even Jesus mentions the Law, the Prophets, and Psalms (Luke 24:44), which indicates that by the early years AD, these writings were compiled and recognized as authoritative Scriptures by the Jews.

2. Read **Matthew 5:17-19**. From what Jesus says about the Law and the Prophets, what can we assume about these books of the Old Testament?

"Canon," from the Greek, was a building term meaning rule or level. It referred to a standard dependable for its accuracy. It has come to mean the list or catalog of accepted books making up the Scriptures.

BC means "before Christ". Dates before Christ are measured backwards, with the "smaller" dates being more recent than the "larger" dates. BCE (before the common era) means the same as BC.

It is possible that the book of Job was written down earlier than Moses' writing, although this cannot be confirmed.

Old Testament = Hebrew Bible

AD is an abbreviation from the Latin "Anno Domino" meaning "the year of our Lord". These dates begin after the year 1 BC, with the first year being AD 1. CE (common era) refers to the same dates as AD.

Other times Jesus speaks of the Scriptures (Old Testament) are:

Matthew 5:17; 7:12; 11:13; 22:40
Luke 16:16, 31; 24:27, 44
John 6:45; 10:35

There are no Biblical manuscripts written by the original authors' hands in existence. Instead, copies of the originals (and copies of copies) have come through the years to provide the text that is our present-day Bible.

Most of the Old Testament was written in ancient Hebrew, with a few passages in Aramaic. The books that would make up the Jewish Bible were determined by "the Men of the Great Assembly", who were 120 men who led the Jewish people from about 500 BC to 200 BC.¹

In the 300's BC, Alexander the Great of Greece had conquered Palestine and Egypt, which brought the Greek language to the world around the Mediterranean Sea. Through the years, Hebrew was becoming a less familiar language among the Jews living outside Palestine, so they decided to translate the Scriptures into a more common language: Greek. In the mid-200's BC, the Hebrew Old Testament was translated into Greek by seventy (or seventy-two) Jewish elders in the city of Alexandria, Egypt.

This Greek translation became known as the Septuagint.

The Septuagint is made up of the 39 books of the Old Testament plus some apocryphal books which are not considered canon by Orthodox Jews or by Protestant Christians.² Palestinian Jews of the BC era did not include the apocryphal books in their list of Scriptures.³

From 200 BC to AD 68, unknown Jewish scribes made copies of the Hebrew Scriptures on scrolls of animal skins and papyrus which were then hidden in caves at Qumran, near the Dead Sea. The first of these manuscripts was found in 1947 and are today known as the Dead Sea Scrolls. The Dead Sea Scrolls are mostly fragments, of both Biblical and nonbiblical writings. Fragments have been found from every book of the Old Testament except for the book of Esther. A scroll of the entire book of Isaiah was found, which is 1000 years older than other existing Old Testament manuscripts.⁴

There is some debate whether a council of rabbis in Jamnia, Palestine, in about AD 90 may have been instrumental in identifying and, in effect, closing the canon of the Hebrew Bible so that no other books could be considered part of the Jewish canon. This may have occurred as an effort to prevent Jewish Christians from trying to include writings of the Apostles, which they would have considered authoritative, in the Hebrew canon.⁵

Around AD 700, Scriptures in the Hebrew language were standardized with pronunciation guides added (ancient Hebrew had no vowels). This Hebrew manuscript is known as the Masoretic Text since it was prepared by Jewish scribes known as the Masoretes (or Masorites).⁶

There is debate among scholars about which Scriptures are more accurate - the Greek Septuagint or the Hebrew Masoretic Text - since there are variations in the texts. Since the originals from which they were made no longer exist, there is no definitive answer to this question. In comparisons with the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest manuscripts now extant, more variations are found between the Scrolls and the Masoretic Text than with the Septuagint. Overall, though, the differences are minor and do not affect the truths of God's message to the faithful.⁷ This provides a clear example of how God has preserved the accuracy of His Word through the passage of time.

The Old Testament passages written in Aramaic are:

Ezra 4:8-6:18
Ezra 7:12-26
Jeremiah 10:11
Daniel 2:4-7:28

Septuagint is from the Latin meaning seventy and may be referred to by the Latin numerals LXX.

"Apocrypha" is a term for writings between the time of the prophet Malachi and the time of Jesus' earthly ministry. The seven books of the Apocrypha are also known as Deuterocanonical books (by Catholics) or pseudepigrapha (by Protestants).

Scrolls have been found in 11 different caves near the Dead Sea. About 15,000 fragments from more than 500 manuscripts were found in Cave 4. Scholars have identified 825 to 870 scrolls. The longest scroll is the Temple Scroll, over 26 feet long.

The Israel Antiquities Authority protects and preserves the Dead Sea Scrolls in Jerusalem.⁸

Before the Great Isaiah Scroll was found, the oldest Hebrew Isaiah manuscript was found in the Codex Leningrad, a complete Old Testament text dated AD 1000. The Codex Leningrad is a Masoretic Text.⁹

"Codex" is the term given to groupings of papyrus scrolls

The Masoretes were Jewish scribes and scholars

Most Protestant translations of the Scriptures are made from the Masoretic Text¹⁰, whereas Roman Catholic and Eastern Orthodox use the Septuagint, including the Apocrypha.^{11, 12}

3. After learning these facts about the Old Testament Scriptures used for today's translations of the Bible, what does the remarkable accuracy of the Scriptures through the passage of thousands of years tell you about God?

"Orthodox" refers to adherence to what is traditional, established, accepted. In the Christian religion it refers to adherence to faith as stated by the early Church creeds.

A creed is a formal statement of faith or belief.

Early Christians accepted the Jewish Bible on the authority of Jesus' word (see Matt. 5:18, 22:29; John 10:35) as well as that of the Apostles, all of whom often referenced Old Testament passages. The Old Testament also provides the prophecies fulfilled by Jesus, thus proving He is Messiah, foretold of for the Jews and the Gentiles.

4. **Read Luke 24:44.** How does Jesus endorse the Jewish Bible (the current Old Testament)?

The original language of the New Testament was Koine Greek, since this was a common language of that day throughout the Mediterranean region. The message of salvation through Jesus, the gospel, was preached and taught orally at first. The apostle Paul traveled with the message, only later writing to the churches he had established and visited. His letters would have been written in the mid-first century AD and shared between churches (Col. 4:16).

Koine Greek refers to Hellenistic Greek or common Greek following Alexander the Great's conquests¹⁷

"Gospel" is a translation of the Greek word *εὐαγγέλιον* (euaggelion) for "good news"

The canonicity of the 27 books of the New Testament was determined through the use of these texts by the early church. Various church leaders would reference or list some or all of these books as authoritative for the church, using apostolic authorship (or someone close to the apostles) as a guideline for acceptance. (See the previous chapter for information on the author of the New Testament books.)

The Church Council of Laodicea (AD 363) listed all the New Testament books, except for Revelation¹³. The Council of Hippo, Africa in AD 393 included Revelation in its list of authorized books.¹⁴ Finally in AD 397, in Carthage, there was a canonical list of all 27 books as the accepted New Testament.¹⁵ This, along with the Old Testament, has become the list of books accepted as authoritative for Christian believers.

Laodicea was a city in Asia Minor, present day Turkey

Hippo was a city on the Mediterranean coast of present-day Algeria, North Africa

Jerome, an early church leader, translated the Greek Septuagint into Latin in AD 382. This version of Scriptures became known as the "Latin Vulgate". At that time, he translated the Apocrypha, but noted that he did not know if they were inspired works.¹⁶

Carthage was located not far from Hippo in present-day Tunisia

By AD 600, the Catholic Church of Rome would allow Scriptures in only the Latin language, which only priests knew. People in possession of other translations of Scripture were subject to execution.¹⁸ This gave the Roman Catholic Church control over the people's knowledge of God's Word and enabled the Catholic Church to institute practices that benefitted the Church at the people's expense.

John Wycliffe was the first to translate the Bible into English in the AD 1380's. This put him in direct conflict with the Pope. He died of stroke in 1384, but in 1415 he was declared a heretic by the Roman Catholic Church. Forty-four years after his death, Wycliffe's remains were exhumed and burned, the ashes then scattered in a river by order of the Pope.¹⁹

One of Wycliffe's followers, John Hus, continued to promote the idea that the Bible should be available to people in their own language, in opposition to the Roman Church's position that only the Latin Vulgate was allowed. The Catholic Church burned him at the stake in 1415 with Wycliffe translated Scriptures used as kindling.²⁰

In 1516, the scholar Erasmus corrected the corruption of the Vulgate Scriptures by publishing his own Greek-Latin Parallel Bible. He made a new translation of more reliable Greek manuscripts into Latin for this version. This was the first non-Vulgate version printed on the printing press.²¹

Gutenberg invented the printing press in about 1440

In 1517, Martin Luther nailed his 95 Theses of Contention on the Wittenberg church's door. Luther was the first to translate the Bible (using the Erasmus version as his original) into the common dialect of the German language, publishing the entire Bible in the 1530's.²²

Meanwhile, William Tyndale was translating the New Testament into English (also using the Erasmus version), which was considered heretical by both the Roman Catholic Church and the Anglican Church (founded by Henry VIII). His New Testament (published 1525-1526) was banned (anyone found in possession of this translation risked death by burning) and Tyndale was strangled and burned at the stake in 1536 after nearly two years of imprisonment.²³

"Anglican" refers to England

In 1529, King Henry VIII declared himself head of the Anglican Church and broke away from the Roman Catholic Church²⁹

The first complete (OT and NT) English Bible was printed by Myles Coverdale, a follower of Tyndale's, in 1535. Henry VIII, as an offense to the Roman Catholic Church, then printed the English Bible.²⁴

In 1546, the Roman Catholic Council of Trent determined that the Old Testament Apocrypha were canonical in reaction to Martin Luther's reformation, which did not recognize the Apocrypha as canon.²⁵

The Council of Trent met in Trento, (northern) Italy.

In 1560, the Geneva Bible was the first version to have the verses numbered along with the chapters. The 1611 King James Version was translated largely from the Geneva Bible.²⁶

The Geneva Bible was used by the Pilgrims and Puritans who first came to America³⁰

Through great tribulation and the sacrifice of many people, we can read the Word of God in our own language. Today the Bible is readily accessible, with numerous translations available in English alone. As of 2007, the Bible has been translated in its entirety into 438 languages, with at least one of the testaments translated into 1,168 languages.²⁷ The Bible is the most published book of all time.²⁸

5. Consider the persecution faced by people who laid the groundwork for us to have a Bible translation in our own language. How does your awareness of their sacrifice affect your attitude about the precious availability of the Bible today? Your attitude about the Word of God?

Many Bibles provide cross references between the columns of Scripture or across the bottom of the pages. Cross references are other verses in the Bible on the same topic or similar to the original verse.

Since there are many translated versions available today, it can become difficult to decide which version is the most accurate and understandable for use for one's own reading and studying.

Versions of the Bible range from literal (or word-for-word) translations to paraphrases (or thought-for-thought). Literal translations are concerned with representing the original Greek or Hebrew word order and grammar. Paraphrases restate the ideas of the original text into English. In the middle ground are mediating translations.

A paraphrase is restating a text in other words, often to clarify the meaning, and can be used as a personal Bible study method

Literal versions are best for study of the Word and assurance of accuracy, while paraphrases might be easier for reading.

Below is a listing of common English versions ranging in order from literal to paraphrase (there is not an exact boundary between the three categories; instead it is a gradual transition from one to the other, the boundaries given below are for some idea of comparison).³¹

A Parallel Bible contains two or more translations side-by-side for use in comparisons

Literal (Word-for-word):

- Interlinear
- New American Standard (NASB)
- Amplified Bible
- English Standard (ESV)
- Revised Standard (RSV)
- King James (KJV)
- New King James (NKJV)

An interlinear Bible presents the English translation directly beneath the original Greek or Hebrew words making this the most literal translation. The Diaglott is an example of this type.

Mediating Translations

- Holman Christian Standard (HCSB)
- New Revised Standard (NRSV)
- New American (NAB)
- New Jerusalem (NJB)
- New International (NIV)
- Today's New International (TNIV)

The text of the Scriptures was divided into chapters by Cardinal Stephen Langton (d. 1228). In 1551, Robert Stephens numbered the verses for even greater ease of referencing Scripture passages.³²

Paraphrase (Thought-for-thought):

- God's Word
- New Century (NCB)/International Children's Bible (ICB)
- New Living Translation (NLT)
- New International Readers (NIrV)
- Good News Translation (GNT)
- Contemporary English (CEV)
- Living Bible
- Message, The

Passages of Scripture are referenced by writing the name or abbreviation of the book followed by the number of the chapter, a colon, and then the number of the verse. For example: John 3:16 means the book of John, chapter 3, verse 16.

Occasionally, only part of the verse might be referenced with a letter following the verse number: the letter "a" for the first half of the verse, the letter "b" for the second half (or middle, if a long verse), and "c" for the final part of a long verse. An example of this is Romans 12:9b, referring to the middle of this verse: "abhor what is evil."

6. Which version of the Bible do you use? Where does it fall in the literal to paraphrase spectrum?

It is usually best to use more than one version for Bible study for a more complete idea of the meaning.

PROPHECY: Read Isaiah 55:10-11

What does this passage say?

How does this affect your attitude toward God's Word found in the Bible?

What surprised you about the history of the Bible?

About what part of the history of the Bible would you like to learn more?

¹ Judaism 101. "Anshei K'nesset HaGedolah." February 2011 <www.ou.org/about/judaism/a.htm#anshei>.

² "Septuagint and Reliability." February 2011 <www.septuagint.net/>.

³ "Canon of the Old Testament." February 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03267a.htm>>.

⁴ "25 Fascinating Facts About the Discovery at Qumran: Dead Sea Scrolls." September 2011 <www.centuryone.com/25dssfacts.html>.

⁵ "The Canon of Scripture." February 2011 <www.fisheaters.com/septuagint.html>.

⁶ Jeff A. Benner. "Isaiah Scroll and the Masoretic Text." February 2011 <www.ancient-hebrew.org/31_masorite.html>.

⁷ "Septuagint - Is it a Reliable Translation?" February 2011 <www.allabouttruth.org/septuagint-2.htm>.

⁸ "25 Fascinating Facts About the Discovery at Qumran: Dead Sea Scrolls." September 2010 <www.centuryone.com/25dssfacts.html>.

⁹ Jeff A. Benner. "Isaiah Scroll and the Masoretic Text." February 2011 <www.ancient-hebrew.org/31_masorite.html>.

¹⁰ "The Orthodox Use of the 'Apocrypha.'" February 2011 <<http://andreasblom.wordpress.com/2010/02/07/the-orthodox-use-of-the-apocrypha/>>.

¹¹ "What is the Difference Between Catholic and Protestant Bibles?" February 2011 <www.twopaths.com/faq_bibles.htm>.

¹² "Septuagint and Reliability." February 2011 <www.septuagint.net/>.

¹³ "Synod of Laodicea (4th Century)." February 2011 <www.newadvent.org/fathers/3806.htm>.

¹⁴ R. Martinez. "The Canon of the New Testament." February 2011 <<http://www.biblicaltheology.com/Research/MartinezR01.html>>.

¹⁵ "Third Council of Carthage (A.D. 397)." February 2011 <<http://www.bible-researcher.com/carthage.html>>.

¹⁶ "The Pre-Reformation History of the Bible From 1,400 BC to 1,400 AD." February 2011 <www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/pre-reformation.html>.

¹⁷ Michael Palmer. "A Concise Overview of the History of the Greek Language." February 2011 <www.greek-language.com/History.html>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ "John Wicliffe." February 2011 <www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/john-wycliffe.html>.

²⁰ "John Hus." February 2011 <www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/john-hus.html>.

²¹ "Erasmus." February 2011 <www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/erasmus.html>.

²² John L. Jeffcoat. "English Bible History." February 2011 <www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/index.html>.

²³ "William Tyndale." February 2011 <<http://www.greatsite.com/timeline-english-bible-history/william-tyndale.html>>.

²⁴ Jeffcoat.

²⁵ "Canon of the Old Testament." February 2011 <<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/03267a.htm>>.

²⁶ Jeffcoat.

²⁷ "Statistical Summary of Languages with the Scriptures." February 2011 <www.ubs-translations.org/about_us/#c165>.

²⁸ "The Most Popular Book of All Time." October 10, 2015 <<http://www.christianuniversitiesonline.org/the-bible/>>.

²⁹ "Anglican Timeline 1517-1564: The Reformation." February 2011 <<http://justus.anglican.org/resources/timeline/06reformation.html>>.

³⁰ Jeffcoat.

³¹ "About Bible Translations." February 2011 <www.christianbook.com/Christian/Books/cms_content?page=73521&sp=104481&event=1003SBR|58674|1003>.

³² Jim Myers. "Origin of the Chapters and Verses of the Bible." February 2011 <<http://www.biblicalheritage.org/Bible/Bible%20Verses.htm>>.